

Napa Valley Register

Heartfelt tribute to Tony Bennett delights fans of all ages at Napa cabaret

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A singer who left his heart in San Francisco, New York native Tony Bennett has developed a fan base around the world.

But there's probably no bigger Bennett devotee than the Bay Area's Russ Lorenson, a fine vocalist in his own right who's put together a sterling tribute to this ageless crooner from Astoria, Queens.

Considered one of the best interpreters of American pop music, standards and jazz, the Tin Pan Alley icon turned 80 last week. Bennett's career spans more than half a century. After achieving artistic and commercial success in the 1950s and early 1960s, his popularity suffered a considerable downturn as rock music came into fashion. Nevertheless, Bennett persevered and staged a remarkable comeback in the late 1980s and 1990s, expanding his audience to a younger generation while keeping his musical style intact. He remains a popular recording artist and concert performer in the new millennium.

Addressing Bennett's career, as well as tenacity, during a performance at the Rainbow Room of Napa's Depot last weekend, Lorenson pointed out that the subject of his tribute is "the postwar heartthrob who inspired hundreds of young girls to wear black outside St. Patrick's Cathedral on his wedding day.

"He's the darling of the MTV generation who made music history when, at the age of 68, he won the coveted Grammy Award for Album of the Year."

Playing off the singer's birth name, Lorenson calls his tribute "Benedetto Blessed" (as the family name literally translates as blessed). It's an appealing 90-plus minute show, presented with intermission, that includes more than two dozen songs associated with Bennett's long career.

It flirts with the '50s (from Mitch Miller-inspired novelty songs like "In the Middle of an Island" to hit show tunes, "Just in Time" from Jule Styne, Betty Comden and Adolph Green's "Bells Are Ringing"), blossoms in the '60s (with very strong performances of Anthony Newley's "Who Can I Turn To?" and Johnny Mandel/Paul Francis Webster's classic "The Shadow of Your Smile") and celebrates the '90s rebirth (Irving Berlin's "Steppin' Out With my Baby").

In putting the Bennett tribute together, Lorenson said he listened to more than 2,000 songs Bennett recorded on a total of 91 albums.

While he's kept the patter to a minimum, the entertainer does keep it informative. "Tony Bennett introduced more Broadway songs than any other performer," Lorenson says as he introduces a medley of '50s hits that included "Stranger in Paradise" (from "Kismet"), "Rags to Riches" and "Because of You."

Lorenson offers a few surprises, such as a medley of seasonal songs that few recall Bennett doing (a deliciously haunting arrangement by pianist/arranger Kelly Park of "Autumn Leaves" and "Indian Summer"). And I had no idea that the pride of Astoria had recorded the cynical Jerome Kern/Otto Harbach/Dorothy Fields temptation, "Let's Begin," from the musical, "Roberta," a favorite of cabaret maven Mabel Mercer.

In a voice that approximates Bennett in the upper register (so it works quite well), Lorenson and his musical henchmen (Park on piano and ukulele, Reed Watley on bass and Eric Thompson on drums) gave a standing-room-only crowd cause for rejoicing. From swinging arrangements of Cy Coleman and Carolyn Leigh standards ("The Best is Yet to Come") to the geographical love song that brought him fame ("I Left my Heart in San Francisco"), Lorenson's tribute is solid gold.

Evidenced by the wide range of ages in Saturday night's audience, Tony Bennett has, as the New York Times so aptly noted, "not just bridged the generation gap, he has demolished it."

If you happen to be in San Francisco tonight, Lorenson will be presenting the Bennett tribute at the Empire Plush Room in the Hotel York. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until he returns to a larger wine country venue early next year. By that time, he expects to change up some of the material, adding other songs associated with Bennett. Let's hope another show tune, "Once Upon a Time," makes the cut. Or even one of the songs he recorded on his comeback "Astoria" CD from the repertoire of celebrated Manhattan cabaret artist Charles deForest — like deForest's signature song, "When do the Bells Ring for Me" which Bennett performed live at President Clinton's inaugural.