

# Napa Valley *Register*

## **Bay Area cabaret artist premieres Tony Bennett tribute in Napa**

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An entertainer since youth, Russ Lorensen was weaned on music. But not the kind of music he wanted to hear.

"My parents had really eclectic tastes," he recalls. "While my dad was a fan of Frank Sinatra, he also collected Manfred Mann records. He liked the hip new singers (on the charts) when I was growing up -- Billy Joel and Phoebe Snow. On the other hand, my mother was listening to Johnny Mathis records and enjoying Garth Brooks."

His friends looked askance as the young Russ Lorensen turned a deaf ear to his parents' musical tastes and chose instead to groove on jazz singers like Chet Baker and Blossom Dearie.

"I honestly don't remember a time in my life when I didn't have music in it -- even if I wasn't performing, I was listening and appreciating," Lorensen says today.

But that early penchant for the great American songbook stood Lorensen in good stead as he went on to star in high school productions of "Guys and Dolls," "The Music Man," "The Boyfriend" and "Fiddler on the Roof."

Now, a decade-long diversion into high tech behind him, Lorensen has returned to show biz in a new medium for him -- cabaret. His second cabaret show, a tribute to Tony Bennett -- the man and his music -- will receive its second performance in Napa over the weekend.

"There is no better champion of the great American songbook," Lorensen said during a phone interview from his San Francisco home. "That's the music I like to do ... it was the theme of my recent CD and of the first show that I performed at the Plush Room and other Bay Area venues."

Audience members repeatedly told Lorensen his style reminded them of Bennett. "I really didn't know a lot of Bennett's repertoire, so I did some research. Seeing what he's covered in some 2,000 songs I have on my iPod, well, I figured this was the show I needed to do."

Titled "Benedetto -- Blessed: A Tribute to the Life and Music of Tony Bennett," the new show premiered last weekend at an Alameda jazz club, Kelly's, owned and operated by Lorensen's arranger/accompanist, Kelly Park (who also happens to hold down the same slot for entertainer Shawn Ryan, who's slated to return to Napa at the end of September).

Lorensen is set to appear at 9 p.m. Saturday in the Rainbow Room at the Depot in Napa. There's no cover charge, just a two drink minimum for the Bennett tribute. Dinner reservations at The Depot guarantee show seating.

## **A buck-and-wing**

Lorenson made his stage debut at the ripe old age of seven in a second grade class production of "The Elves and the Shoemaker." In addition to his roles in high school musicals, he performed and toured with an award-winning classical vocal ensemble. He also gained experience as both choral conductor and composer, winning the high school music division of a young artists competition in his school district for composition work.

After college, Lorenson continued his efforts as choral conductor and voice coach, working for five years as associate conductor of the California Youth Chorale. He got in his stage licks as well, appearing in musical productions with San Diego's Diversionary Theatre, Starlight Musical Theatre and Lyric Opera San Diego.

Nearly a decade ago, he took a major detour away from the entertainment field. He plunged into the high tech world just as the dot.com boom took place. That brought him to San Francisco where he worked for a number of start-ups. His departure from the business world was hastened by the purchase of his company, MacroMedia, by Adobe Systems, and a "very generous severance package" that allowed him to finance his current efforts in his newfound medium.

In 2005, he made his cabaret debut at Caf Majestic, at the historic Hotel Majestic in San Francisco, and last October debuted at the Empire Plush Room. Lorenson's debut CD, "A Little Travelin' Music," was released this past May on the LML Music label, featuring songs from his cabaret show and duets with special guests Shawn Ryan and Klea Blackhurst. His cabaret show of the same name was taped for public television and is being broadcast throughout 2006.

Lorenson will embark on a 15-city tour later this year, promoting the CD and bringing his shows to audiences throughout the U.S. and the United Kingdom.

