

SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

Russ Lorensen Returns to the Empire Plush Room with his Tribute to Tony Bennett

Russ Lorensen has brought the crooner style back to the cabaret scene and what better presentation but to pay tribute of one the great popular singers of the 20th Century, Tony Bennett. Russ had a task trying to pick twenty five songs out of the more than 2000 songs that Tony has recorded during his professional career (which is still going strong).

Russ's voice is very reminiscent of those singers that I used to hear when the 52nd Street cabarets were the cat's meow. You hear a little of Tony Bennett along with Chet Baker as he belts out a song. Russ calls his show *Benedetto/Blessed: A Tribute to the Life and Music of Tony Bennett*, since the famous singer's birth name is Anthony Dominick Benedetto. Bob Hope christened him Tony Bennett as the singer was started on the road of success.

Lorensen intersperses facts about the legendry singer throughout his show. Russ states that an early voice coach told Mr. Bennett "Never compromise--only perform the very best music". That is what Lorensen does during his cabaret show.

Russ picks out not only the songs that made Tony famous but little known songs such as Jack Segal and Robert Well's "When Joanna Loved Me" or the lovely "Antonia" with music and lyrics by the same persons. Russ called this segment "Tony's Children Medley" since these are the names of Tony's children. The segment ends with a soft arrangement of "Danny Boy", in honor of Tony's oldest son Danny. It is a charming way to end that segment.

The artist easily delivers some of Tony's great early hits like "Strangers in Paradise", "Rags to Riches" and "Boulevard of Broken Dreams." Although Tony Bennett never liked novelty songs, he did sing a wild song called "In The Middle of An Island" that the singer was force to sing. Russ brings two audience members up on stage and dresses them with straw skirts to dance a hula to this melody. Even the excellent back up orchestra had to wear straw hats and leis.

Russ sings a beautiful arrangement of "The Shadow of Your Smile," the exquisite song by Johnny Mandel and Paul Francis Webster, and the ever popular song "Just in Time" written by Jule Styne with lyrics by Comden and Green. The poignant number by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley, "Who Can I Turn Too" is ardently sung. There were swinging arrangements of Irving Berlin's "Steppin' Out With My Baby" and Cy Coleman/Carolyn Leigh's "The Best is Yet to Come."

Russ uses a mike through the whole evening, but decides to turn off the mike and use only Kelly Park on piano, Reid Whatley on bass and Eric Thompson on drums in the plaintive Kurt Weill/Maxwell Anderson's "Lost in the Stars". This was "choice" as those Warner Brothers gagsters use to say.

The cabaret artist also did a set with only Reid Whatley on bass and Kelly Park on drums to a "Rhythm" medley that included Joseph Mayer/ Rodger W. Kahn's "Crazy Rhythm", George and Ira Gershwin's "Fascinatin' Rhythm" and the Gershwin's "Slap That Bass". The rhythms are pulsated from both singer and back up.

Russ also sang one of my most favorite songs the lovely Victor Herbert/Al Dubin's "Indian Summer" that I used to hear back in the '50s.

Russ Lorenson has a terrific back up four piece combo with Tony Malfatti doing a vibrant sax solo on several numbers. Kelly Park, who did all the arrangements, did lovely piano solo introductions to "Who Can I Turn To" and Victor Young/Ned Washington's "My Foolish Heart".

Russ told a fascinating story about Tony Bennett. The musical *Kismet* (which had its premiere here in San Francisco) was set to open in New York, however a major newspaper strike was going on during the opening. The producers were afraid of a poor opening with no newspaper advertising available. The producers of *Kismet* had Tony record "Strangers In Paradise" weeks before the opening. The song rose immediately to No. 2 on the charts and this helped *Kismet* to open with large box office advance.

Russ is taking this show to Sterling's Upstairs in Los Angeles, August 11-12 & 18-19. He will appear at the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek on October 6-8 and then go to New York where he will be at both The Hideaway Room at Helen's (October 13, 14 & 21) and the great jazz club Iridium on October 20.

- [Richard Connema](#)