

FROM MTV TO VEGAS,  
THE LEGENDARY  
TONY BENNETT  
HAS TAKEN GENERATION X  
BY STORM. THREE YEARS INTO  
SENIOR CITIZENSHIP, HE'S AT  
THE TOP OF THE POP CHARTS,  
HIS FRIENDS  
INCLUDE THE RED HOT  
CHILI PEPPERS, AND THE  
LOLLAPALOOZA SLACKER SET IS  
SINGING HIS PRAISES—AND  
HIS SONGS.

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BY JUDY DIEDWARDO

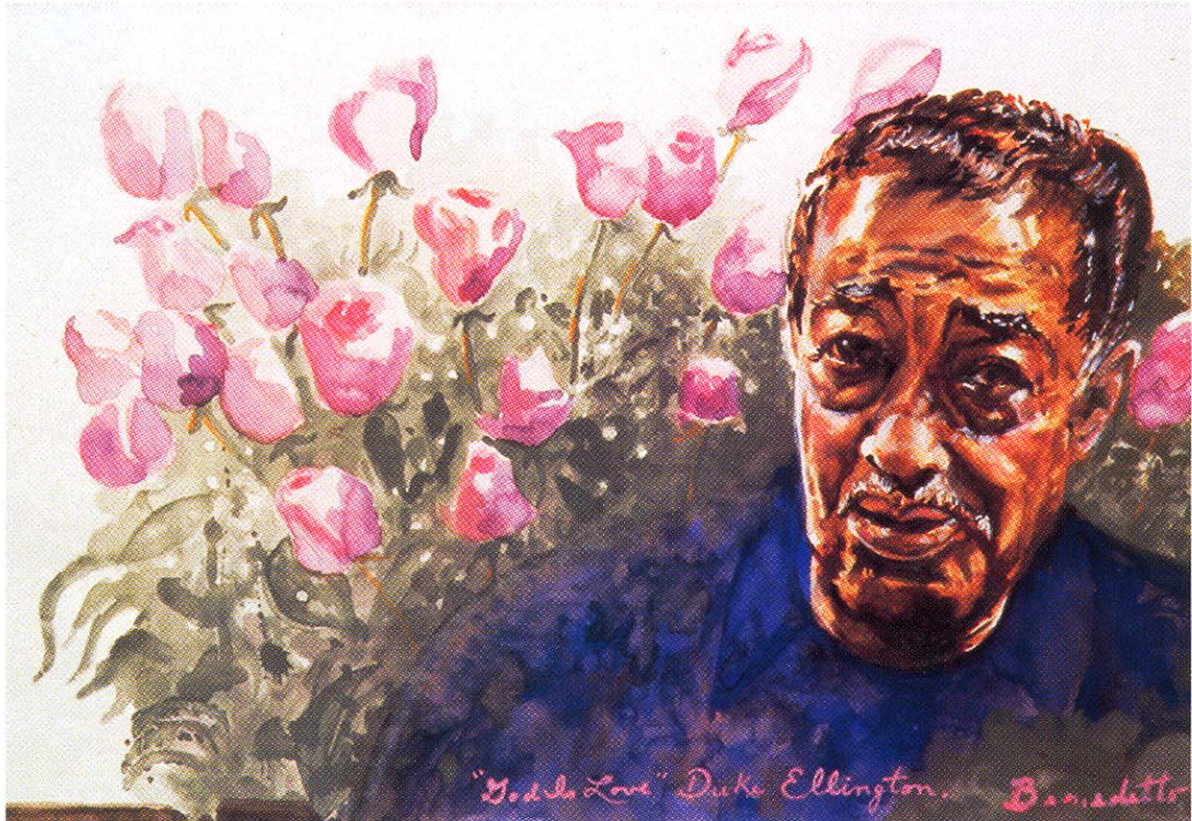




TONY BENNETT  
**UNPLUGGED**



IT'S DECEMBER FIRST AND THE MAIN TELEPHONE CONSOLE AT TONY BENNETT'S MIDTOWN MANHATTAN OFFICE OF RPM MUSIC IS LIT UP AND FLASHING WILDLY. EVERYONE FROM ROLLING STONE MAGAZINE TO THE NEW YORK TIMES IS JOCKEYING TO GET THEIR 15 MINUTES



Bennett's love for portraiture is embodied in his artistic tribute to Duke Ellington.

with the 68-year-old crooner whose just-released Christmas CD is selling at a rate of 20,000 a day.

Comfortably seated in his ninth-story office, the indefatigable Bennett fields each request with the same Zen-like grace that has characterized his stage presence for better than 40 years. But more important than the product being sold is the people doing the buying: Nearly half of an average Bennett concert audience is under age 35. Called "The new darling of Generation X" by *The New York Times*, Bennett has found the soft spot of a generation weaned on rap music—a generation whose parents consider Bob Dylan an oldie. You have to go to the grandparents to talk about crooners.

**B**ennett's appeal? The soothing songs of the '40s, '50s and '60s. He performs them at more than 250 concerts a year, including his recent 40-city tour sponsored by WordPerfect Corporation—marking the first time a computer company has employed "entertainment event marketing." No gimmicks, no fancy synthesizers or light shows. The only spin comes from his signature tux—sometimes traded for a smartly tailored blue suit. But as a testimony to his sense of hip (and humor), he sported baggy shorts, oversized sunglasses and a velvet top hat when he co-presented at the 1993 MTV Music Video Awards next to Anthony Kiedis and Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers.



"Homage to Hockney,"  
oil on canvas



"We had a lot of fun," Bennett recalls. "The late Cary Grant told me to always go where the enthusiasm is. And that's what I find with the MTV crowd and the people at the alternative rock stations. They just cheer me on. And wow! I've never felt better in all my life," says the man who came from a time when stardom was more heroic than trendy. (During Bennett's first wedding in 1952, 2,000 girls in black mourning veils surrounded Saint Patrick's Cathedral.)

"My life's dream has always been to buck the notion of demographics," says Bennett, who has managed to outlast Elvis, The Beatles—even the Sex Pistols. "Music—good music—should transcend all barriers. Way back when, it was Sinatra who told me to stay with good music. That hasn't changed. I've never lost my spirit or changed my style to cater to anyone," he smiles.

"I just found out that my MTV *Unplugged* album has been voted number one jazz album and I've been voted number one jazz singer by Billboard," he says proudly.

Bennett, who may be one of the oldest artists ever to appear on MTV, is delighted with his new found audience and the energy with which they support their new idol. In fact, he was the star of MTV's hour-long "Unplugged" concert series broadcast last June. Bennett was joined for a song each by k.d. lang, Elvis Costello, the Lemonheads' Evan Dando and Dinosaur Jr.'s J. Mascis. After the concert, Costello confessed, "You can imagine the fear and trembling that comes when standing up to sing next to Tony Bennett. He has the truest kind of style. He was modern to begin with; the rest of us are just catching up."

Born Anthony Dominic Benedetto on August 3, 1926, Bennett was raised by a widowed mother in the Astoria section of Queens during the Depression. He studied commercial art in high school where he received a degree from the prestigious High School for Industrial Art. He went on

to study acting and singing on the GI Bill.

In 1949, he was discovered by Pearl Bailey in a Greenwich Village nightclub. And during a backstage interlude, fellow entertainer Bob Hope suggested he change his name. "It will look better on the marquis," Hope explained. "He was right," says Bennett.

## PERSONAL EFFECTS

**MARITAL STATUS:** Single. Bennett is twice divorced and dating jazz musician manager and promoter Susan Crow. (She's under 30.)

**REPERTOIRE:** 94 albums, three Grammys

**PERSONAL FAVORITE:** "I Left My Heart in San Francisco." Really. (FYI: When it was released in 1962, 1.5 million copies sold. However, it never climbed higher than number 19 on the charts.)

**PERSONAL HEROES:** Bing Crosby, Duke Ellington and Pablo Picasso. "They were artists who lived long and worked up until the day they died."

**ON LIFE:** "Art is long, life is short. Enjoy the ride."

**STYLEGUIDE:** Bennett is a stickler for fashion. When jolted awake by L.A.'s January '94 quake, Bennett didn't head for the Peninsula Hotel lobby as instructed by management. He dressed to the nines before joining a lobby full of bathrobe clad guests.

**ON RAP MUSIC:** "It's a healthy and correct revolution."

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY:** Currently being penned by his pianist, Ralph Sharon. "We're closer than brothers," says Bennett. Promises to be full of human and humorous stories—"no kiss and-tell jazz," he says.

**LOCAL APPEARANCE:** Leave it to the Kravis Center to be hip at all the right times. Bennett will croon for those lucky enough to get a seat at the Kravis' February 20 Gala. "We're absolutely thrilled to have him as our artist for the gala," says Kravis Center CEO Judith A. Shepherd. "Not only does his elegant style have such a broad appeal, but he's a genuinely nice man. We always strive for our annual gala to be an evening of great elegance and fun, and Tony Bennett was the obvious choice—not to mention a personal dream of mine."

His launch to stardom came in 1951 after recording *Because of You* and *Rags to Riches* (1952). He went international in 1962 when he recorded his now-signature song, *I Left My Heart In San Francisco*, for which he won two Grammys (Record of the Year and Best Male Solo Performance).

While Bennett had a busy performing schedule, he was minus any recording contracts. (His long association with Columbia Records, producer of more than 80 of his albums, ended in 1971 because he refused to sing pop rock music. The divorce lasted for 15 years.)

"It wasn't a bad thing," Bennett assures. "It was time for me to take a break—have more time to paint and study. They wanted me to do Top 40. I can't blame them. They had a business to consider. But it wasn't my thing, so it was time to move on."

Enter one of Bennett's four children—son, Danny, a former rock guitarist who understood the business well: "I remember being awakened in the middle of

the night by the sound of my father and Count Basie jamming in the basement," says Danny, now 40.

In 1979 he became his father's manager and in 1986 cut a new and improved deal with Columbia. That was the easy part. Convincing his father to agree to some contemporary promoting would prove a formidable challenge.

"What sold Columbia was the idea that my father was a catalog artist, and there was gold in them thar hills," Danny explains. "As for my father, I told him, 'Look, Dad, marketing isn't a bad word.' He understood."

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A succession of media moves followed, including a much publicized profile on Bennett in *Spin Magazine*, followed by an appearance along with the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Ice-T in *Spin's* 1988 swimsuit issue. Combined with everything from regular appearances on *David Letterman* to being caricatured on *The Simpsons*, Bennett has been accepted with open arms by his new followers—many of whom are hearing his name for the first time.

"Danny told me to trust him with what was happening. He told me that he could see beyond the huge generation gap," says Bennett. "And I'm very lucky to have him. You know, more than money I've always wanted someone like him who I could trust. It's a beautiful relationship that we have. I'm very proud of him."

The gap was most dramatically bridged last year when Bennett performed at a series of benefit concerts organized by alternative rock radio stations. "Some people say that I've made a comeback. Not true. Young people have changed their mind about music and I am fortunate enough to have been in the right place at the right time," says Bennett.

"I think the kids today got so far away from the things that are good—especially in the '60s and early '70s—that they got frightened. They saw their peers dying and families being ripped apart. What they want now is wholesomeness, quality. And my music is that," says Bennett.

"Happily, the majority of young kids I see are really enjoying themselves. That's why I like the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Michael Jackson—and Madonna is fantastic."

Bennett's recordings and popularity are striking gold for the first time since the mid-'60s, when the singer's rich baritone voice was heard everywhere singing *I Left My Heart My Heart in San Francisco*. His recording career built momentum with a four-CD retrospective collection in 1991 that set the stage for two Grammy-winning albums in a row: *Perfectly Frank*, an album of torch and saloon songs



dedicated to Frank Sinatra, and *Steppin' Out*, a collection of tunes written for Fred Astaire.

"We did these two, as they say, unplugged. Actually, I've been unplugged for years," he laughs. He's been using that line a lot lately, but it's still funny.

"After the MTV awards, a lot of the young bands came up to him and told him how much they respected him for not compromising his music," says Sylvia Weiner, Bennett's publicist. "He's definitely stuck to his guns in terms of the kinds of music that he presents," she says. "And the young people see him as a role model."

Bennett has always been accompanied by an impeccable collection of jazz musicians, including his trio, led by pianist Ralph Sharon, his accompanist for over 30 years.

"Nowadays, success is measured by money. In my day, integrity was the measuring stick. Money followed. And I'm not about to change now," says Bennett.

As for Bennett's art, the fact that he signs his real name to each piece shows that his passion for fine arts predates his success with the performing arts. In fact, some of the paintings and sketches that are part of the "Anthony Benedetto: The Paintings of Tony Bennett" exhibition date back 35 years. His first "formal, real good gallery show," as he refers to it, was in October 1993 at Manhattan's Upper East Side Elysium Art Gallery.

Contrary to some who consider his paintings a novelty, Bennett's work has gained respect apart from the notoriety of their creator. His paintings sell for as much as \$40,000 each and exhibits have been staged throughout the country.

Bennett paints every day, and carries his sketchbook and paints with him when he travels. His works range from portraits of musicians to New York City street scenes to mountain landscapes.

At home in his studio Bennett covers the spectrum of mediums but prefers oils. "They offer a depth that acrylics and watercolors do not," he explains.

Does Bennett consider himself an accomplished artist? "Leonardo da Vinci once said, 'Too bad I'm going to die because I'm just learning how to paint.' I'm very much a student—a student who's still learning." ♦

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