



## Loreson Channels the Incomparable Tony Bennett

by TJ Fitzgerald

Who doesn't love Tony Bennett? Well, I do and so does singing recording artist Russ Loreson, who brings the music and life of Mr. Bennett to the stage in his one-man show, *Benedetto/Blessed: A Tribute to the Life and Music of Tony*, starting this month. Loreson performs the show at Sterling's Upstairs (4349 Tujunga Avenue, Studio City) for four performances only, August 11-12, and 18-19. With musical direction by renowned jazz artist Kelly Park and written by Loreson, *Benedetto/Blessed* premieres July 30th in San Francisco, and from there will play in select cities throughout California and the East coast. The show was created, in part, to honor Mr. Bennett's 80th birthday, which he will celebrate August 3, 2006. So let's check in with Russ as I have just checked out his website at [www.russloreson.com](http://www.russloreson.com) and

found a strangely unique photo, which piqued my curiosity.



TJ: First of all, I love the picture of you as the ghost on your website.

RL: Thanks! Funny enough, one of the first songs I ever sang around the house was Casper's theme song! My favorite part was the bridge: "He always says hello, and he's really glad to meet ya! Wherever he may go, he's kind to every living creature." I used to drive my mother crazy with it, so she dressed me up as Casper for my first

Halloween as a "biped!"

TJ: Tony is from Astoria? Where did you grow up?

RL: I was born just outside of Philadelphia then moved across the border to Delaware when I was 5 years old. My dad's company transferred him to San Diego when I was 9 years old, and that's pretty much where I grew up and went to high school and college. I moved to San Francisco in 1997 as part of my old high-tech career, to be part of the dot-com boom. It's funny to be doing a show about Tony Bennett, because I really do relate to leaving my heart here in San Francisco. I love living here, and miss it terribly when I'm traveling.

TJ: Were you always a singer?

RL: I've been a singer since even before I can remember. I sang in choirs all

throughout my school years, and eventually became a choral conductor and composer. When I discovered musical theatre in junior high school, I thought it was just about the most perfect thing in the world. I was (am?) really nerdy about it, and having just seen the marvelous production of *The Drowsy Chaperone*, I can really relate to the Man in Chair character. I am a lot like that, driving my friends and family crazy with old cast recordings of musicals. In high school, I went into a period of only listening to "legit" music (madrigals, Gregorian chant, opera, etc.), but eventually came back to my love of theatre music.

TJ: Was music a constant in your life growing up?

RL: 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.

TJ: Was your family musical?

RL: Not one bit! None of them, not a single one! The only song I've ever really heard my mother sing is "You Are My Sunshine." She used to sing it to me as a kid, and I overheard her sing it several years ago to my little niece when she didn't know I was listening. My parents were definitely music lovers, though. We listened to everything from Johnny Cash to the Moody Blues to [Phoebe Snow](#). My dad was a huge Frank Sinatra fan - but was also into Manfred Mann's Earth Band. My mom is a huge Johnny Mathis fan - but also is crazy about Garth Brooks. I was exposed to their very eclectic tastes, which I think has served me well.

TJ: So you are a big Tony Bennett fan?

RL: You know, I have to admit that as a kid, I was not. In junior high, I would really only listen to musical theatre. As I got into high school, it was all about choral music of the Renaissance. And I was heavily influenced by female jazz singers like Jeri Southern, Blossom Dearie, Ella Fitzgerald, Chris Connor, and even Doris Day. The only male singer I ever listened to heavily during my formative years was [Barry Manilow](#)! But as my appreciation of the Great American Songbook has deepened over the last 5-10 years, I have come to adore the classic male singers as well - Mel Tormé, Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, Chet Baker, Johnny Hartman -and of course, Tony Bennett. The Great American Songbook has had no greater champion than Mr. Bennett. And I am now officially a Tony Bennett fanatic!



TJ: Where did the title *Benedetto/Blessed* come from?

RL: Mr. Bennett's birth name is Anthony Dominick Benedetto (he was christened Tony Bennett by none other than Bob Hope!). While I was doing my research for the show, I saw an interview with Mr. Bennett where he talked about his birth name, and

that in Italian, it translates to "blessed one". He said that at this stage of his life and career, he truly knows what it means to be blessed. And as I heard him say that, I thought to myself, "No, Mr. Bennett - it is we your fans who have been blessed!" But I guess he and I are both right - he has been blessed with a remarkable talent and artistic vision, and we have been blessed by him sharing it with us for over 50 years. And the name for the show just bubbled out of that naturally.

TJ: What can audiences expect from the show? Is it all music or is a retrospective of his career?

RL: As I originally conceived the show, it was to be a mix of music and narrative about Mr. Bennett's life. You know, the typical "cabaret" show where you impart all sorts of facts and clever anecdotes about your subject to the audience in between the songs. But in his autobiography, "The Good Life," Mr. Bennett talks at length about his artistic philosophy, which he says was first imparted to him by an early voice coach (and later echoed by such luminaries as Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Bill Evans, Count Basie and others): "Never compromise - only perform the very best music." And I realized that THAT was the story of Mr. Bennett's life. So I stripped out nearly all of the so-called "patter", and I tell the audience up front that I'll be telling Mr. Bennett's story through his music. I also tell them that if they want to delve more into the historical facts (and they should!), we offer his autobiography for sale - at cost - after the show. So the show really is about the music.

TJ: What type of research did you do for this show?

RL: In keeping with what I was just saying, I listened to the music. I have nearly 2000 different performances of Mr. Bennett's on my iPod, and have listened to all of them. I read and re-read his autobiography and every article or interview I could get my hands on. I bought every video and DVD I could find to watch him in performance. I trolled eBay, looking for historical memorabilia that I could glean information from. I've even spoken with a few people who know him personally. But I've spent most of my time immersed in his music, listening to the various interpretations. One thing that is so marvelous about his artistry is that he keeps singing many of the same songs, even after 50 years. But he allows them to change and grow with him. For example, if you listen to the first 1951 recording of "Because of You," it is a very different interpretation than that on his 1962 Carnegie Hall concert recording. And it's completely different from the later recordings he's done of the same song. But they're all equally wonderful in their own right. And it's not that he "takes it easy" on the later recordings - his later adaptations are even more challenging vocally than the early ones!

TJ: Have you tested the waters with the material yet and how was the audience reaction?

RL: Yes, we have. I did a CD Release concert for my first CD a few months ago here in San Francisco at The Empire Plush Room. We tried out four songs from the show, including what we call the "Early Hits Medley," which is made up of "Boulevard of Broken Dreams," "Rags to Riches," "Stranger in Paradise," and "Because of You". The audience went crazy for it! We've tried to be very true to recorded arrangements that Mr. Bennett used. I put my own stamp on the interpretation of course, but I asked my musical director to keep within the framework of the original recordings.

As I said before, Mr. Bennett has recorded many songs multiple times, so we chose the arrangements that we liked the best, that fit our band and my personal style the best. So, for example, when we tried out "Fly Me To The Moon", we did the beautiful ballad arrangement that Mr. Bennett first recorded in 1965. People are so surprised when they hear it, especially with the opening verse, because they're just so used to all the other up-tempo versions. We've snuck that song into a few other concerts we've given, and the reaction is always the same. The other song that people have gone crazy for is "Because of You" - this is the song that so many people had sung at their weddings in the 1950's, and they are so nostalgic for it. It's very gratifying to know that I can take them back to a place and time in their life that is so special.

TJ: Have you heard from Mr. Bennett and will he be coming to see your show?

RL: No, I've not had any direct contact with Mr. Bennett. I have people on my creative team who know him, and they tell me that they will have him come to see the show. But I keep telling them that if he does come, please don't tell me beforehand! I'm not sure I'd have the chutzpah to go out and perform his music in front of him, if I knew he was in the audience! Besides which, he's very busy with his own tour and celebrating his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday next month, so I'm sure he's too busy to come see me. But maybe, someday...



TJ: So do you consider yourself a crooner?

RL: That word has such a negative connotation for some people, as though it somehow diminishes the artistic value of the performance. But yes, I'd have to say that I am a crooner to a certain extent, or that at the very least, I croon when it's appropriate to the performance. For example, I just did the show *1776* with a theatre company here in the San

Francisco Bay Area; I certainly didn't croon in that, but I most certainly do within the context of Mr. Bennett's music.

TJ: Any possibility of releasing an album of the music you will be performing?

RL: I've been asked that several times since we started doing this material, and I certainly hope to record it. But, artistically, I want to live with this material as a performer for a while before I commit it to the permanence of a recording. For some of Mr. Bennett's fans, his music is sacred, and I feel a great responsibility to make it the best I possibly can. I'm guessing that it will be at least a year before we head into the studio with this material.

TJ: In order for our readers to find out more about you, I do a little questionnaire called MY FAVORITE THINGS. So here goes? What's your favorite past time activity?

RL: Well, besides music, I collect antique glass. I have quite a large collection

(probably one of the largest in the world) of glassware that was made by an American company called Tiffin Glass.

TJ: Ok, now your favorite state...

RL: You know, I think it would have to be California. I've lived in both Northern and Southern California, and just the varied landscapes (geographical and political!) within the state make it so beautiful.

TJ: I love California too! Next up, favorite song....

RL: I know this sounds like a cliché, but there is no way I could pick just one. Whatever song I'm singing at the moment is my favorite at that time. So much depends on what mood I'm in, who's singing it, what life significance it has for me...nope, no way I could name just one. It's like asking which of your children you love the best!

TJ: Fair enough. How about your favorite dish?

RL: Now this is easy - anything my mom cooks! She's the best cook in the world, and anything she makes is wonderful. But I'd have to say my "holy of holies" from her kitchen is her Fried Green Tomatoes! YUMMMMMMM!

TJ: I have never met anyone who has actually had fried green tomatoes...cool! Easy one now, your favorite actor?

RL: This is a toughie, because I tend to love specific performances more than specific actors. But if I had to choose one, I'd say [Brian Stokes Mitchell](#). I've never seen a performance of his that I didn't walk away from shaken to the core as an artist.

TJ: One of my favorites, too! Thanks so much, Russ.

The good news is you can and should catch Russ Lorensen as he honors the legendary Tony Bennett in his new show, *Benedetto/Blessed: A Tribute to the Life and Music of Tony Bennett*, at any of the following venues:

- July 30, Kelly's of Alameda, Alameda, CA
- August 5, The Rainbow Room at The Depot Restaurant, Napa, CA
- August 8-9, The Empire Plush Room, San Francisco, CA
- August 11-12 & 18-19, Sterling's Upstairs, Los Angeles, CA
- October 6-8, Dean Leshner Center for the Arts, Walnut Creek, CA
- October 13-14 & 21, The Hideaway Room at Helen's, New York, NY

For more information on his shows, check out his website at [www.russlorenson.com](http://www.russlorenson.com) as he makes his way from the West Coast to the Great White Way. So as I leave my heart in San Francisco, actually it is physically on the East Coast, ciao for now!

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TJ Fitzgerald has been around the New England Theatre scene both as a participant (acting and directing) as well being a theatre fanatic since birth. He had been a featured columnist on interviews and theatre features for New England Entertainment Digest since 1992 and is currently a board member of the New England Theatre Conference. His past interviews have included Tony Award winner Faith Prince, Tony Nominee Brad Oscar (The Producers), Maureen McGovern, (Little Women), Joanna Gleason (Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, Into The Woods), Gregory Jbara (Chicago, Into The Woods) and Stephen Schwartz (Wicked, Godspell). It's been quite a life thus far, folks and the best is yet to come