



Singer Russ Lorenson shines in classy Tony Bennett tribute show

By Pat Craig, Correspondent
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Typically, a tribute show involves impersonation, for better or worse, and a get-up: KISS makeup, for example, or an overly tight white jumpsuit and an oil spill of black hair.

With "Benedetto/Blessed," you get a guy in a suit singing a choice selection of what amounts to well under 1 percent of the music Tony Bennett has recorded the past six decades. You also get the evocative voice and personality of singer Russ Lorenson and one of the best four-piece jazz combos you could hope to hear on a late spring Friday night.



Singer Russ Lorenson performs a tribute to Tony Bennett

It would be folly to do a Bennett impersonation when the real Bennett is still performing at 83 (he played the Black and White Ball in San Francisco just over a week ago). So Lorenson does the right thing, capturing attitude and Bennett's career-long philosophy — only perform the very best music.

And that's what you get from Lorenson's show, plus a neat little biographical look at the singer who was plugging along post-World War II under the stage moniker of Joe Bari before a legendary American comedian shortened his real name — Anthony Dominick Benedetto — to Tony Bennett. That comedian had been boxing as Packy East before settling on Bob Hope, so he knew a bit about changing names.

Lorenson's biographical tidbits are like tasty snacks served between tunes to either shine a bit of light on Bennett or make a point about a song. Lorenson reports, for example, the only tune Bennett loathed was "In the Middle of an Island," a 1956 record he was forced to make following a long dry spell.

The show offers a brilliant selection of Bennett tunes recorded from the late-1940s to the '90s, with "Steppin' Out With My Baby," the ancient Irving Berlin tune that resurrected Bennett's career and led to his making his first musical video.

Lorenson handles the material skillfully, and uses his own remarkable voice and style to make the tunes his own, while still celebrating the way Bennett presented them.

The show also has a few twists, particularly with the singing of "One For My Baby (And One More For The Road)" the melancholy tune that Sinatra pretty much owned. Bennett recorded his own version of the song in 1956, employing a much more up-tempo jaunty style. So Lorenson and his musical director Kelly Park came up with an arrangement incorporating both styles to create a showstopper.

Lorenson's show is the anchor attraction for the Something C.O.O.L. Summer Cabaret Festival. The festival also includes a late-night cabaret "Aging Bull," by Tom Orr ("Dirty Little Showtunes!") at 10 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays at the Eureka. Other featured performers include Carly Ozard, Holly Nugent, Maureen McVerry, Katya Smirnoff-Sky and Lua Hadar. More information is at www.somethingcoolcabaret.com/.

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THEATER REVIEW

- WHAT: "Benedetto/Blessed: Celebrating the Life and Music of Tony Bennett"
- WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 6 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays through June 27
- WHERE: Eureka Theatre, 215 Jackson St., San Francisco.
- RUNNING TIME: 2 hours
- TICKETS: \$25, 415-674-3863, 800-838-3006, www.brownpapertickets.com