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Christmas in San Francisco with Russ Lorenson

Russ Lorenson has established a reputation as one of the San Francisco Bay Area's leading interpreters of jazz standards, with a sound and approach that place him at the intersection of Broadway, jazz, and pop... the very essence of the Great American Songbook.



Your stage career began at the early age of seven. Can you tell us what or who inspired your love for music and theatre?

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 by the time I graduated high school. In junior high, I was introduced to musical theatre by a wonderful teacher, **Loren Salter**, whose influence on me continues to this day. In fact, Lorenson is a stage name, in homage to him ("Loren's son"). I had another great teacher in high school, **Bob Keller**, who really gave me an appreciation for classical choral music and gave me my early opportunities in composition and conducting.

As a teen, my "pop" listening was heavily centered on **Barry Manilow**, believe it or not. But my love of jazz and my passion for the Great American Songbook came later: **Linda Ronstadt's** recordings with **Nelson Riddle** in the early 80's were considered "easy listening" at the time, but to me they were revelations! The biggest "ah hah" moment came when I saw the movie "When Harry Met Sally" and heard **Harry Connick's** vocals on the soundtrack. I knew then that that was my music. I dove whole-heartedly into jazz and standards and haven't looked back.

When growing up in Philadelphia what music genre had you dancing in the streets?

Well, anyone who knows me at all knows that there is virtually NO music that gets me dancing — I am "choreographically challenged," as they say! You know, it's funny, I don't really remember much music from that time. My family moved from Philly to San Diego when I was nine years old, and though I had been in kids' choirs up til that point, my first "musical memory" was hearing Barry Manilow sing "Mandy" on the radio when I was 11 — I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing the first time I heard that song.

I was quite into that middle-of-the-road "pop" sound for a long time, primarily because I could understand the lyrics. Most dance music didn't "mean" anything to me. I know that it's why I've always liked country music as well — there are stories in the songs, and the lyrics say something.

You love performing on stage and it shows during your concerts. Tell us a little about your first performance and how you felt stepping out on stage for the first time.

It was like coming home — that's the only way to describe it. Though I had been on stage with groups many times ("third spear carrier from the left"), my first featured role was as Nicely-Nicely in "Guy and Dolls" in junior high. The first time I made an audience

laugh, and the first time I finished singing "Sit Down, You're Rocking the Boat" to thunderous applause — well, I was hooked. It was such a rush, such a high, I became an addict, I guess.

In junior high, I was fat and awkward, and a bit of a nerd, but when I walked out on that stage, I felt completely safe. And once I had done it, I was suddenly a very popular kid. My life changed, without a doubt.

What I like most about your shows is your ability to connect with the audience. I know first-hand what it is like interacting with you on stage. Remember the hula skirt dance? We won't go into that here, but how do you go about planning a particular show? If you have for example a four- or five-night run at a particular venue, do you plan different shows for each night?

It's just so much fun, interacting with an audience. I really try to approach my shows as though they were a party at my house — we're not there to solve world peace, we're all there to have a good time. I've never really suffered from stage fright, because why would I be afraid of my friends? I'm a bit of a goof in real life, and I let that show in my stage performances. So if I make a mistake, forget a lyric, etc., I'm honest about it, because everyone already knows. Let me tell you, a little self-deprecation goes a long way!

And when I plan my shows, I leave plenty of room for spontaneity. So when I plan a show for a longer run, I don't really change the show from night to night. We're going to do the same 20 songs, in the same order, and in the case of a "story show" (like my tribute to **Tony Bennett**), I'm going to deliver the same basic facts of the story.

What I don't do is memorize exactly how or what I'm going to say, and my voice dictates how I'm going to sing the songs. If I'm in exceptional voice one night, I'll be a little more daring, note-wise. If I'm under the weather, I spend a lot more energy on the interpretation of the song, rather than vocal pyrotechnics. Plus, each night is different because of the audience. Most non-performers are truly unaware of the vital role an audience plays in experiencing a show. We performers feed off of the energy an audience gives, so the show changes depending on that. If you've got a group of people "giving great audience," you try harder, you try to give them more.

Your show "Benedetto/Blessed: Celebrating the Life and Music of Tony Bennett" was a very emotional and inspiring show. I thoroughly enjoyed the concert and as a result read "The Good Life" after seeing your show. Can you tell us how Tony Bennett's life story inspired you?

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.

And in keeping with that, I listened to the music. I have nearly 2,000 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!

But what truly inspires me, time and again, are the personal stories that audience members share with me after the show, either about Mr. Bennett himself, or personal connections to his music. I take my responsibility to represent him and his work very seriously.

You perform and donate your time to many charities including the Richmond Ermet Aids Foundation. What does it mean to you personally to help these charitable organizations?

I was given a gift — because of what I do, I have gotten to meet and work with some extraordinary people, including several of my idols. So, since I'm not a rich guy, nor am I a brilliant scientist who can cure disease, nor am I a great teacher, I've found that the best way I can say thank you to the universe is to give of my talent in benefit of organizations I believe in. REAF is a tremendous organization, who have raised and given so much money to serve people with HIV and AIDS. And they do it with such style, panache and fun, so that no one feels like, "oh god, another fundraiser!" I do try to focus my efforts on groups that I believe are well-run, who give a lot to their constituencies, and who are truly appreciative of those who donate their time and money. Most of my charitable efforts have been focused on arts organizations, and those who serve children.

You have a very smooth, sexy and scintillating voice. Have you ever had a voice coach?

(Blushing) Well, thank you! When people tell me I have a good voice, I say, "Well, I should, I paid enough for it!" Yes, I've had several great vocal teachers and coaches over the years, starting with Loren Salter, the guy who got me started in all this back in

junior high. I came back to him as an adult after college and studied with him for several years. **Jack Lasher**, my voice teacher in college was a great influence on me, as was **John Lehrack**, my coach here in San Francisco for several years. Nowadays, I don't study vocal technique as much, but focus on stylistic technique, and my musical director **Kelly Park** plays a big part in that.

It's been said by many musicians in the Bay Area that jazz is a dying genre and that there are just not enough clubs in which to perform. Many jazz vocalists are infusing other genres such as pop, rock, etc., into their repertoire. Do you find this to be true as well?

You know, the death of jazz (and classical, cabaret, Broadway, etc) has been reported for years. I think there's actually a pretty vibrant jazz scene here in the Bay Area, though it's small. I live a few blocks from the new Yoshi's in San Francisco, and there have been lots of little clubs that have popped up in the area as a result of their opening. We have The Jazzschool and Anna's Jazz Island in Berkeley, Shanghai 1930 and Savanna Jazz here in the City, and even the Rrazz Room which features jazz, along with pop and cabaret.

But it's true that there just aren't enough places to perform on a regular basis if you're someone like me. I live in that strange intersection of jazz, pop, and theatre, where I'm not a hard-core jazz vocalist, nor am I full-out Broadway-style singer, so venues are not always sure what to do with me. I think one of the things that kills the genre (especially for vocalists) is the belief that the Great American Songbook stopped being written in 1959! Audiences love the standard repertoire, but get tired of hearing the same thing over and over again. So artists have strated responding by changing the kind of music they do (as you've pointed out), rather than just look for new repertoire. There are some truly terrific songwriters out there whose music should be heard. I've been mixing some of the new in with the old over the last year, and it's been wonderful to see audiences respond so favorably to it.

One issue I do see in the Bay Area is the hesitancy on the part of venues to give locals a chance. While it's understandable that venues like to book "names," it seems ridiculous to me that a venue will book someone no one's heard of, just because they're from New York, rather than someone who has a following here in the area. There seems to be this strange bias against "locals."

When preparing for a show, how do you choose your songs?

I need a framework, first and foremost. I create rules for myself about what a show will be about, and then start researching. So, for example, in my latest show, "Standard Time," I decided I only wanted to do songs written in the last 20 years, but that fit into "traditional pop vocal," or "standard" repertoire. I am constantly receiving songs from composers, so I had a big pile to choose from there. Then I started looking at original compositions from singers I respect and admire, like Harry Connick Jr., **Michael Feinstein**, **Peter Cincotti** and **John Pizzarelli**.

My musical director had a bunch of originals that I threw into the mix as well. I started with a potential list of about 200 songs, and whittled it down to 25 I really liked. And that's the key — I have to like them, and they have to mean something to me, or else I can never make them mean something to someone else. Above all, in choosing songs, the lyrics have to say something to me, no matter how good the tune is.

That applies even in a "story show" like "Benedetto/Blessed." Of course I had to pick songs that were connected to Mr. Bennett, but the songs also had to resonate with me in some way. And most often, that came down to the lyrics. With the exception of the hula song, of course — that was there just for fun!

You travel for many of your shows. Do you enjoy being on the road and why?

I actually do enjoy being on the road, as much of a homebody as I am. I think it's because I get to be away from my element, the everyday cares and concerns of my "real" life, and just focus on the task at hand, which is being an artist. Meeting different people, performing in different halls, it gives you the freedom to allow new influences into your art.

Who are your top three musical influences?

Wow, that's a tough one! Well, other than Loren Salter, whom I mentioned earlier, I'd have to say, number one would have to be Tony Bennett — he's the master. What else can I say?

Number two would have to be Barry Manilow, frankly. So many people take great pleasure in maligning him and his work, but this is a guy who went from writing commercial jingles and accompanying **Bette Midler** in bathhouses to being one of greatest-selling artists of all time (over 75 million records!). In 1978, five of his albums were on the best-selling charts simultaneously, a feat equaled only by Frank Sinatra, **Michael Jackson** and **Johnny Mathis**! I still remember singing along to his records with a hairbrush in my hand, imagining what it would be like to perform as a singer in concert. Because of him, I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up.

It's really hard to pick a single person for third — there are so many! I could give you a laundry list of singers and instrumentalists I respect and admire, and who have influenced me in one way or another, including many who are great friends and colleagues. Honestly, though, I'd probably have to pick my musical director, Kelly Park, as next in line. He's taught me so much about stylistic choices, about jazz, about letting go and being free on stage, but being strict about quality. I really am so fortunate to work with him.

You have a Christmas concert coming up at the Rrazz Room in December. Tell us more about the show, your band and where people can order your CDs.

I recorded "Christmas in San Francisco" on my first CD, and it was picked up by KOIT-FM here in San Francisco as part of their

annual "all Christmas" format, replacing **Vic Damone's** version of the song. It got a lot of airplay, and so the following year, I recorded a holiday CD, and my annual holiday show came out of the CD release party we had for it. Once the CD was released, I put a show together for the CD release party, which has grown over the years to include special guests, performing friends who bring their own touch of holiday magic to the show. It's turned into an annual tradition here in San Francisco, and we have taken the show on the road for the past several years as well.

This year's show will be a blast — my special guests will be **Carly Ozard**, a brilliant comedic singer/actress, named "San Francisco's Best New Cabaret Performer 2009," and whom I've had the pleasure to work with in several productions around the Bay Area; **Suzanna Smith**, a really great jazz vocalist who appears all over the Bay Area; and **Jonathan Poretz**, a terrific Bay Area crooner, who, in addition to performing his own brand of jazz standards as a headliner at major venues like Yoshi's, has the honor of portraying Frank Sinatra in the long-running show, "The Rat Pack is Back."

My band varies a bit with each show, but they are always headed up by Kelly Park, my fantastic musical director, a renowned jazz pianist in his own right. For this show, we'll have **Reid Whatley** on bass, **Adam Goodhue** on drums, and **Tony Malfatti** on sax, the same foursome who did the Christmas CD with me.

Both of my CD's are available on iTunes, Napster and the other download stores, as well as through Amazon.com, and my website. But the best way to get one would be to come down to the Rrazz Room and let me sign one in person!

The show is Wednesday, December 23rd at 7pm, and tickets are available at <http://www.therazzroom.com>.

Finish this sentence. If I weren't an entertainer I would...

You know what? I can't finish that sentence! I have no idea what I'd do!

About the Author



As a writer for over 30 years, **Joanne Olivieri** has authored two poetry chapbooks and has been published in numerous magazines and journals around the world. Visit her [blog](#) or send her an [e-mail](#).