

By Albert Goodwyn  
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Of course Russ Lorensen sang "The Song" in his tribute to Tony Bennett. He also sang twenty-one other songs recorded by Bennett. But when he encored with "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" at the Plush Room, his question, "Does anyone ever get tired of making love?" captured the essence of the emotion in Bennett's signature song of our beloved City.

Lorensen's well-controlled voice does not have the same vocal timbre as Bennett's tenor still does (Just over age eighty, Tony still performs and in June married a much younger woman. Russ says Bennett is "singing better than ever.") But he does have a smooth baritone with a bari-tenor range, pleasant nasal sounds and perfectly even sustains throughout. He even adapted Tony's habit of singing at least one song off-mike ("Lost in the Stars" in this show), just to demonstrate the importance of vocal projection. Russ' consistent pitch control worked just fine without amplification, although admittedly the Plush Room (a former speakeasy) is not vast. His vocal range in "Danny Boy," part of a medley to Tony's children, was impressively soaring and melodious, even though, by comparison, Russ has limited tonalities.

Lorensen's voice does not have the huskiness of Bennett's, but it has all the warmth. He has obviously spent time researching Tony's style. For "Who Can I Turn to," Russ's sensitivity to phrasing recalled Bennett's unique artistry. In "Firefly," a boogie-woogie number, Russ varied the timing in ways that would put shame to the Andrews Sisters. He exemplified Bennett's Broadway efforts with his showy rendition of Irving Berlin's "Steppin' out with My Baby." Russ' smooth-sailing vocal manner was showcased in a medley of tunes by Al Jolson and Charlie Chaplin.

Lorensen's voice was even and comforting throughout the evening, and he is an audience charmer. He does not try to imitate Bennett, thankfully, but with his quartet accompaniment, he revealed the artistry of a master crooner as though he were a devoted acolyte. He uses the attitudes and approaches of Bennett, but even with no reference to him, Lorensen's own vocal technique is a masterpiece.

On Tony Bennett's 81st birthday, Lorensen led a special celebration for him, featuring cake, champagne and a giant birthday card that all audience members could sign. The card will be delivered to Mr. Bennett when he returns to San Francisco in September to perform at Davies Symphony Hall.