

Tony Bennett Singer Par Excellence

On July 21st I heard news that brought me to a full stop: Tony Bennett, once my idea of the singer's singer had passed away. And all this time I thought he was one of the immortals. Well, maybe I still think that.

My earliest recollection of hearing Tony was back when I was teaching English in Pillager, Minn. I got it into my head that maybe if I took singing lessons I could develop my voice. So at a coffee break I asked our choir man, Joe, how I should go about it. He recommended my listening to some of Tony Bennett's songs. That would give me some idea of how good singers phrase their lyrics and control their tone to bring out the true meaning of the words.

Well, after listening to "My Funny Valentine" a few times and "Rags to Riches" a few more, I brilliantly concluded that I'd just better stick to teaching English. Bennett had a range, vocal color and intrinsic brightness and excitement in his voice that was light years beyond my talent. I resolved to confine my singing to crooning.

But my venture into singing gave me a huge appreciation for Tony Bennett that has never changed. I've always considered him better than Sinatra, and still do. But Frank, to his credit, thought Tony better too.

Wisely, MTV played Tony's songs a lot on Saturday the 22nd, where I hoped he was being honored. Sure enough they played many of the songs from his "Duets" albums and one could easily see how tremendously he impressed younger generation pop stars like Lady Gaga, and Faith Hill. His audience had lots of college age people being wowed by the pure artistry of this great old master.

They were truly enthralled with the style and excellence of a born performer, still able to cut it with as much cool, confidence and charisma as ever--still looking fine and singing great right up to the end.

One of his “Duet” partners was Amy Winehouse, an amazing talent who would have rivaled Barbara Streisand had she lived, but tragically, drugs ended her career just four short months after her appearance with Bennett.

On Sunday the 23rd, MTV featured even more of Tony’s performances, many from earlier times when Tony was only 80-something. Several showcased some of the great combos rich with tremendous musicians. Some standout hits were “Night and Day,” “Autumn Leaves,” “Stranger in Paradise,” and an amazing rendition of “Fly Me To the Moon.” That one really sang to me in the line “And let me play among the stars,” because it recalled some of the greats with whom Bennett performed: Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Count Basie, Judy Garland, Doc Severinson Paul McCartney, Ray Charles and Willie Nelson. Truly he played “among the stars” for real.

Incidentally, it was Bob Hope who discovered Bennett, and promoted him on several of his shows, opening important doors. Then he recorded *Rags to Riches*, a huge hit that set Tony on the road to fame and fortune. *Rags to Riches* really impressed me because it touched on my own young life as a “poor boy.” I sang it a lot: “And though my pockets may be empty/ I’d be a millionaire.” I bumped into it again at NDSSS when my great Sociology mentor, Vernon Hektner, explained the “rags to riches” influence of the Horatio Alger novels about ragged Dick, the match boy, making good.

Solomon in the Bible points out that “your gifts” will bring you before kings and princes. Anthony Benedetto was wonderfully gifted--not just with a great voice, but with a magnetic smiling friendliness that made him unique, giving him favor, with Bob Hope first, and then the whole listening world.

I hope more of the younger generation seeing him perform will realize that one doesn’t have to gesture wildly, paint yourself with tattoos, or lace your teeth

with gold to gain acceptance. Young people, God has given you gifts or talents that will get you in. Seek out your gift, remember God, who gave you that gift, loves you. Stay thankful, stay humble, and follow your dream. The doors will open.

What many of our great young artists showed, was how genuinely they adored Tony Bennett--a true father figure and role model for them all.

When I watch clips of Tony in performance, what stands out is how his every gesture, facial, expression, movement of his body, suits with the message of the words, while his great voice brings out the soul and spirit living within the lyrics.

It wouldn't surprise me if, even now, Tony was playing "among the stars." That's got to be a jam session to beat all jam sessions. Wish I could sit in.

Gene Pinkney 23-07-31- for The Daily News