

# Upbeat and a 'master improviser,' Tony Bennett was one of a kind

BY LLOYD SACHS

For the Sun-Times

Tony Bennett had many great qualities as a vocalist. But, from a fan's perspective, none meant more than his remarkable consistency.

Whether he was performing in a spacious concert venue like at the Ravinia Festival or in a tiny club like the old Gold Star Sardine Bar, he maintained the highest standards. He offered surpassing musicality, showmanship and a deeply personal approach to standards.

Though Bennett, who died Friday at 96, rarely departed from the comforts and joys of his beloved Great American Songbook, which he promoted with the zeal of a car salesman, he always brought something new to his performances, increasingly taking greater risks as he reached his later years.

As formidable as his sense of swing and command of melody were, he wasn't a jazz singer. He was a master improviser, keeping expectations in the air with his shifts in tempo and key and an unparalleled ability to create instant drama with a burst of emotion or a note held almost as long as the night.

Sustaining the word "never" (as in "never dies") on "How Do You Keep the Music Playing?," he captured a complex world of feeling.

His sudden shouts ("Time is a thief!" he yelled during a performance of "Speak Low," in happy violation of the title) and sudden whispers left you thinking you were privy to his internal conversations.

And then there was his magical ability (all that was missing was a rabbit jumping out of his tux pocket) to somehow make "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" sound fresh after a million renditions — convincing us that his heart was at the very least on loan to Chicago.

Bennett's insistence in playing by his own rules after emerging from a career rut in the 1970s struck a deep chord among his followers, resulting in 1980s and 1990s masterpieces including "Bennett/Berlin" (songs by Irving Berlin) and "Steppin' Out" (a tribute to Fred Astaire) and later appealing to pop star col-



Tony Bennett and k.d. lang perform in 2009 in New York City. GARY GERSHOFF/GETTY IMAGES FOR EXPLORING THE ARTS

laborators including k.d. lang and Lady Gaga.

Perhaps Bennett's most enduring quality was his investment in happiness. No popular artist was more resolutely upbeat than he was, as reflected in his unlikely approach to Billie Holiday's songbook. Rather than sing the pain-driven classics for which the troubled legend is best known, he revived the chipper tunes she recorded, including "Laughing at Life," determined to rehabili-

tate her image. A daunting task but one he approached with the dedication with which he approached everything.

Seeing Bennett perform in the late and lamented Gold Star Sardine Bar in the 1980s was like watching Renoir paint in your living room. The sense of intimacy and connection was powerful. Oh, those strokes!

But perhaps my most lasting image of this perennial Chicago favorite is of him performing

at the Rosemont Theatre in 1997, wordlessly intoning the melody to "I Got Lost in Her Arms" while taking a soft stroll around the piano.

Here was a profound picture of contentment: a man alone, losing himself in his music even as he was helping a multitude of others find their best selves.

Lloyd Sachs is a former jazz critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

**CS★T**

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