



Tony Bennett

A Swingin' Christmas Featuring the Count Basie Big Band

(Columbia Records/ RPM Records)

Two years ago, consummate entertainer Tony Bennett, the indefatigable superstar whom Frank Sinatra aptly named “the best singer in the business,” celebrated his 80th birthday in high style, and in exemplary company, with the Grammy Award-winning *Duets: An American Classic*, which became the singer’s best selling CD of his career reaching multi-platinum status.

Now, Tony is back with *A Swingin' Christmas Featuring the Count Basie Big Band*, an album that simultaneously honors two career milestones. It was four decades ago that Tony delivered his first — and, to date, only — Christmas album, recording *Snowfall* in London and New York with arranger/conductor Robert Farnon and a massive big band. And it was precisely a half-century ago that Tony united with Count Basie in the studio, making music history by becoming the first white vocalist to record with the Basie orchestra.

So pleased has Tony been over the past 40 years with *Snowfall*, widely acknowledged as one of the all-time great Christmas albums, that he continuously dismissed any suggestions of a follow-up festive release, instructing Columbia executives to simply reissue the original season after holiday season. When Tony at last decided it was time to dig anew into the bag of yuletide tunes he so loves (of the vast Christmas songbook he notes that, “really good songwriters invariably write a lyric that says ‘if only it could be like this all year round’”), there were two stipulations. He wanted the playlist to be lively and fun, heightening each listener’s sense of holiday cheer; and, even more important, he wanted to capture the same brassy grandeur that made *Snowfall* so magnificent, now with his all-time favorite outfit — the Count Basie Orchestra.

“It’s time,” says Phil Ramone, “We *need* a really good Christmas album, and Basie and Bennett really speak to this holiday.” A *Swingin’ Christmas*, with eleven tracks that extend from the cozy warmth of “I’ll Be Home for Christmas” and romantic playfulness of “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm” to the tender joyfulness of “Christmas Time Is Here” and august quietude of “O Christmas Tree,” marks the legendary producer’s fifth collaboration with

Tony. Their first project, the 1997 Billie Holiday tribute *On Holiday*, was followed by three consecutive Grammy winners: *Playin' with My Friends*, *The Art of Romance* and *Duets: An American Classic*.

As Phil recalls in his bestselling memoir, *Making Records: The Scenes Behind the Music*, when they were preparing for *Playin' with My Friends* in 2001, Tony “told me that he felt restricted by the stationary microphone he’d been forced to use at most of his vocal sessions, [so] to make him feel at ease, I arranged the studio as if he were giving an intimate concert, and set him up with a handheld mike.” For the recording of *A Swingin' Christmas*, Tony’s sense of freedom was further escalated. The sessions were held in Englewood, New Jersey — the town Tony called home in the 1950s and ‘60s — in a state-of-the-art facility that happens to be named Bennett Studios. But it’s not Tony’s name above the door. The Bennett in Bennett Studios is the younger of Tony’s two sons, Daegal, a richly gifted sound engineer. One of Bennett Studios’ most distinctive features is that it is connected, via fiber-optic cable, to the elegant Bergen Performing Arts Center, located just down the block. As a result, Tony and the musicians were able to record directly from the Bergen PAC stage, facilitating his desire “to make the recording like it’s a live performance. We tried

to be as spontaneous as possible so the album has a life to it. It doesn't sound like something manufactured or too perfect. It's just real." Thanks to this unique recording process, the *A Swingin' Christmas* sessions were also captured on film, and, in addition to the regular CD, two deluxe, double-disc CD/DVD versions — one including a bonus holiday card painted by Tony, the other packaged with a set of 10 cards featuring his festive artwork — complete with the “making of” footage, will also be released on October 14.

Of the eleven tunes that fill *A Swingin' Christmas*, five — “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” “Winter Wonderland,” “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm” and Rodgers and Hammerstein’s jaunty “My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music* (not written as a Christmas song, though its feelgood theme is ideally suited to the holiday season, particularly when enhanced by Tony’s special brand of uninhibited exuberance) — were included on *Snowfall*. But Tony — who, like all great jazz musicians, remains a master of improvisation and reinterpretation — makes each as fresh as new-fallen snow. Added to Tony’s Christmas canon are “Silver Bells,” “O Christmas Tree,” “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” the lovely, lilting “Christmas Waltz” (custom-written by Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne for Tony’s

great friend Sinatra), the sweet, hymn-like “Christmas Time Is Here” from *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and, least familiar among the new selections, Johnny Mandel and Marilyn and Alan Bergman’s deeply romantic “All I Want for Christmas Is You.”

As on *Duets* (and, for that matter, pretty much every album Tony has recorded over the past 60 years), *A Swingin’ Christmas* finds him surrounded by top-drawer talent. Topping the list is Tony’s music director and accompanist, Lee Musiker, who follows in the giant footsteps of such legendary pianists as Ralph Sharon and Bill Evans. Rounding out Tony’s quartet are drummer Harold Jones (a personal favorite of Count Basie’s), bassist Paul Langosch and guitarist Gray Sargent. Then, of course, there are the 13 members of the Count Basie Orchestra, under the direction of Bill Hughes. Some of the superb bandmates are young enough to only know Count Basie, who passed away at age 79 in 1984, from his records and filmed appearances. Conversely, the band’s two elder statesmen, saxophonist John Williams and trombonist Clarence Banks, spent years touring and recording with the Count. Sitting in with the orchestra at the piano, brilliantly rising to the enormous challenge of filling the space vacated by Count Basie, is the inimitable Monty Alexander. Also featured on *A Swingin’*

Christmas, adding a gorgeous harmonica solo to “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” is Belgian jazz icon Toots Thielemans.

A Swingin’ Christmas also showcases another special guest. On “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm,” Tony is joined by an emerging jazz singer who shares his last name. She is Antonia Bennett, the younger of Tony’s two daughters. Of the duet, Phil Ramone says, “there’s something about the DNA when it’s working. It’s really cool.” Adds Tony, “The song is really very similar to our relationship. We’re very friendly with each other and think about each other all the time. She’s got the gift. She sings in tune [and] has a good, spontaneous feel for phrasing. That’s something you’ve either got or you haven’t. You can’t teach anyone that.”

The album’s familial connections continue, of course, with son Dae overseeing the recording and mixing, and further extends to Tony’s eldest son, Danny, who serves as Executive Producer for *A Swingin’ Christmas*. Dan has been his father’s manager for nearly three decades, and is recognized not only by Tony but also throughout the music industry as the chief sculptor of the career renaissance that has extended Tony’s global audience to the MTV

generation and beyond and kept him at music's forefront for a remarkable six decades.

A lifelong Count Basie fan, Tony first worked with his favorite bandleader in late 1958. At the time, Tony was under contract to Columbia Records (a relationship that continues to this day), while Basie was signed to the Roulette label. Solution: the pair teamed for two albums. The first, for Columbia, was *In Person! With Count Basie*, recorded December 22 and 30, 1958. The second, *Bennett & Basie — Strike Up the Band* (subsequently reissued as simply *Basie/Bennett*) on Roulette, was captured at Manhattan's Capitol Studios less than a week later. Both landmark albums remain in print a half-century later.

Though they became close friends, often performing and touring together throughout the following two-and-a-half decades, they never again teamed for a recording during Basie's lifetime. In 1997, however, there was a reunion of sorts, thanks to Phil Ramone. During preparation for *On Holiday*, Danny Bennett called the producer and suggested that, via the magic of modern technology, Tony be paired with Billie Holiday, who had died 38 years earlier, on "God Bless the Child." As Phil explains in *Making Records*, "the problem was that Billie never recorded the

song in stereo, so there was no way to isolate and extrapolate her vocal. Columbia A&R man Don DeVito wasn't deterred, and searched until he found a 16mm film featuring Billie singing "God Bless the Child" [with Count Basie] from the 1940s. The arrangement was sparse... and the rhythm section was placed so far back in the mix that you could barely hear Count Basie's piano." Thanks to the wonders of digital sound restoration, the track was cleaned up, Holiday's vocal and Basie's piano were isolated, and arranger Rob Mounsey transcribed the original arrangement. A group of musicians were hired to play along in the studio. Tony's vocal was then blended seamlessly with Basie and Holiday, not only enabling, as Phil explains, "Tony to do something he'd long dreamed of doing: singing a duet with Billie Holiday" but also placing Tony and Basie side-by-side once more.

For *A Swingin' Christmas*, Tony confesses that "the real challenge for me was what was missing: Count Basie's piano playing." Fortunately, Tony was able to persuade Monty Alexander, whom he aptly describes as "a fantastic artist the music world loves" to take Basie's place. "Monty is a natural," says Tony, "and he adores Count Basie. The riffs that he plays on the record are very similar to what Count Basie would have done."

The October 14 releases of *A Swingin' Christmas* marks only the beginning of Tony's festive agenda. Throughout the yuletide season, Tony will be the showcased artist for Bloomingdale's Holiday Windows campaign. Tony also created a seasonal painting that will be reproduced on all of Bloomingdale's holiday shopping bags. Bloomingdale stores will offer a special edition of *A Swingin' Christmas* with "Jingle Bells" added as an exclusive bonus track. (The chic department store chain will also be including a free download of "Jingle Bells" with every purchase of a \$100 gift card). And, on November 20, in front of Bloomingdale's flagship store on 59th Street in Manhattan, Tony will present a free, public holiday concert.

In addition, as he has for the past 15 years, Tony — whom the world now knows is as accomplished a painter as he is a singer — has created a holiday image for inclusion in the American Cancer Society's Holiday Card Series, which raises money for cancer research.

Summing up his heartfelt enthusiasm for *A Swingin' Christmas* and his related holiday plans, Tony says, "I find as a painter and a singer that I've fallen in love with life, and I try to communicate that everyone should do that. What a gift it is to be alive! I love to

perform, and the public has been so good to me through the years. So, I just wanted to wish them happy holidays.”

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Tony Bennett is an artist who moves the hearts and touches the souls of audiences. He’s not just the singer’s singer but also an international treasure honored by the United Nations with its Citizen of the World award, which aptly describes the scope of his accomplishments.

The son of a grocer and Italian-born immigrant, Anthony Dominick Benedetto was born on August 3, 1926, in the Astoria section of Queens, New York. He attended the High School of Industrial Arts in Manhattan, where he nurtured his dual passions, singing and painting. His boyhood idols included Bing Crosby and Nat King Cole, both big influences on Bennett’s easy, natural singing style. Tony sang while waiting tables as a teenager then performed with military bands throughout his overseas Army duty during World War II. After the war, the GI Bill enabled him to study vocal technique at the American Theatre Wing School. The

first time he sang in a nightclub was 1946 when he sat in with trombonist Tyree Glenn at the Shangri-La in Astoria.

Tony's big break came in 1949 when comedian Bob Hope noticed him working with Pearl Bailey in Greenwich Village. As he recalls, "Bob Hope came down to check out my act. He liked my singing so much that after the show he came back to see me in my dressing room and said, 'Come on kid, you're going to come to the Paramount and sing with me.' But first he told me he didn't care for my stage name (Joe Bari) and asked me what my real name was. I told him, 'My name is Anthony Dominick Benedetto,' and he said, 'We'll call you Tony Bennett.' And that's how it happened. A new Americanized name, the start of a wonderful career and a glorious adventure that has continued for sixty years."

With worldwide record sales eclipsing 50-million, and dozens of platinum and gold albums to his credit, Tony has received thirteen Grammy Awards as well as the prestigious Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. The MTV generation first took Tony Bennett to heart during his appearance with the Red Hot Chili Peppers on the 1993 MTV Video Awards. He appeared on *MTV Unplugged* and the resulting recording of the same name garnered him the top Grammy Award for Album of the Year. "Tony Bennett has not just

bridged the generation gap,” observed *The New York Times*, “he has demolished it. He has solidly connected with a younger crowd weaned on rock. And there have been no compromises.” Bennett credits his eldest son and manager, Danny, for his success in capturing a whole new generation of listeners.

His initial fame came via a string of Columbia singles in the early 1950s, including such chart-toppers as “Because of You,” “Rags To Riches” and a cover of Hank Williams’ “Cold, Cold Heart.” He had placed two-dozen songs in the Top 40, including “I Wanna Be Around,” “The Good Life,” “Who Can I Turn To (When Nobody Needs Me)” and his signature hit, “I Left My Heart In San Francisco,” which earned him two Grammy Awards. Tony Bennett is one of a handful of artists to have new albums chart in the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s, ’80s, ’90s, and into the new millennium. He introduced a multitude of songs into the Great American Songbook that have since become pop music standards. He has toured the world to sold out audiences, winning rave reviews whenever he performs. Tony re-signed with Columbia Records in 1986 and released the critically acclaimed *The Art Of Excellence*. Since his show-stopping performance of “When Do the Bells Ring for Me,” from his *Astoria* album, at the 1991 Grammy Awards, he has been awarded Grammys for *Steppin’ Out*, *Perfectly Frank*, *MTV*

Unplugged, Playin' with My Friends, The Art of Romance and *Duets: An American Classic*. In celebration of his unparalleled contributions to popular music, Columbia/Legacy assembled *Forty Years: The Artistry Of Tony Bennett*. The four-CD boxed set, released in 1991, chronicled the singer's stellar recording career and documents his growth as an artist inspiring *Time* magazine to call the collection "... the essence of why CD boxed sets are a blessing." Recently, thanks to Tony's remarkable career longevity, the set has been updated and expanded, with the title changed from *Forty Years* to *Fifty Years*.

Tony Bennett became a Kennedy Center Honoree in 2005, and was named an NEA Jazz Master in January of 2006. Last year, he was named the recipient of *Billboard* magazine's elite Century Award, in honor of his outstanding contributions to music.

Tony has received an Emmy Award and a Cable Ace Award for his groundbreaking television special, *Live By Request...Tony Bennett*, which featured a unique interactive format in which the viewing audience called in song requests during the program, a concept created by Bennett that has become a regular special on the A&E network. Tony has also authored three books: *What My Heart Has Seen*, a beautifully bound edition of his paintings

published in 1996; *The Good Life*, his heartfelt autobiography released in 1998; and *Tony Bennett In the Studio*, a sumptuous salute to his dual career as singer and painter, published last year.

Tony is a dedicated painter whose interest in art began as a child. He continues to paint every day, even while touring internationally. He has exhibited his work in galleries around the world, and was chosen to be the official artist of the 2001 Kentucky Derby, creating two paintings in celebration of the iconic event. The United Nations has commissioned two paintings from him, including one for its 50th anniversary. His original painting “Homage to Hockney” is on permanent display at the Butler Institute of American Art, and the celebrated National Arts Club in New York is home to his “Boy on Sailboat, Sydney Bay.” His oil painting “Central Park” was accepted to the Smithsonian’s American Art Museum’s permanent collection in Washington, DC, and most recently his portrait painting of Duke Ellington was accepted by the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, marking the third of Bennett’s paintings in Smithsonian collections.

Throughout his career, Tony Bennett has always put his heart and time into humanitarian concerns. He has raised millions of dollars for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, which established a research

fund in his name. His original paintings each year grace the cover of the American Cancer Society's holiday greeting card, proceeds from which are earmarked for cancer research. He is active in environmental concerns and has performed at fundraisers for both the Walden Woods Foundation and the Save the Rainforest Foundation. The Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta bestowed upon him their "Salute to Greatness Award" for his efforts to fight discrimination. The United Nations presented him with their 2007 Humanitarian Award.

In honor of one of his greatest friends and staunchest supporters, Tony conceived and spearheaded the establishment of the Frank Sinatra School for the Arts, which opened its doors as a New York City public high school, offering an extensive arts curriculum, in September of 2001. A permanent site for the school, designed by famed architects Polshek Partners, will open in Fall, 2009 in Bennett's hometown of Astoria, Queens, adjacent to the Kaufman Astoria Studios complex. With his wife Susan, they founded Exploring the Arts, which supports the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts and provides support to arts education in public schools.

In the 1950s, thousands of screaming bobbysoxers surrounded the Paramount Theatre in New York, held back only by police

barricades, to see their singing idol Tony Bennett. Today the children and grandchildren of those fans are providing equally ardent in their worship of him. Perhaps what sums up Tony's legacy and longevity best is an observation made in *The New York Times*' review of *MTV Unplugged*: "What accounts for the Bennett magic? Artistry certainly. The repertory is indeed classic.... But perhaps more important is his ability to convey a sense of joy, of utter satisfaction, in what he is doing."

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Tony Bennett turned 80 on August 3, 2006, an event which has generated a wide range of tributes and celebrations. In addition to the release of *Duets: An American Classic*, RPM Records/Columbia Records/Legacy Recordings launched a monumental and definitive reissue project, The Tony Bennett Master Series. Executive produced by Tony Bennett and Danny Bennett, the first five releases in The Tony Bennett Master Series included expanded editions of three Grammy winning titles — *I Left My Heart In San Francisco* (1962), *Perfectly Frank* (1992), and *MTV Unplugged* (1994) — as well as two brand-new 16-song collections: *Tony Bennett's Greatest Hits of the '50s* and *Tony Bennett's Greatest Hits of the '60s*.

Tony has been the subject of both a filmed biography produced by Clint Eastwood and a major television special, *Tony Bennett: An American Classic*, which aired on NBC in autumn 2006 and won 7 Emmy Awards making it the most honored television program at the 2007 Emmy Awards ceremony. It garnered Bennett his second Emmy Award to his credit.

Conceived and directed by Rob Marshall, executive produced by Danny Bennett, John DeLuca and Rob Marshall and produced by Jodi Hurwitz, *Tony Bennett: An American Classic* featured musical guests Elton John, Michael Bubl , John Legend, k.d. lang, Diana Krall, Christina Aguilera, Stevie Wonder, Barbra Streisand and Chris Botti. Segment hosts for the program included Robert DeNiro, Bruce Willis, Billy Crystal and Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Notables from the worlds of music, stage, screen and politics were on-hand to help Tony celebrated his 80th birthday at a star-studded party at the Museum of Natural History in New York. The evening included heartfelt tributes from Harry Belafonte, Bruce Willis, Katie Couric and former President Bill Clinton.

“As you know, I’ve always admired your singing and your ability to bring millions of people together across the generations through your music,” said Clinton, who sent along taped greetings when he was unable to personally attend Bennett’s birthday festivity due to a prior commitment. “But you haven’t stopped at your musical success. You’ve spent so much time working to bring people together through public service. I’ll never forget your special performance at my First Inaugural, and I can’t thank you enough for the support of the Clinton Global Initiative, even auctioning off one of your beautiful paintings for an enormous amount of money that will help to keep children around the world alive. I’ve valued our friendship so much over the years. You’re still young, your ear is still pitch-perfect, you’ve got a light in your eye, and I hope this special day is just the beginning of many, many more happy birthdays to a very good man.”

“Everything’s all happening at once,” said Bennett. “It’s the biggest amount of recognition I’ve ever received--almost like a payoff for all the years of traveling on the road.”

As the world’s most boyish octogenarian, a vital musical artist at the peak of his powers, Tony Bennett is living proof that, to steal a

line from Sinatra, fairy tales can come true if you're young at heart.

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