

Tony Bennett: Musician, Artist, and Advocate for Creativity

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Tony Bennett received the 2017 Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song. Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden, in announcing the award, stated that “Tony Bennett is one of the most accomplished and beloved artists of our time. His staying power is a testament to the enduring appeal of the Great American Songbook the Gershwins helped write, and his ability to collaborate with new generations of music icons has been a gift to music lovers of all ages.”

Bennett has spoken often about his lifelong love of the Gershwins’ creativity. In the Library’s press release about the prize, Bennett stated, “When I was still using the stage name ‘Joe Bari’ I made a demo record that was a two-sided 78 disc, and one of the sides I recorded was ‘Fascinating Rhythm,’ which was written by George and Ira Gershwin. I am very proud that one of the earliest records I ever made was a song written by the Gershwins, as their songwriting mastery was so exceptional. To be receiving an award that was named in their honor is one of the greatest thrills of my career, and I am deeply appreciative to the Library of Congress to be named this year’s recipient.”

Bennett’s musical career has largely been based on recording his interpretations of other songwriters’ works. His first number one song, “Because of You,” which he recorded in 1951, was written by Arthur Hammerstein and Dudley Wilkinson. Bennett recorded his signature song, “I Left My Heart in San Francisco,” in 1962. It was written by George Cory and Douglass Cross and first registered with the Copyright Office in 1954.

While Bennett became famous for his seven decades of sound recordings, he also is an accomplished painter, usually using his given surname, Benedetto. He has registered volumes of his artwork with the Copyright Office, and his works include oils, watercolors, scrolls, and sketches. Three of his originals are part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution, including his portrait of Duke Ellington at the National Portrait Gallery.

Bennett also has authored five books registered with the Copyright Office. Two of them, *Tony Bennett: What My Heart Has Seen* (1996) and *Tony Bennett in the Studio: A Life or Art & Music* (2007) feature his artworks and have become best sellers.

Wanting to strengthen the role of the arts in public high school education, Bennett and his wife, Susan Benedetto, founded Exploring the Arts. The organization established the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in Astoria, Queens. Thanks to the couple’s generosity and enthusiasm, future generations have the opportunity to explore their creativity. ©



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