

June 22, 2003

NEW YORK--This is a road song that begins with a goodbye.

On a cool-as-a-cocktail spring day Tony Bennett finishes a conversation in his apartment overlooking Central Park South. Bennett stands up from a plush white sofa and wishes me safe travels. Instead of walking me to the door he turns around to face a picture window overlooking the park. This great singer seems so small, standing alone in the center of the grand window. But that's the pull of this town.

You see something new every day.

And Bennett has lived in New York City most of his life.

Anthony Dominick Benedetto was born Aug. 3, 1926, in the East River community of Astoria, Queens, New York. He is the son of a grocer and an Italian-born immigrant. His father opened a store at Sixth Avenue and 52nd Street in Manhattan--the former site of Columbia Records, for which Bennett records. Bennett grew up in an apartment building at 23-18 32nd St. in Astoria. The building still stands on what is now 21st Avenue at Van Alt Avenue and Clarke Street.

"I started in a dream world of humble people," Bennett says during a long conversation about New York. "I grew up during the Depression. There's nothing like the view from Astoria into Manhattan the Upper East Side. I go to a tennis club in Long Island City next to Astoria about 20 minutes from here. I often stand there and look at the United Nations, the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building. As a little boy, I used to see these wonderful tugboats go by these huge buildings. As a kid, you dream of how you'd like to make it in the big city. The city is full of dreamers."

Bennett resides in a big neighborhood these days. Except for a period in the early 1970s when he lived in Los Angeles, Bennett has lived in New York all his life. Since 1995 Bennett and his dog Boo, a white Maltese (so named because he got her on Halloween), have lived across the street from Central Park. Neighboring attractions include the Plaza Hotel, 5th Avenue and 59th Street and Mickey Mantle's Restaurant, 42 Central Park South.

During my trip to see Bennett I stayed at the intimate Beekman Tower Hotel, East 49th Street and First Avenue, three blocks north of the United Nations. The 175-unit Art Deco hotel was built in 1928 as the Panhellenic Tower for sorority women who had just moved to New York. The hotel has been designated a landmark by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Committee.

The Beekman's Top of the Tower piano bar on the 26th floor is one of New York's best-kept secrets. The 75-seat bar features vintage open-air terraces and great views of the skyline and the East River. These dramatic vistas remind Bennett of his favorite song about New York. Although he has recorded Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind," and he digs Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York," Bennett chooses Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's "Manhattan" as his pick to click.

"I just love the lyrics," and he breaks into ". . . We'll have Manhattan/The Bronx and Staten Island too/It's lovely going through the zoo/It's very fancy . . ." He continues, "I try to not compromise and just sing intelligent songs. I don't like to disrespect the public--ever."

Central Park South offers Bennett's most familiar view of the city.

Central Park--from 59th Street to 110th Street, Central Park West to Fifth Avenue--marks its 150th birthday this year. Bennett uses the 843-acre park as an inspiration for his watercolor painting. "I go into the park and paint," Bennett says while sitting in front of a stark black and white David Hockney sketch of Bennett sketching Hockney's sister. "I head out into the field. It's ideal. I have to go early in the morning before people show up. I like the light at 5:30 in the morning. It is beautiful. The park is all manmade. The gentleman Calvert Vaux who built this park also built Hyde Park in London." (Frederick Law Olmsted also worked on Central Park.)

Bennett still paints on a daily basis. He is currently working on a series of portraits of jazz artists. Bennett's portrait of Ella Fitzgerald already hangs in the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. He acknowledges the shared disciplines of painting and singing. "A line, form and color," he says in a smoky rhythm. "Balance is important. You need to know what to leave out. It's the same rule in all of the arts. The way I see it is to learn lessons from people like Leonardo DaVinci who just took it all on. He studied Latin, engineering, nature, painting."

Bennett studied portrait painting at the Art Students League of New York, 215 W. 57th St., up the street from where he lives. A coffee table book about Soviet Impressionism sits on his coffee table. He says, "I went to art school (the High School of Industrial Art) across the street from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 5th Avenue and 82nd Street. I've been going to that museum my whole life and I still haven't seen everything in it. It is as great as the Art Institute of Chicago. That is one of the benefits of traveling. I see every museum in the world."

Bennett also has an eye for flowers. When he painted a portrait of the great Duke Ellington titled "God Is Love", Bennett positioned Ellington in a landscape of flowers. In his later years, every time Ellington wrote a song he sent Bennett flowers. Seattle is the only other American city I associate corner flower shops with as much as New York City. Bennett's pick-to-click flower shop is Matles Florist, 329 W. 57th St. "He doesn't have a favorite flower, but he likes everything natural," says Paul Maltaghati, the shop manager. "He doesn't want things to look like they're designed."

Bennett gets ideas for jazz portraits by visiting New York clubs. His favorite club is the subterranean Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. South (between 11th and Perry Streets). The Vanguard was founded in 1935 by Lithuanian immigrant Max Gordon. Folksingers Leadbelly and Harry Belafonte have also graced the Vanguard's stage. Chicago-born jazz singer Dianah Washington always wore a huge blonde wig when she appeared here. "It's a classic place," Bennett says. "They are very selective about whoever they choose in that room. It's based on real musicianship. Miles Davis started there. Bill Evans. Once someone plays there, somehow they just take off. It's a small little hole in the wall, but the atmosphere is perfect. I also

like the Blue Note (131 W. Third St.)."

Man does not live by be-bop alone, and Bennett's favorite New York restaurant is Piccola Venezia (Little Venice), a classic 200-seat trattoria at 42-01 28th Ave. in Astoria, Queens. The restaurant celebrates its 30th anniversary this year. Bennett says, "It's the real thing. In New York, if you don't come back, they don't care because there's so many people. That neighborhood is full of Italians. If their meals weren't better than the meals you could get at home, they would go out of business. I love the seafood he's partial to broiled red snapper and it's always real fresh." Bennett also enjoys the homemade pasta stuffed with osso buco meat.

Bennett is up for all stops on his tour of New York. He only hedges his bets when I ask him to choose his favorite baseball stadium: Yankee Stadium, Shea Stadium (the home of the New York Mets in Queens) or KeySpan Park, the Coney Island home of the minor league Brooklyn Cyclones. An adjacent room in Bennett's apartment features a row of autographed baseballs, including a personalized signature from Joe DiMaggio.

"The Yankees always have me sing 'America the Beautiful' on opening day," Bennett says "I've always dreaded the thought of having the San Francisco formerly New York Giants and the Yankees playing in the World Series. Then I'd have to take a plane out there and sing '(I Left My Heart in) San Francisco' and sing 'America the Beautiful' here."

Queens is rich with American musical landmarks.

Besides walking in Bennett's footsteps, check out the Dorie Miller Houses on Northern Boulevard between 111th and 112th Streets, a stone's throw from Shea Stadium. During the mid-1950s jazz trumpet player Clark Terry lived in this co-op named in honor of a black World War II Navy hero.

The neighborhood's most famous home is the Louis Armstrong House at 34-56 107th St. in the Corona section of Queens. Armstrong resided in this modest two-story red brick home from 1943 until his death in 1971. It is currently being restored and turned into a museum, and it will be open to the public this fall. Soon after the Armstrongs moved in, Dizzy Gillespie settled in a house behind them on 106th Street.

Bennett completists will want to visit Bennett Studios, a state-of-the-art recording studio owned and operated by Bennett's son Dae in quaint Englewood, N.J., just a five-minute drive from the George Washington Bridge. Tony Bennett and k.d. lang's Grammy-nominated "A Wonderful World" tribute album to Louis Armstrong (produced by T. Bone Burnett) was recorded in the historic 1,400-seat Harms Theater, a block away. Bennett and lang used vintage hand-held microphones in front of a 50-piece orchestra. Dae piped the music through a 64-channel fiber optic cable back to his studio.

Bennett Studios is in a renovated 1920s train station in downtown Englewood. He opened the studio on Sept. 6, 2001. "We're in the process of making a new record with my dad just using this studio," Bennett says during a separate interview in Englewood. "I use lessons I learned from my dad every day. He often quotes Duke Ellington; 'There's only two kinds of music, good and bad. You have to know the difference.' We do that on a daily basis." Prior to

opening Bennett Studios, Dae operated Hillside Sound Studio in Englewood for 18 years. His clients included Naughty by Nature, James Ingram and Salt n' Pepa.

And to honor his pallie from nearby Hoboken, N.J., Tony Bennett has established the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts, a public high school for gifted children based in Astoria, Queens. The school is currently in a temporary site at LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City. Ground will be broken for the permanent site in the next year or two. "It's going to be adjacent to the Kaufman-Astoria Studio Complex," Bennett says. "It will become a whole cultural center. The Museum of Modern Art just opened an annex there. It's been very successful. It's drawing people who have never been in that area."

The Sinatra school will include a broadcast center, the Tony Bennett Concert Hall and a media center archiving arts events, performances and Sinatra Forums. An advisory board includes Harry Belafonte, Carol Burnett, Harry Connick Jr., k.d. lang, Regis Philbin and others. Bennett is also in dialogue with Nancy Sinatra.

One of the most memorable images of Tony Bennett and Frank Sinatra together was captured in a grainy black and white photograph of them holding hot dogs during the early 1960s in front of Nathan's Famous Hot Dogs, 1310 Surf Ave. on Coney Island. Both men are wearing tuxedos. Sinatra is downing his hot dog as Bennett is talking.

"Sinatra was down in Florida," Bennett says. "He called me up and said, 'Tony, we're going out tonight.' We went to see Lionel Hampton at a small club. About seven limos stopped in front of Nathan's. We got the hot dogs, jumped back in the limos" and went to see Hampton.

"Coney Island is coming back and that's good. That's where Jimmy Durante started. He was a piano player for George Raft on Coney Island. See, in those days film producers were primitive people but they knew what they wanted. These new things were called movies--'Let's get people who know how to move.' You had Raft; Jimmy Cagney, who was a dancer; Cary Grant, who was a gymnast and knew body language. Burt Lancaster was athletic."

Bennett wasn't so athletic. He was something of a pipsqueak when he sang at the 1936 opening of the Triborough Bridge that connects Queens, Manhattan and the Bronx. Bennett stood alongside New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. "My uncle was commissioner of the library in Queens," he says. "I don't remember, but my brother John and sister Mary remember. They're older than me. There's a photo somewhere of us marching along the bridge together. That bridge changed the entire complexion of the city."

On a good day, Tony Bennett can see that bridge from his apartment window. He looks at that bridge and always sees a new song, sometimes of youth but always of possibility.