

Tuesday Musical launches season with “Because of You,” A Tribute to Tony Bennett

by Mike Telin



For more than three decades pianist/singer/arranger/educator and historian Michael Feinstein has dedicated himself to bringing the music of the Great American songbook to the world. And of the many interpreters of that musical genre, the name Tony Bennett stands above most others.

On Tuesday, October 22 at 7:30 pm at E.J. Thomas Hall in Akron, Tuesday Musical will launch their new season with Michael Feinstein’s “Because of You,” a tribute to the iconic singer featuring the Carnegie Hall Big Band. Tickets are available [online](#).

I caught up with Feinstein by phone.

Mike Telin: Congratulations, the show is getting great reviews. You have a ton of dates lined up and it appears that more continue to be added.

Michael Feinstein: That’s true. I had no idea there would be such interest in this particular program, which is very nice — I’m grateful.

MT: Touring with a big band must be fun.

MF: It’s the inauguration of the Carnegie Hall Big Band. It was created for this tour and to have the experience of making music with some of the finest musicians on the planet is a slice of heaven.

MT: Is this show all part of keeping the Great American Songbook alive?

MF: I suppose, and I say I suppose because I didn't set out with any conscious goal to do so. It's just the music that I love and I know it's endangered at this time.

However, the wonderful thing is that there are new generations discovering it, and it's heartening to know that it will continue, even though it's certainly not mainstream. My whole career people have asked me about the survival of this music, and yet it does survive.

MT: It must have been a daunting task to narrow down the list of songs, even for a two-hour show. How did you go about doing that?

MF: It's like solving a crossword puzzle. I started by making lists of songs and categorizing them as essential songs connected with Tony, the songs that I love, and lesser known songs that he did sing that might be interesting to the audience. Then creating a through-line — songs that help to tell the story, because my programs always feature anecdotes, and in this case multimedia. So it all comes together to tell the musical story.

And it evolved. When I first tried out this program it was much too long. But I didn't know how long it would be because of creating the dialogue. I have been streamlining, creating medleys, and cutting it down, so it's now in a very user-friendly form.

MT: Had you been thinking of doing something like this before Tony's passing?

MF: It was after his passing that the idea came. I've never been a fan of doing a tribute to somebody who's alive, unless there's some extenuating circumstance that justifies it. But in this case, because I knew Tony and had a friendship with him, it felt appropriate and in some ways organic.



MT: When did your friendship begin?

MF: I was first introduced to Tony by Rosemary Clooney in 1983 when she hosted a benefit for charity in a beautiful theater in Long Beach, California. She asked Tony if he would participate, and he generously said yes.

And in preparation for that concert Rosemary connected me to Tony because he was thinking of singing some unusual versions of some songs that I had access to.

So I met Tony when he came to Long Beach for the show and he invited me to call him if I came to New York. A year later I did, and he was incredibly generous. He took me out on the town and was very encouraging. I was not known in any way, shape or form, but he took the time and made the effort to help me and I never forgot that. We remained friends through the years, and he and his wife Susan would come over for dinner sometimes.

MT: What set him apart from other singers?

MF: Tony had a very different sensibility from other singers because he considered himself to be a jazz singer — he often would sing with smaller groups as opposed to a symphony because he liked the musical flexibility that it offered him.

And he introduced a lot of songs that have become standards. Things like *The Best Is Yet to Come*, the Johnny Mercer song *I Wanna Be Around*, and others like (I left my Heart) *In San Francisco* and made them iconic, even though they might have been sung by other people.

The program is a combination of songs one would expect to hear, plus songs that he sang which were also sung by others but had his own interpretive take. Even though I certainly don't imitate Tony, nor do I have a desire to do so, singing his repertoire with the accompaniment that in some cases is reminiscent of his own choices, gives me the opportunity to tell stories that are sometimes humorous and sometimes poignant about his life, and give people a little window into his creative process.

MT: While you were putting the show together, did you discover anything that you didn't know about him?

MF: I didn't know that during the time he was in the army, starting in 1944, he had been involved in the liberation of a concentration camp. That was one of the defining moments in his life that made him, for the rest of his years, a pacifist. And it instilled in him the desire to use music as a means of creating peace.

The other thing that happened when he was in the Army overseas is that his commanding officer who was a racist demoted Tony because he had Thanksgiving dinner with a fellow enlistee who was black. That further refreshed his desire to be one of the people at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the 60s, marching on Washington with Martin Luther King.

MT: When you're performing the show do you feel his presence?

MF: Sometimes I do. Even though I'm singing songs very differently from the way he did there is definitely a sense of Tony's style and approach. One of the things about Tony is that he had different voices in the way that he could interpret any given number. And to see which ones he chose to sing in a swing setting or in rhythm versus the ones he sang ad lib or out of tempo were interesting to research — it gave me a sense of how I wanted to do them.

Tony had very specific ideas about how he liked to sing these songs, and it varied widely. For example, when he sang *Fly Me to the Moon*, most people might have expected him to do it in the swing style that Sinatra did with the Basie band, but Tony did the opposite. And so those choices that he made gave me the freedom to make my own choices.

MT: Is there a song that is especially meaningful to you?

MF: "Once Upon a Time," which was written by Charles Strouse and Lee Adams, is a gorgeous song that he plucked from an obscure Broadway musical called *All-American*. I just find it deeply moving and poignant and connected to his younger days — in the way that I introduce it. It's one of my favorite moments in the show, even though it's one that I do alone at the piano. And it's a direct contrast to many of the other numbers done with the 17-piece band.

MT: I didn't realize it was a 17-piece band.

MF: It's a small big band, and the power of a live band is a rare thing these days, so people I hope will be thrilled just by the sound of the orchestra.

MT: How did you end up putting the group together?

MF: Last year I did my first tribute to Tony at Carnegie Hall, and I worked with a big band. I got the idea to create an official Carnegie Hall big band, because there was no such entity. So I went to Clive Gillinson, the CEO of Carnegie Hall, and he liked the idea, and so we were able to assemble some of the finest New York-based musicians. It's a dream team of players, some of which vary city-to-city, depending on their availability, because they're very in-demand musicians.

But the thought of doing it with a big band is something that seems important to me because Tony toured with the Basie band, he worked with the Ellington band, and other big bands back in the day, and it's one of the more iconic ways to memorialize him.

MT: I just have to ask, do you ever look at your touring schedule and think, how am I going to pull all of this off?

MF: Yes, daily. I just did three shows in three days, and the big thing is physical and vocal stamina. But it's all been going well, so I'm grateful.

MT: Is there anything else you think that audiences should know about the show?

MF: It's a fun show, and it's musically very rich, and the visual element, the multimedia, is a fun addition to the program. So, it's an immersive experience.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com October 10, 2024

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