



# JAZZ

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# The 'Gift' of Tony Bennett

The legendary singer is touring Latin America and has a holiday special on Univision

**A**t 86, living legend Tony Bennett is in the midst of a storm of activity that could tucker out artists half his age.

How does he do it? By staying centered on what the great jazz pianist Bill Evans told him right before he died.

"Bill found me and said, 'Just think truth and beauty. Think truth and beauty.' That's become my premise, privately, for all of my workmanship," Bennett says. "What I do now is gravitate towards truth and beauty."

In his book released last month, "Life Is a Gift," Bennett tells tales like the above anecdote, compressing a lifetime into clear wisdom that rings true. A companion DVD, "The Zen of Bennett," currently on the film festival circuit, is getting stellar reviews for its intimate portrait of an artist beloved by millions.

Bennett's entire Columbia records catalogue became available on iTunes this past week. And Sunday night, Dec. 23, Bennett becomes the first

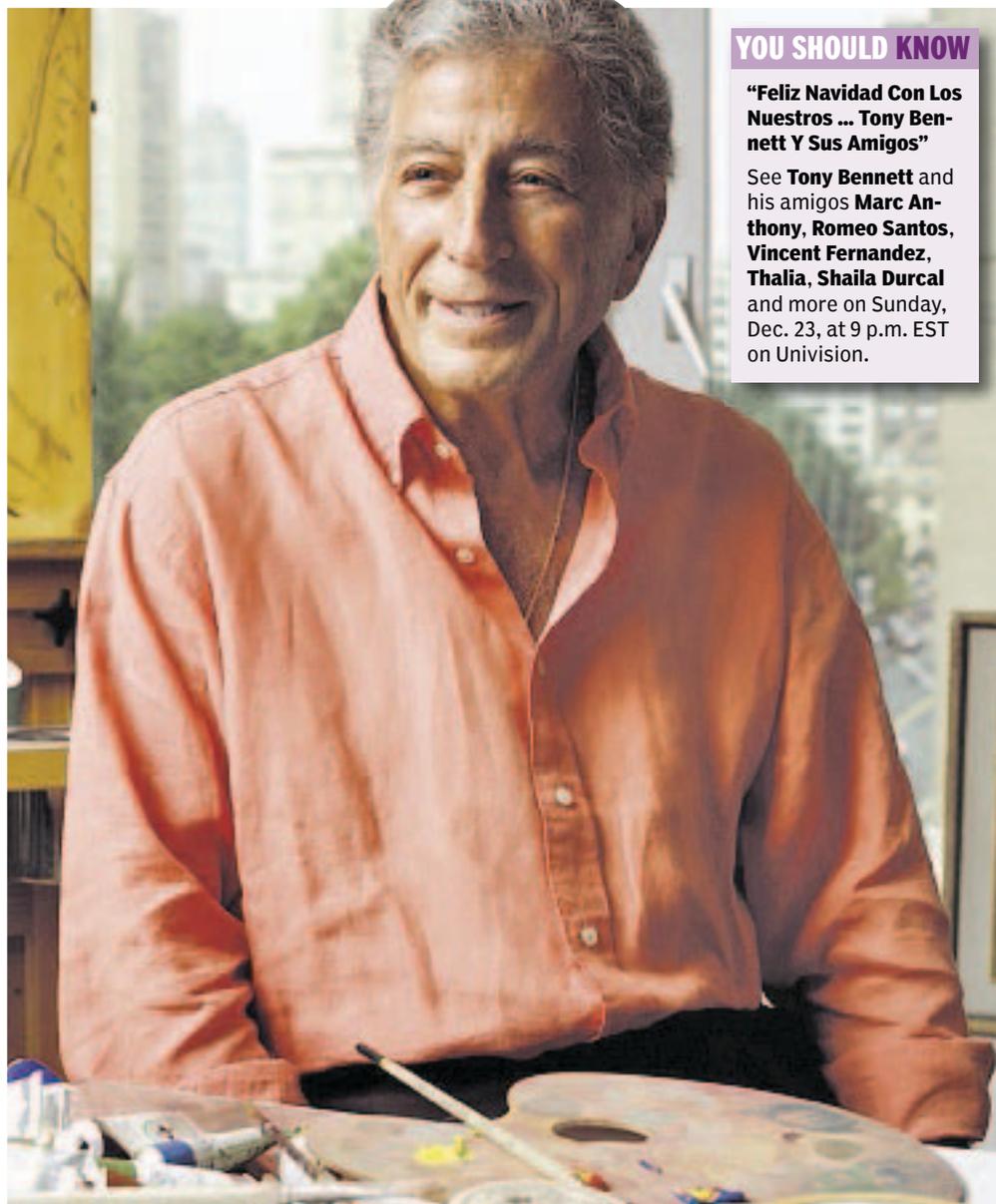
non-Hispanic celebrity to star in a primetime broadcast on Univision. He was on the Mexico City leg of a Latin American tour in support of his new "Viva Duets" recording when we spoke.

People in Mexico are warm and friendly to him. "They're wholesome and very family-oriented," he says.

You could say the same about Bennett. His avuncular, gracious manner makes you feel at home immediately in conversation. In the DVD, we see how he sets John Mayer at ease by explaining the backstory to "One for My Baby," saying it's like two guys in a bar lamenting over lost love. He got Amy Winehouse to relax over her interpretation of "Body and Soul" by sharing accounts of the great Dinah Washington, whom Winehouse idolized.

Though his status in American culture transcends jazz or pop as music categories, once he heard that I love jazz, our chat really took off.

"My plight in life is that I'm really upset with the big



MARK SELIGER

**Bennett has been a painter for decades, and his artworks have been exhibited widely.**

corporations that frown on jazz because they know it's not going to sell," he says. "They seem to estimate how many bigots there are in the world and make sure that sales never go through the roof with a jazz artist.

"Jazz is an African-American art form. People don't realize how creative and intelligent it is. It's elongated improvisation, which never happened before in the history of art. It's a great art form that's loved throughout the world."

Bennett is an avid student of the arts generally. He grew up in a family in which bigotry wasn't tolerated, and where his love for music and painting was nurtured. He's been a painter for many decades. Next summer, during the Montreal Jazz Festival, his work will be featured in a gallery exhibit.

"My Italian-American family would say, 'We love the way you paint flowers, you entertain us so much.' At 14, my brother was singing solos with the Metropolitan Opera as a result of

being inspired by my father, who was a magnificent opera singer. This created a passion in my life to sing and paint, a passion that has been consistent with me right to this moment."

All through "Life Is a Gift," Bennett recalls moments of grace and insight from friends and colleagues, such as Count Basie, Fred Astaire, Duke Ellington, Bob Hope, Lena Horne and Pearl Bailey. He tells of his tenure as a soldier in World War II, and the absurdity of social oppression that prompted him to join the civil rights movement upon the urging of his friend Harry Belafonte.

His great mentor and close buddy, Frank Sinatra, gave him huge support in his life and career. So when the chance came to create a school where he was reared in Astoria, Queens, Bennett called it the Frank Sinatra

School of the Arts.

"Every year we have a convention for it, and now, through our Exploring the Arts organization, we have 14 schools [where] we supply the performing arts," he says. "We won't stop until we work with every public school in the five boroughs and, eventually, across the country, to provide performing arts equipment for every school in the nation."

That beautiful vision is grounded in love for America. "It's really a gift to be a citizen of the United States," he says. "It's the beginning of one world and we should

respect the best of each nationality and each religion, instead of criticizing one another and looking at the seedy side of things.

"That's what happens being an American. Aside from the politics, you're really loved all over the world — as long as you're not selling weapons and all that."



## JAZZ OF NOTE THIS WEEK

### JOHN COLTRANE FESTIVAL (COUNTDOWN 2013)

Mon.-Sun. at Smoke, 2751 Broadway (between 105th and 106th Sts.), 7/9/10:30 p.m., (212) 864-6662, smokejazz.com

Exciting tributes to Coltrane by musicians of note, such as Louis Hayes, Harold Mabern, Steve Wilson, Eric Alexander and Joe Farnsworth. Call or go online for specific lineups.

### WYNTON MARSALIS: THE LOUIS ARMSTRONG CONTINUUM — MUSIC OF THE HOT FIVES AND SEVENS

Wed.-New Year's Eve at Dizzy's Club, Broadway at 60th St., 7:30/9:30 p.m., (212) 258-9800, jalc.org

When Marsalis revisits the recordings that launched the jazz revolution in the late 1920s, his spirited brand of New Orleans polyphony and collective improvisation stirs afresh.