

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

## HIGH NOTES

*Tony Bennett in the studio—with Lady Gaga.*

BY GAY TALESE

On a bright Sunday afternoon shortly after one o'clock in Manhattan, a few days before his eighty-fifth birthday, which he would modestly acknowledge on August 3rd by dining at a neighborhood restaurant on the East Side with his wife, Susan—who, within a few weeks, would be celebrating her own, forty-fifth birthday—Tony Bennett was standing behind a microphone at the Avatar Studios, on West Fifty-third Street, rehearsing a few lines from “The Lady Is a Tramp” while awaiting the presence of Lady Gaga.

Lady Gaga was expected to arrive at two o'clock, with her hairdresser, her makeup artist, her creative director, her vocal coach, her producer, her security guards, and others who know her by her pre-fame name, Stefani Germanotta; and then, after she had warmed up, she would join Bennett in singing “The Lady Is a Tramp,” the final recording for his latest album of duets, “Duets II,” which will be released by R.P.M. Records/Columbia on September 20th. It is a sequel to his 2006 Grammy Award-winning album, and sixteen other singers had already collaborated with him. They included John Mayer (“One for My Baby”), Carrie Underwood (“It Had to Be You”), Queen Latifah (“Who Can I Turn To?”), Mariah Carey (“When Do the Bells Ring for Me?”), Aretha Franklin (“How Do You Keep the Music Playing?”), Willie Nelson (“On the Sunny Side of the Street”), Andrea Bocelli (“Stranger in Paradise”), and Amy Winehouse (“Body and Soul”). Bennett and Winehouse had sung together in London in March, four months before her death, in July, at twenty-seven, following years of familiarity with drugs and alcohol.

Over dinner a couple of weeks be-

fore the session with Lady Gaga, Bennett told me that he had been concerned about Winehouse's well-being when he spent time with her in London. He said, “I wanted to tell her that she needed to shape up or she could end up destroying herself.” In August, he appeared on the MTV Video Music Awards in a special tribute to Winehouse, saying, “She was a true jazz artist in the tradition of Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holliday.” After the broadcast, he told a reporter, “What I wanted to do, I wanted to stop her. I wanted to tell her that many years ago I was naughty also with some drugs.” He went on, “Woody Allen's manager at the time”—Jack Rollins—“said he knew Lenny Bruce, and he said one sentence that changed my life. He said, ‘He sinned against his talent.’ I wanted to tell her that.”

As a few dozen people gathered within the glass-enclosed control room anticipating Lady Gaga's appearance, Bennett was standing alone on a white platform, in the center of the studio. He had on a hand-tailored Brioni tux with a red pocket square, a white shirt, and a black tie that had been a gift from his drummer, and he was singing the introductory verse to “The Lady Is a Tramp,” the Rodgers and Hart show tune from their 1937 musical, “Babes in Arms”:

I've wined and dined on Mulligan stew  
and never wished for turkey  
as I hitched and hiked and gifted, too,  
from Maine to Albuquerque.

He then turned toward his musical director, Lee Musiker, a sharp-featured, energetic, dark-haired man of fifty-five, who sat behind a grand piano, a few yards away. “Let me ask you something,” Bennett began, in his character-

*Bennett says that Gaga is an enormous talent, but, underneath it all, she's just “a sweet little Italian-American girl who studied at N.Y.U.” Photograph by Mary Ellen Mark.*

istically soft and deferential manner. "Can you go up another key?"

"You want me to raise it up more?" Musiker asked.

Bennett nodded. And, as Musiker's fingers moved with accelerated energy along the keyboard, Bennett appeared to be more contented as he again sang the opening lines of the intro:

I've wine'd and dined on Mulligan stew  
and never wished for turkey.

After he had satisfactorily rehearsed the next eight lines of the intro, which he planned to sing alone on the record before participating with Lady Gaga in the duet, he decided to rest his voice for a while. She was due in about half an hour.

"I did my scales today," he said, as he stepped down from the platform. Bennett practices scales for fifteen to twenty minutes every day, singing along to a small tape recorder that plays a cassette of exercises created by his longtime teacher, the late Pietro D'Andrea. Once, I heard Bennett say, "The first day you don't do the scales, you know. The second day, the musicians know. The third day, the audience knows."

At Avatar, he popped a dime-size yellow lozenge into his mouth and headed over to the control room to spend some time with his guests and

family members, including Susan, who is often with him when he sings.

A week earlier, she had flown with him and his quartet to concerts in Reno, Las Vegas, and Denver, three of nearly a hundred appearances he makes every year around the nation and overseas; and she intends to be in the audience on Sunday evening, September 18th, when he and his quartet are scheduled to present a few dozen of his favorite songs from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House. But, no matter where Tony Bennett is featured, what he sings and how he sings have pretty much remained the same for most of his more than sixty years as an entertainer. As his friend Count Basie once reminded him, "Why change an apple?"

Susan began dating Bennett in 1985, on the eve of his fifty-ninth birthday, when she was eighteen. Her mother, Marion Crow, a fourth-generation native of the San Francisco Bay Area—and a devotee of Bennett's music since her student days at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, in the early fifties—had introduced Susan to the singer five years earlier. Marion and her husband, Dayl Crow—a broker with Merrill Lynch who had been a fighter pilot in Korea—were vacationing in Las Vegas, accompanied by their daughter. After they had seen Bennett's show, they

bumped into each other outside the venue, and Marion initiated the introduction. Susan shyly shook hands with the singer but was quickly put at ease by his graciousness.

Marion and Dayl had first met Bennett in New York many years before, in 1966. Dayl Crow was in the city on business and was staying with Marion at the Plaza. After she read that Bennett was booked at the Copacabana, she asked Dayl to get tickets. While they were having a drink at their table before the show, a young woman photographer stopped by and offered to take their picture.

"Yes," Marion replied, "but only if Tony Bennett is in it."

Soon the photographer returned to say that Bennett would see them in his dressing room before the performance, and it was there that he posed with them. Marion was two months pregnant with Susan. Forty-one years later, after she married Tony Bennett, in 2007, Susan explained to a reporter, "It was a prenatal influence that led me to him."

Their marriage, in a civil ceremony in New York, at which Mario and Matilda Cuomo were the principal witnesses, had been preceded by a twenty-four-year courtship, owing to Bennett's prolonged and contentious separation from his second wife, Sandra, with whom he has two daughters—Johanna, born in 1969, and Antonia, in 1974. He retains a warm relationship with both. Antonia, a singer, often travels with him and his musicians, opens his shows, and occasionally does a few numbers with him onstage, including a Sondheim song, "Old Friends."

Bennett's marriage, in 1952, to his first wife, Patricia, ended more amicably; and Patricia and Tony's two sons, Danny, born in 1954, and Daegal, a year later, are both professionally engaged in their father's career and were among those waiting for Lady Gaga. Danny, a well-proportioned six-footer who boxes in a gym about three times a week, is Bennett's manager. He has hazel eyes, a receding hairline, and an engaging demeanor not lacking in self-assurance. His somewhat shorter but equally fit brother, Daegal, who has inherited their father's green eyes and Roman nose, is in charge of sound.

Daegal—commonly called Dae,

pronounced "day"—has his own recording studio, in Englewood, New Jersey. Earlier in the week, a seventeen-piece orchestra had met there to pre-record the music that would soon flow through the system at Avatar and blend in with Tony Bennett's and Lady Gaga's voices as they sang into their microphones. Dae believed it was more efficient to have the orchestra complete its work in the New Jersey studio, where the acoustics were ideal and which afforded the Bennett organization some flexibility when coping with the tight schedules imposed by most of the high-profile singers it sought for the duets.

Dae knew that Lady Gaga's time was very limited. As he waited for her to arrive at Avatar, he seemed unable to relax, sitting in the rear of the control room. When his father waved in his direction, Dae failed to notice him, because he was focussing on the console, a black soundboard about five feet wide and lined vertically and horizontally with rows of illuminated knobs (green, red, yellow, amber) that alternately cast slight reflections upon his forehead.

Danny Bennett was standing behind him, looking through the big window at a documentary film crew wheeling a camera along tracks laid on the studio floor near the white platform. Also in the control room, close to the doorway, were two longtime friends of Bennett's—seventy-year-old Leonard Riggio, the chairman of Barnes & Noble, and seventy-one-year-old Joseph Segreto, who owns a restaurant called Eleven 79, in New Orleans, and first met Bennett in Las Vegas in 1961, when Segreto was a roadie for a band from Philadelphia that was playing in the lounge of the Sahara.

Both Segreto and Riggio were smartly attired, and Susan, who has blond hair and brown eyes, stood talking with them. She was wearing orange linen pants with a yellow-and-white striped short-sleeved shirt and sandals.

As Bennett joined them, Segreto patted him on the back and complimented him on how well he had sung the intro. Bennett smiled but changed the subject to Lady Gaga, whom he recalled meeting in early May when they had each performed at a charity event

for the Robin Hood Foundation at the Javits Convention Center. He also met her mother and father that night, he said, as well as a young man who had told him, "I'm her boyfriend, so you'd better watch out."

The others laughed. Segreto shook his head. "She's big," he said.

"She's going to be bigger than Elvis Presley," Bennett said.

He went on to describe Lady Gaga as being enormously talented not only as a singer but as a dancer and a pianist—and he suggested that, at the same time, under all her makeup and marketing, she was just a normal human being, "a sweet little Italian-American girl who studied at N.Y.U."

Bennett and his friends stood talking near the door for the next fifteen minutes, discussing, among other things, his upcoming show at the Metropolitan Opera. That reminded Riggio of a story about Luciano Pavarotti doing a book signing at Barnes & Noble.

"There were five thousand people lined up outside," Riggio said.

Bennett let out a low whistle.

"So we go inside the store, and Pavarotti, you know, he is signing slow, and talking to people, and the people are giving him pictures, and other books, to sign, and I feel bad for the people outside, so I'm saying, 'Only one book' and I'm trying to move it. So Pavarotti looks at me, and he smacks me in the face, and he goes, 'Mind-a your own-a business-a!'"

Everybody laughed, and Bennett offered his own Pavarotti story.

He said, "I remember Sinatra once asked Pavarotti, 'How do you sing a soft high note?' and Pavarotti replied, 'You keep-a your mouth closed!'"

Conversation turned to Bennett's forthcoming visit to New Orleans, where he will join Riggio and Riggio's wife, Louise, in celebrating the completion of the hundred-and-first house built under the auspices of the couple's nonprofit foundation, Project Home Again in New Orleans, which has provided furnished housing, without cost, to low- and moderate-income families wishing to reestablish themselves in the city following Hurricane Katrina. Bennett said that he and his quartet would entertain the Riggios and the other celebrants there on November 11th, and Segreto promised to cook something

special at his restaurant. Segreto has developed a warm relationship with the couple ever since they launched their foundation, and Leonard Riggio has acknowledged it by naming one of his many racehorses, a two-year-old Thoroughbred, Mr. Segreto.

"How about that, Tony?" Riggio called out, as Segreto took a little bow.

"That's nice," Bennett replied, and gave his signature smile. He then conceded being a frequenter of racetracks back in the seventies, when he lived in Los Angeles, and he remembered one day when he went to the track at the invitation of Cary Grant.

"All the women were just fainting as he's walking," Bennett recalled. "All the women in the boxes fainting. Cary Grant, you know. So I said, 'You come here often?' 'Yes,' he said. 'I own the track.'"

"He owns it?" Segreto exclaimed, in his gravelly voice.

"He owns it," Bennett repeated.

"Probably Fred Astaire paid for it," Segreto said, "because he used to go betting with two hands. Who bet more on horses than two guys, friends of yours, Mickey Rooney and Fred Astaire?"

"I didn't know that," Bennett said.

"Fred Astaire was at the track all the time," Segreto went on. Then Segreto mentioned the name of a woman who was once involved with Astaire, a woman whom Bennett was also acquainted with, and Bennett thought for a moment and then said, in a lowered voice, "She messed him up."

"Oh sure she messed him up," Segreto declared knowingly. "But he was such a great fan of the races."

Lee Musiker approached Bennett from behind and asked, "You want to do a couple of warmups before she arrives?"

"O.K.," he said. With a little nod toward Susan and his friends, he turned and headed back into the studio, where he soon resumed his earlier position on the white platform. While Musiker began playing the piano, Bennett, microphone in hand, began to sing, without full voice, the first lines of the duet he would soon record:

She gets too hungry for dinner at eight,  
Loves the theatre but she never comes late.

On the music stand in front of him,

in case he forgot the lyrics to "The Lady Is a Tramp," there were three sheets of paper on which were printed, in large letters, triple-spaced, every word of the song—approximately forty lines that he and Lady Gaga would alternately deliver, with her words printed in red and his in black.

GAGA: I never bother with people I hate...

BENNETT: Doesn't dig crap games with barons and earls...

GAGA: I won't go to Harlem in ermine and pearls

I won't dish the dirt with the rest of those girls...

But before he had completed his second run-through of the tune, his attention was drawn to the sounds of a crowd of newly arrived people—who, having exited the freight elevator, had proceeded down a hall in the direction of the control room, led by Lady Gaga, a slender young woman with aquamarine bobbed hair. She wore dark glasses, a long black lace gown that you could see through; and, over it, a sleeveless black leather motorcycle jacket, unzipped, with studs on the lapels. A silver buckle dangled from a belt that flapped along her right thigh as she ran gleefully toward Bennett.

"Hello, Tony!" she called out, her arms extended.

"Oh, great!" he exclaimed, stepping down from the platform to embrace her as she removed her dark glasses, revealing a small scimitar-shaped stroke of eyeliner beside each of her eyes, extending back toward the temple, resembling a couple of anchovies. As Musiker rose from the piano bench to shake hands with her, Dae and Danny were on their way down from the control room to review the recording procedure. When she removed her leather jacket, and Bennett tried to assist her, she good-naturedly shoved him away, saying, "No, that's O.K. Don't *you* hold a thing." She dangled the jacket in the air until a young man hastened into the studio to take it and carry it to her dressing room.

Lady Gaga stood silently near the piano for a few seconds, looking around the studio and up at the ceiling, which was thirty-five feet at its highest point. She was tugging at the waist of her black lace gown, which she said had been designed by Tom Ford. The gown was so long that several inches of it

swept along the floor, and had twisted around her ankles. It was impossible to see the shoes she was wearing, but underneath the lace dress she had on what looked like a black bikini.

"I love the way you wrap that skirt," Bennett said finally. "It's fabulous."

"I thought I'd give a little *twist* for you, Tony," she said.

Bennett was eager to tell her a story. "I've got to tell you that when my wife and I exercise we look out our window at a synagogue right across the street." He said that some men were working hard erecting a scaffolding there. "And then I noticed that, on the side of their truck, in big letters, the word 'Gaga' was painted!"

"Great," he continued, his bronzed face creased with its almost permanent smile.

She then asked Danny Bennett whether or not there was a limit on the rehearsal time before they began the recording.

"As many times as you want to rehearse it, or do it—anything," Danny said. "Everyone's really flexible here."

"Great," she said. "Thank you," and then in a loud voice she said, "Test," and proceeded on her own, without the accompaniment of the prerecorded music, to sing, "That's why this chick is a tramp."

Bennett laughed.

Then she corrected herself. "That's why the lady is a tramp," she sang, pronouncing the last word "tray-amp."

She was having fun, inflecting a slight Southern redneck intonation and a bit of "Guys and Dolls" spirit into the music of Rodgers and Hart: the words "I never bother with people I hate" she sang as "Eye-ha never bother with people I hay-yate."

Bennett joined in: "Doesn't dig crap games, with barons and earls."

When she followed with "I won't go to Harlem in ermine and pearls," she pronounced the words as "oimens" and "poils."

"Oh, I'm so nervous!" she said.

"No, it's terrific," he said.

"If I tap out, you can just tell 'em that it was all planned."

"Sounds great," he responded.

Then, after they had laughed through the rest of the song, she turned to him and asked, "What was it like with the girls?"

He looked at her quizzically.

"Do they always get this way around you?"

When he failed to answer, she continued, "Do they always get really nervous and stand there sweating and blushing?"

Among those joining in the laughter were Susan and the others in the control booth, who now included members of Lady Gaga's troupe and also her vocal coach, a gray-haired, bespectacled man of sixty-six named Don Lawrence, who first heard her sing when she was thirteen, and whose clients have included Mick Jagger, Christina Aguilera, Whitney Houston, Bono, and Jon Bon Jovi.

Danny Bennett, who had been sit-

"Working so hard!" she said, and laughed.

Danny Bennett came up and introduced himself, and then pointed out his brother.

"Such an honor to meet you, wow, hello," she began, and then she asked some questions, such as "Do we both use the same mike?" (no, there was one

for each singer) and "Should I use headphones?" Dae explained that his father did not want headphones, after which she turned to Bennett and said, "I love that you don't want them."

"Beautiful gown" was his reply.

"Thank you," she responded. "I wore it for you. The whole thing, head to toe, as in 'What would Tony want?'"

ting near Don Lawrence, returned to the studio carrying a newspaper clipping from the *Yonkers Record*, dated August 26, 1951, bearing the headline "GIRLS 'GAGA' AS TONY CROONS A HIT." The article displayed a photograph of a youthful, dark-haired Tony Bennett in a tuxedo surrounded by four smiling young female fans; the caption explained that he had just serenaded them with one of his all-time hit tunes, "Because of You."

Lady Gaga began reading the article aloud, standing next to Bennett. "Girls 'gaga' as Tony croons a hit," she read, and moving closer to him she said, "See, I told you. You make women do that. Look what you did! Oh, Tony, I would have been chasing you around. Oh, Tony, do you die when you read that?"

"Oh, you're right," Susan Bennett replied, her voice echoing through the speaker in the control room. "Gotta keep the girls off him."

"Keep Gaga off!" Lady Gaga corrected her, before turning to somebody on her staff and requesting a drink. A young man scurried into the studio carrying a glass of whiskey. Bennett watched as she took a sip. Then she announced, "Now that I've had a little bit to drink, I'm not so nervous." Again she turned to Bennett.

"Do women do that around you, too?" she persisted.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Do they just knock 'em back, just so they can be in your presence?" she asked. He grinned.

"Yes, they all do," she answered for him. "We're all very nervous around him." She took another swallow, holding the glass in one hand and the microphone in the other.

Dae's voice was heard over the speaker in the control room, asking, "All set?"—meaning, in effect, Shall we finally get to work?

"I'm all set," Lady Gaga said. Then she added, "Hey, Tony."

"Yes?"

"I missed you, baby."

Suddenly, the brassy up-tempo sound of the orchestra filled the studio, and immediately it was accompanied by the two singers' voices:

BENNETT: She gets too hungry for dinner at eight,

Loves the theatre but she never comes late.

GAGA: Eye-ha never bother with people I hay-yate.

They smoothly got through the song, taking a little more than two minutes, and after the conclusion Dae Bennett, in the control room, said, "O.K., that sounds really good. We just need to do some inserts on the end, and we'll have everything."

"O.K.," Bennett said.

"Great," Gaga replied.

But then Bennett went on, "I think we should do it a couple more times, I really do, and get whatever's good there." He turned to Lady Gaga: "Is that all right with you?"

She agreed, saying, "We're having a good time."

She looked around at some of the guests standing in the hallway and the control room, and, seeing the dapper Leonard Riggio, and Joe Segreto in his seersucker suit, white shirt, blue-knit tie, and white shoes, she said to Bennett, "You know, all my friends—you have to meet them sometime, they're always in three-piece suits, with beautiful hats on. They like to go out and pretend like it's the fifties."

"Right," Bennett said. They agreed to do another take.

Gaga said, "I'm going to give it a little more character."

He started singing again, and when they finished she said, "It's like our third date now!"

Over the next half hour, they did six more takes, some with scatting, all of them acceptable to Bennett's sons, in the control room, but at the conclusion of each take neither Bennett nor Lady Gaga wanted the duet to end.

"Oh, fun!" she exclaimed, after yet another take. "We can do this all day?"

"Yes, I liked it," he said.

"Shall we do one more?" she asked.

"Whatever we want," he said. "We can do it till we're very happy with it."

"Oh, let's keep having fun. I'm having a good time."

"Good."

"Is your musical director happy?"

"So far," Dae Bennett replied over the speaker.

"Everybody's happy," Lady Gaga declared. "Happy faces!" she loudly an-

nounced, adding, "I've never done this without headphones. It's so liberating." She took another sip of whiskey.

For a different take, they decided to improvise some lyrics.

When Gaga burst out, "I like the Yankees," Bennett followed with "and Jeter's just fine."

Lady Gaga interrupted. "Maybe I should pick another Yankee. Posada's my favorite. But is he not playing anymore?"

Somebody shouted that he'd been benched.

"Makes me sad," Lady Gaga said, then improvised a new line: "I miss Posada!"

When they finally decided that there was a limit to their alacrity, and their duet was done for the day, they were called upon to do a short taped interview for the documentary film, which Danny was overseeing.

"Was it O.K.?" Lady Gaga asked Bennett, as they stepped off the platform.

"Aw, c'mon. It's the best thing that ever happened."

"I can't wait. I'm going to cry so hard when it comes out."

With Bennett and Lady Gaga sitting side by side in front of a camera, a staff member named Sylvia Weiner asked her to recount some of her feelings about working with Tony Bennett.

Lady Gaga replied that, when she knew she'd be recording a duet with him, first she decided she would have to change her wardrobe: "Well, I have to meet Mr. Bennett! What do I wear. Do I look classy? Do I look elegant? Do I look sexy? I don't know what he likes. So I tried a couple of different outfits on, and then I just ran out there, and"—turning toward him as she spoke—"I met your beautiful wife. It was wonderful."

"Well," Weiner went on, "tell us why 'Lady Is a Tramp' lent itself so well for your duet."

Lady Gaga thought for a moment, and then replied, "Well, 'cause I'm a tramp. And," she went on, gesturing at Bennett, "he knows it."

She laughed.

But he shook his head.

"I know that you're a lady," he said, emphatically. "Playing a tramp." ♦