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Tony Bennett says he's 'never felt better'

By CASSANDRA SZKLARSKI

TORONTO (CP) - At age 80, legendary singer Tony Bennett can boast of conquering the charts for more than five decades. But after a lifetime of accolades and countless hits, Bennett says he still struggles with the most basic of his art form's skills - reading sheet music.

Bennett says coping with dyslexia, a learning disability that causes difficulty in reading and writing, has been an ongoing struggle throughout his impressive career.

"I've always had a bit of dyslexia, so it's very hard for me to read proficiently," says Bennett, known for a rich, natural vocal style that appears effortless.

"It's very difficult. My eyes bounce, so it's difficult for me to follow musically that way. I have to do it instinctively and intuitively."

Patience is the key, says Bennett.

"I just have to work a lot slower. It comes a lot slower. But good learning takes a long time," he says. "To really learn something, you have to keep doing it until it appears effortless. So it takes time."

Time has certainly been on the music icon's side.

Despite his advancing years, Bennett looks anything but the aging crooner. His smooth face suggests a man closer to age 60 and his solid frame is the result of tennis three times a week.

"I'm 80 and I've never felt better in my life," he boasts.

A recent performance on the Canadian Idol stage showed his voice in top form as well, with the laid-back performer expertly belting out the classics with his jazz band as youngsters in the studio audience hooted and cheered.

And a glance at Bennett's year so far would suggest his career is on a high.

He turned 80 on Aug. 3 and his birthday party included celebrity guests Robert De Niro, Billy Crystal and Catherine Zeta-Jones. A television special on the event is set to air this fall.

Meanwhile, Bennett will receive Billboard magazine's highest honour, the century award, in December.

This week, Bennett releases a new album of songbook standards. Tony Bennett: Duets/An American Classic features collaborations with contemporary artists including Bono, Elton John, Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder.

Canadians on the record include k.d. lang, Diana Krall and Michael Buble.

"They're all the songs that I've introduced over the years with all the greatest contemporary artists that are around today," says Bennett, who shows his age when bantering about his fondness for younger performers such as folk legend "Bobby Dylan."

It seems the three Canadians on the disc made an impression for their professionalism and artistry. Bennett praised Krall as a "double threat" for her "beautiful" singing and piano playing. He declared his love for lang's soul, singing and passion.

But he put relative newcomer Buble, British Columbia's Juno-award winning jazz singer, in another category altogether.

"I have a lot faith in Michael Buble, I think he's just wonderful," says Bennett.

"He's the first artist of all of the contemporary artists - not just on my record but of all the artists that I've ever heard of the



Tony Bennett. (CPimages/ AP/ Paul Hawthorne)

younger group - that believes in the past."

"You know, (they say) if you steal from one, it's thievery, if you steal from everybody, it's research. He does a little Dean Martin, he does a little of Bobby Darin, he does a little of Frank Sinatra, a little Bing Crosby and puts them all together, it's Michael Buble."

When it comes to what clutters the pop charts these days, Bennett is not so generous. He blasts record companies for churning out bland hits in order to meet bottom lines.

"They need some trash to just sell right away," says Bennett, breaking from an otherwise magnanimous tone.

"And they hype you up with advertisement and say you gotta buy this because this is what's in right now. And you buy it and then six months later you say, 'Why did I like that? They forced me to like something.' "

"They make a quick kill but you don't remember it. It's not like a Nat King Cole record that you just hear, you say, 'That's timeless.' "

Now that he's 80, Bennett says he's achieved a wisdom that's given him confidence in both his personal and professional lives. While he wouldn't elaborate on his personal challenges, he says age has taught him to forgive and not dwell so much on the little mistakes that used to stir him up.

"There's a contentment that sets in," he says of turning 80.

"When you're younger, you're hyper: 'God, I still have this to do, I didn't do that right.' It's like jagged. Whereas, now, at 80, you start saying, 'What's new?' "

Professionally, Bennett says he's learned when to leave things out, noting that his earlier performances had him lingering on stage for too long. He still remembers the one - and only - time he bombed in front of an audience. It happened early in his career, right after he came out of the army.

"I was singing a song about my old gang and how it's great to be back. People just didn't want to hear about war - they had it with the Second World War and they started booing me," recalls Bennett.

He immediately took the audience's advice and never performed the song again.

"The audience is the best educator a performer could have," he says.

On the whole, Bennett says he doesn't like to reflect on the past. There's too much going on right now.

He's also a passionate and a celebrated painter, and these days finds himself consumed with refining his technique. Bennett explains that he's studying anatomy so that his painted figures "don't look like stick figures".

As for improving his music, Bennett says he still has much to learn.

"Musically, God, it never ends. It never ends."