

---

# Tony and Me

---



“... for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”

—FWP

André L. Churchwell, MD

**From:** Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, Tennessee 37232

**Address for reprints:**  
André L. Churchwell, MD,  
Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, 319 Light Hall,  
Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, TN 37232-0190

**E-mail:** andre.churchwell@vanderbilt.edu

I could be viewed as a walking incongruity. As a baby boomer, while my friends were dancing to the Motown beat, I was listening to Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and Louis Armstrong. My musical tastes, like many of my interests, were honed by studying my father, our high priest of exceptional taste and a devotee of epicureanism. To some of my schoolmates, I seemed a man out of his time. I would say, “different strokes for different folks,” then and now.

My love of classic jazz led me to a special event—a Tony Bennett concert held at our local performing arts center. As I sat, preparing to be musically transported to nirvana by Mr. B., I was abruptly jolted to reality when several attendees hurriedly left my row. A young woman prompted me to move because a very ill man was seated farther down the row. Reflexively, I rose and stumbled down the dark row toward the man and reached him about the same time that Tony began his set with Jule Styne’s “Just in Time.” I prayed that I, too, would be just in time. Upon reaching my destination, I saw an elderly gentleman whose color could only be described as white as a sheet. His breathing was labored, and he was sweating profusely, but, thankfully, he was wearing a beatific smile.

As if in answer to a prayer, seated next to the man was a fellow doctor who, with a strained smile, quietly greeted me and said, “I am glad you are here!”

I am a practicing cardiologist, and I could tell that the man was in shock and needed to get to a hospital quickly. Rapidly surveying the scene, I knew the row was too narrow to lay him down, and we were too far away from an open area to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation if it were mercifully needed. My acute care training overcame my natural anxiety, and I shouted: “I need 4 able-bodied men to help carry this man up the entry ramp to the landing.”

I briefly wondered, “What would Tony do?” Would he stop singing and tell me to shut up? I needn’t have worried. Tony is a seasoned professional, and he continued singing without missing a beat.

After we checked the man’s vital signs and called 9-1-1, his breathing stabilized. As the paramedics were loading him for transport to the nearest hospital, his wife thanked me for helping. The man was now fully alert and asked the paramedics to pause for a moment to allow him to hear the ending of a Tony Bennett classic. My fellow fan and I agreed that Tony’s music was “good medicine.” Notably, that night, his singing was uniquely therapeutic and, as usual, perfect.

Before the concert, I had occasionally dreamed about singing with Tony Bennett and the Count Basie Orchestra. If shouting can be considered a form of vocal expression, my dream was fulfilled on 2 levels: that night, medicine and music merged into a public expression of compassion.

To have the then-87-year-old Tony Bennett grace the stage at the Tennessee Performing Arts Center and to hear his unique style of singing—a blend of jazz expressionism and sophisticated swing—was a rare privilege. I was dumbstruck by his youthful vigor and the unerring pitch and quality of his voice. Singers’ careers depend on 2 thin, muscular structures called vocal cords. Most of us have heard about singers who have lost their voices because of the delicate nature of their vocal cords, including Julie Andrews, and for a short time, late in his career, Andy Williams. So to hear Tony still hitting high Cs and Es astounded me.

I have read all of Tony Bennett’s most recent books, including his memoir, books on painting, and the deeply personal *Life is a Gift*. The last book offers us a window

---

Portions of this article previously appeared in *The Tennessean* (13 April 2014), which has granted permission to republish them in modified form.

into Tony's soul. He implores us to love and not hate; to listen to our creative side, for it will bring joy; to value people and friends; and to search for beauty in our lives. Given its message, the book could have been penned by Henry David Thoreau or Oscar Wilde. Tony, like many great artists, recognizes the fleeting nature of life. He loves to sing Fred Astaire's song, "Life is Beautiful in Every Way," which prompts us to look for joy and beauty each and every day of this frenetic existence. Finding brief glimpses of beauty in song, painting, poetry, and nature slows the pulse and offers a moment for

reflection, albeit briefly, of what it means to be human and humane.

That is a lot to get out of 8 measures of music.

---

*Submissions for Peabody's Corner should 1) focus on the interpersonal aspects of a specific patient–doctor experience; 2) be written in storybook fashion; 3) contain no references; and 4) not exceed 5 double-spaced typescript pages.*