



Tony Bennett

Tony Bennett is a legendary American singer and entertainer.

A few years ago, while filming a documentary about my life, I returned to Podargoni, in the Calabria region of Italy, where my family originated. I found myself on a mountaintop singing “O Sole Mio”—the same mountaintop where, I had been told, my father used to sing and could be heard by the whole village before he left Italy and immigrated to America. It was an extraordinary moment for me—knowing how far both my parents traveled to create our family’s life as Italian Americans—to return to the place where it all began.

My paternal grandmother, Maria Benedetto, who was a widow at the time, my father, and his sister, Antoinette, took a steamship from Naples to America just two days before the historic eruption of Mount Vesuvius on April 4, 1906. Maria dressed my father, John (named after his late father, Giovanni), as a girl for the twenty-one-day trip, as otherwise he would have been separated from her in the men’s section of the ship’s steerage class. My maternal grandparents, Antonio and Vincenza Suraci, had arrived in America much earlier, in 1899, after blight forced many of the farmers of that region to immigrate. Vincenza had two children by then, Mary and Frank, and was pregnant with my mother, Anna, during the trip to New York to start their new life. It is also important to know that my maternal grandmother, Vincenza Suraci, was the sister of my paternal grandmother, Maria Benedetto.

When you think of how the immigrants of that time moved to a new country, many of them with no relatives to greet them or any knowledge of what to expect, it is astounding. Today most of us won’t go to a local movie without reading all about it online beforehand, let alone a new

country! I have always felt that the immigrants who came to America during this time were the most courageous citizens of all.

The Suracis made it through the harrowing experience of arriving at Ellis Island and took a small boat to Battery Park in Manhattan. They had been given an address of a tenement at 139 Mulberry Street, where they could find lodging, and by September of 1899 my mother, Anna, was born. She was the first in my family to be born in the United States. Over time the Suracis saved money and sent it to Calabria to bring more of my relatives to New York. They took them into their home and helped them find work. By 1906, when my paternal grandmother and father arrived in New York City, they stayed with my maternal grandparents, who had now moved to Little Italy.

Grandpa Suraci was a true example of living the American dream. He worked hard, saved his money, and was able to move the family to a quieter neighborhood on East Twelfth Street between First and Second Avenues in Manhattan. He began a wholesale fruit and vegetable business providing goods to the pushcart vendors throughout Lower Manhattan. Grandma Suraci had the head for numbers, so my father would turn over his earnings each night, and like so many immigrants, she kept their money in a trunk under the bed.

My mother's older brother, Frank, was determined that my mother would get an education. The rest of the family protested, as in Calabria there was no education system. Thankfully, Frank prevailed and my mother, for a short time during her childhood, attended school.

During this time my father's sister, Antoinette, and her husband, Demitri, moved to midtown and opened a grocery store on the corner of Fifty-Second Street and Sixth Avenue. Decades later, I would marvel at the coincidence of my signing with Columbia Records in 1950—the corporate offices were on the same block where my aunt and uncle owned a grocery store in 1918. As they say, only in America!

My father moved in with his sister and went to work at his sister's grocery store. At twenty-four, John Benedetto began to think of marriage, and in those days, arranged marriages were still the norm, so

a family discussion ensued and it was decided that Anna Suraci, his cousin, would be the perfect match. In Lower Manhattan on November 30, 1919, my parents, Anna and John Benedetto, were married.

When my sister, Mary, was born in 1920, the apartment on Fifty-Second Street was getting crowded, so my father's brother Domenick suggested they move near them so my father could help run his brother's grocery store. My parents left New York City and moved to a small town in upstate New York called Pyrites. That lasted until my brother, John, was born in 1923, and then my family moved back to Manhattan.

Soon after, Grandpa Suraci told his wife, Vincenza, that he wanted to get away from the city and move to the country and buy a house. My grandmother thought that was a fine idea, and out came her trunk from under the bed. To my grandfather's shock and delight, she had saved \$10,000 in cash! So they moved to the country—which in those days was the borough of Queens—and they bought a two-family home on Thirty-Second Street in Astoria. My parents followed them to Queens, and after a few years most of the Suraci and Benedetto family members also settled there. That is how Astoria became the center of my family's life. I was born Anthony Domenick Benedetto on August 3, 1926, at St. John's Hospital in Long Island City, thereby becoming the first person in my family to be born in a hospital.

During my early years in Astoria, I remember sleeping on a pullout couch with my brother, as our apartment had two bedrooms—one for my parents and the other for my sister, Mary, and Grandma Maria, who came to live with us. My father, who had rheumatic fever as a child and was sickly from then on, had to stop working, as he barely had the strength to leave our apartment. My mother took a job as a seamstress in Lower Manhattan and would work long hours and even bring dresses home with her at night. One of my most vibrant memories is sitting at her feet while she worked. She was always very quiet, but every once in a while she would throw a dress over her shoulder in disgust and say, "I refuse to work on a bad dress." It was from my mother that I learned that sticking with quality is important and why I have always strived to

only record and perform the very best songs from the great American songbook.

My father was poetic, and he loved music, art, and literature. He sang Italian folk songs around the house—the same ones he sang on the mountaintops of Calabria in his youth. He was a philosopher, and we would sit outside and watch the stars at night and he would tell me about the universe. Tragically, his health deteriorated, and he passed away when I was ten years old.

After my father passed, my mother had to work even harder to support three children on her own. And this is when our immigrant family rallied around her to make sure she was taken care of. Every Sunday they would come to our house and we would have a big Italian meal. Afterward they would form a circle, and my brother, sister, and I would perform for them. Those Sundays in the circle of my family, where I received so much love and encouragement, were the inspiration for my wanting to become an entertainer. It was then that I learned who I was and what I wanted to do in my life. Although it was Bob Hope who changed my given name to Tony Bennett, it was my Italian American family who brought my dreams to life.

Our family name is Benedetto, which means “the blessed one” in Italian, and I know that I have truly been blessed in my life and that coming to America was a dream come true for my family and for so many other immigrant families just like ours.

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