

“I Left My Heart in San Francisco”--Tony Bennett (1962)

Added to the National Registry: 2017

Essay by Bill Christine (guest post)*



Tony Bennett



Original 45



Original album

By 1953, George Cory and Douglass Cross, who had met while pulling their stateside Army duty during World War II, had written dozens of songs but couldn't sell any of them. A Cory-Cross collaboration called “I'll Look Around” was done by such glitterati as Mabel Mercer, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, but it never gained traction in any of their repertoires. Cory and Cross, living together in San Francisco and barely getting by, moved across the country to Brooklyn Heights, the better to be closer to Tin Pan Alley and the recording industry.

It was in Brooklyn Heights where the two songwriters, pining for the city they had left, wrote their ode to San Francisco (Cory the music, Cross the lyrics). By early 1954, they felt it was good enough to be shopped around, although they had a long-running disagreement over the title. Cory thought it should have been called “When I Return to San Francisco”; Cross' preference was “When I Come Home.”

“It's a good thing they changed it,” said Tony Bennett, whose 1962 recording of “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” turned his career around. “Those other titles sounded like something that might have been written by a travel agent.”

In 2019, nearing 93, Bennett was still singing what had become his signature song.

The song was written specifically for Claramae Turner, whose long, heralded operatic career in both San Francisco and New York was just beginning. The friendship between Turner and Cory and Cross went back to their salad days. Turner and Cory were both members of a Gilbert and Sullivan repertory company in San Francisco. Turner and Cross sang in the chorus of the San Francisco Opera Company. Turner began singing the San Francisco song immediately after Cory and Cross showed it to her in 1953, and she frequently used it as an encore for her performances over the years. She did a demo record with Cory playing the piano, but a widespread recording of the song never happened. After she sang the song for the last time, in San Francisco in 1972, Turner expressed regret that she hadn't gone to a record label and recorded it.

Later, Cory and Cross met Tessie O'Shea, the zaftig Welsh entertainer, in New York and offered her the song. She sang it a few times during nightclub performances but didn't get around to recording it until 1967, five years after Bennett. Through his mother, Cross had a connection with Tennessee Ernie Ford (Ford had bought Mae Cross' ranch in Northern California), and Ford was offered the song in 1961, several months before Bennett discovered it.

Jim Loakes, Ford's trusted manager for decades, and Jack Fascinato, the singer's conductor, heard him try the song in an informal setting and nixed it.

“It's a love song,” Fascinato said, unenthusiastically. “It's a love song to a city, but still a love song.”

“It doesn't seem like your kind of song,” Loakes said to Ford.

When the piece became a lasting hit for Bennett, starting in 1962, Loakes said: “Ernie, Jack, me, we all kicked ourselves. The arrangement Tony first used was the exact same one Douglass Cross showed me in my office the year before. Who knew?”

Six years after they finished it, the Cory/Cross song was still on the shelf. They knew Ralph Sharon, Bennett's accompanist, and gave him the sheet music one day on the streets of Manhattan. Sharon took it home, didn't look at it, and put it on a stack of other unrecorded songs that he kept in a dresser drawer, next to his dress shirts.

Fortunately for all concerned, the song was still at the top of the stack in December of 1961, when Sharon was packing for a tour that would eventually take him and Bennett to San Francisco.

The “San Francisco” in the title caught Sharon's eye. Had the name still been the esoteric “When I Come Home,” it's likely that Sharon would have overlooked it. But since the upcoming trip would end with him and Bennett performing at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco, Sharon tossed the languishing music into his suitcase, along with his shirts.

On the road to San Francisco, Bennett had club dates at The Vapors in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Although Sharon referred to Hot Springs as “the middle of nowhere,” the town, with its illegal yet wide-open gambling, drew entertainers such as Frankie Laine, the McGuire Sisters, Liberace, the Ames Brothers and Patti Page to its many night spots. Living there at the time were Bill Clinton, an aspiring high school saxophone player, and his mother, whose favorite pastime was placing \$2 bets on the horses that ran at the Oaklawn Park racetrack.

One night in Hot Springs, after their last show at The Vapors, Bennett and Sharon found themselves at The Black Orchid Lounge, having a nightcap. Only C.B. “Sonny” Hudson, a 26 year-old bartender, was with them in the room. Sharon had the Cory/Cross composition in his pocket and showed it to Bennett for the first time. Bennett suggested they go over to the piano and try out the song. A few minutes later, they returned to the bar and Hudson said: “Tony, if you ever record that, I'll be first in line to buy a copy.”

On December 28, 1961, a few days after leaving Hot Springs, Bennett was at the Venetian Room in San Francisco, singing the song in public for the first time. The encores were built-in, and Ivan Paul, writing in the “San Francisco Examiner,” said: “[Bennett] came up with a thrilling old tune, ‘I Left My Heart in San Francisco,’ that was a showstopper.”

“Thrilling old tune”? Well, perhaps Paul had done his homework. Technically, the Cory/Cross song had been around for six or seven years.

Still, Mitch Miller was not convinced. Back in New York, Miller was a major domo at Columbia Records, where Bennett was under contract. Miller thought the song was a regional aberration, something that would amount to a ripple at best outside San Francisco. But Bennett persisted, and Miller finally said, “OK, do it. But make sure it's the b-side.” In those days, the wildly popular 45 RPM records, which sold for about a dollar a copy, had a song on each side, and the a-side was the song the labels promoted. Miller had picked out a song for Bennett to

sing as the a-side--"Once Upon a Time," a tune Ray Bolger was scheduled to sing in "All American," an upcoming Broadway musical.

On January 23, 1962, late at night, Bennett and a 38-piece orchestra gathered at the old Armenian Greek Orthodox Catholic Church on East 30th Street, which had been nicely converted into a recording studio. The San Francisco song was the last on the schedule and by that time, Miller, with an early appointment the next morning, went home.

After 3 a.m. on January 24, Bennett did a fourth take that everybody liked. On February 2, the record was released, and by the end of the year, "Once Upon a Time" had been forgotten, the show "All-American" was a short-lived failure, and the b-side was largely responsible for the sale of two million records.

From the residuals, George Cory and Douglass Cross became millionaires. They moved back to their beloved San Francisco, a city they could now enjoy on their own terms. But they quit writing songs, ended their relationship, and continued their lives of heavy drinking. Cross was 54 when he died in 1975 and Cory was 57 when he died in 1978, a death that was wrongly called a suicide until an update by the San Francisco coroner's office in 2017.

Asked once about the success of the song, Cory said: "It reflects, in some small measure, perhaps, the history, the legend, the magic of this beautiful city that has fascinated the imagination of the world."

Tony Bennett is more succinct: "It's a great song. A great song about a great city."

Bill Christine wrote "They Left Their Hearts in San Francisco: The Lives of Songwriters George Cory and Douglass Cross." He was a staff writer for 25 years at the "Los Angeles Times," where he won nine national writing awards and shared in a Pulitzer Prize.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.