

Tony Bennett and Lady Gaga respect each other and the music during classy, polished show at ACL Live

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(Longtime Austin American-Statesman contributing music writer John T. Davis reviews Thursday night's Tony Bennett/Lady Gaga show at ACL Live.)

When the news broke that Lady Gaga was cutting an album of standards with Tony Bennett, skeptics (including my ownself) thought, "This has 'gimmick' written all over it." After all, the last time Austin experienced Hurricane Gaga, she made an entrance at Stubb's BBQ during South By Southwest trussed to a pole and wound up covered in fake vomit. Ella Fitzgerald she was not.

But in this particular case, the cynics rolled snake eyes. The polished and passionate Lady Gaga who joined Bennett onstage Thursday night at ACL Live was light years from the shock-rock provocateur who flaunted convention at Stubb's.

Onstage, she gave every evidence, both vocal and physical, that she is genuinely besotted with the Great American Songbook and the 88-year old "saloon singer" who personifies the craft and class of a bygone era of American pop music.

Drawing in large measure from their chart-topping, Grammy-winning duet album, "Cheek To Cheek," Bennett and Gaga took turns commanding the stage, each with their own cabaret-sized combo. Their duets, and there were plenty of them, were by turns moving, playful and affectionate, with respect paid by both parties.

At one point, during Gaga's resonant solo rendition of Cole Porter's "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye" (as close to a perfect song as this listener is aware of), Bennett stood in the shadows by the piano, applauding softly. It was a gesture that Gaga reciprocated as she waited in the wings watching Bennett perform his iconic theme song, "I Left My Heart In San Francisco."

Speaking of Bennett, what can you say? The guy still works out like a prizefighter ("The first day you don't do the scales, you know," he told a *New Yorker* reporter. "The second day, the musicians know. The third day, the audience knows.") Though his voice has husked up somewhat with the years, it still has a luxurious texture, infinite gradations of emotion and thrilling strength, as he demonstrated at the powerhouse climax of "For Once In

My Life,” earning him the first of several standing ovations.

(“Everybody has pressure,” acknowledged Gaga at one point. “Me, I have to follow Tony Bennett seven times during this show.”)

Gaga’s own triumphant moments came in quieter, moodier interludes, including the aforementioned “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye,” along with “Nature Boy” and most especially, a mournful, last-call take on Billy Strayhorn’s classic “Lush Life.” Penned more than half a century before she was born, it seems a song Gaga was fated to sing, and she knocked it out of the park.

As duet partners, Gaga and Bennett shone in giddy, swinging, effervescent, scat-singing, give-and-take uptempo numbers like “Firefly,” “It Don’t Mean A Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”, “I Won’t Dance,” “Goody Goody” and a gleefully over-the-top “The Lady Is A Tramp.”

They may be six decades apart in age but at the end of the day Bennett and Gaga seem like two Italian-American kids from New York who grew up in love with the idea of making music that would outlast them both. Thursday night, they seemed to do just that.