

# The Boss

From Ol' Blue Eyes  
to the Beatles and beyond,  
Peter Bennett has touched showbiz royalty

By Tony Lofaro

The Prince of Promotions is holding court at Patsy's — one of Frank Sinatra's favorite New York restaurants — and talking about the Beatles. It all makes sense. Peter Bennett has worked with both Sinatra and the Fab Four during an astounding career that has touched most of the big names in showbusiness.

In his bulging briefcase he carries snapshots that tell some of the tales. There's Elizabeth Taylor, Princess Grace, Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Michael Jackson (with an Afro), the Rolling Stones, Julio Iglesias, Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Sophia Loren. The stories are in his head, and may soon be in a book.

The 55-year-old Bennett, a hulking man with thinning black hair, a warm smile and a thick-as-cheesecake New York accent, is a dead ringer for actor Paul Sorvino (*Goodfellas*), who also happens to be a friend. He's a distant cousin of Tony Bennett, a fact he tends to downplay.

Bennett, aka Pietro Benedetto of the Bronx, knows something about record promotion. *Billboard* magazine dubbed him the World's Top Promotion Man, *Rolling Stone* also hailed him as one of the top promoters in the business.

Still, there was one record even the world's best couldn't do anything with. Bennett knew he couldn't turn John Lennon's controversial 1973 song *Woman Is the Nigger of the World* into a hit and he told the Beatles so.

"I did not like the song and told John I would not promote it," says Bennett over the lunchtime din at this popular 56th Street eatery. "I thought the song was racist, it was not a commercial song, nobody would play it."

His decision put him in conflict with the most temperamental of the Beatles. Lennon stomped off to promote the song himself, telling Bennett that if it turned into a hit the legendary promoter would have to kiss his behind. Bennett agreed.

The song, of course, bombed, never rising higher than No. 67 on the pop charts. The promoter knew his stuff, a fact Lennon later acknowledged, with an apology.

"I said to Lennon, 'You're the boss of songwriting. I'm the boss of promotion.' He put his

arms around me, but there were no bad feelings over what had happened."

Bennett — who has been photographed with showbiz's elite — has been the boss of promotions for more than 40 years. And he's not slowing down. He has recently been spending time in Ottawa, hardly an entertainment mecca, to work on a couple of new ventures. He has also gotten to know some Ottawa talent.

Bennett's extensive bio includes a national hit in his musician days (a version of the Peggy Lee song *Fever*), a stint as the national promotion director at Apple Records and a period as Nat King Cole's manager. He also helped organize the first rock benefit, Concert for Bangladesh, in 1971, promoted the large-scale Emerson Lake and Palmer concert at the opening of Montreal's Olympic stadium in 1976, and produced a worldwide TV special at the 1988 Seoul Olympics with Gloria Estefan and Brooke Shields. And he's had a long association with Bob Hope, working with the ailing comedian until six years ago.

Bennett was primarily a record promoter, hustling records to radio station program directors. He had to make sure his clients' records got airplay and then made it onto the *Billboard* record charts.

He has covered much ground in his career, dabbling in rock music, concerts, personal management and movie production — always as a behind-the-scenes guy, piecing together deals, soothing the egos of performers and working closely with record executives.

Just think of him as a consigliere (the Robert Duvall character in *The Godfather*), a negotiator between artist and record company. He's ridden the coattails of the big stars, but he still loves the smell of new talent. He is always searching for the next big star, eager to "enhance" (his favorite word) their career.

He helped land Ottawa singer Tammy Raybould a gig last summer at the Bitter End, a vaunted New York club, after he met her in Montreal.

"He got me into New York and without him I would not have had a name there," says Raybould, 24, of her set before some record industry executives. She said the Bitter End gig was crucial to her chances of breaking into the United

States and it led to a return club engagement, possibly later this year.

For about nine months, Bennett has also shuttled to Ottawa from his home in Greenwich, Connecticut, to act as adviser and possible investor on two business ventures with Digital Works, a printing firm on Bank Street. One is an Internet project in which people would vote via computer on the world's sexiest woman, the other is a magazine listing bios of models and performers who would be available to casting agents, producers and modeling agencies. The projects could debut later this year.

BENNETT ENTERED the record promotion business through the back door.

He grew up in the Bronx, where he once shined Frank Sinatra's shoes. He also made hero sandwiches for Ol' Blue Eyes at an old New York restaurant frequented by fighters Jake LaMotta and Rocky Graziano. He considered entering the priesthood, but later turned to music, buying his first drum set at a pawnshop for \$22.

He dreamed of being a famous drummer and he won a Gene Krupa drum contest. At age 17, he got a break when he worked with bandleader Tommy Dorsey on a reunion tour with Sinatra.

"I worked behind Sinatra on the drums, Sinatra used to say 'Hey kiddo,' and he called me his former shoeshine boy. He embarrassed me onstage, I hated it," says Bennett, who is separated from his wife, Annette, a corporate headhunter. He has two grown sons, Joseph, 30, and Peter Jr., 31, who live in Greenwich.

In the early '60s his own band, Pete Bennett and The Embers, had a modicum of success with their recording of *Fever*, which led to an appearance on *American Bandstand*.

When a friend offered him a 50-per-cent partnership to distribute records for a new record label to radio stations, he reluctantly took the job, figuring there was nothing to lose. The record label, Motown, was a newly formed Detroit-based company founded by Berry Gordy Jr.

"I did not know how hard it was to promote other people's records. It was a lot of work, going to radio stations, getting them to play records of artists for a label that no one had heard of."



Peter Bennett is a distant cousin of Tony Bennett, about the only connection the World's Best Promotion Man downplays. His briefcase bulges with photos of some of the greats he has worked with during the past 40 years, from Mohammed Ali to Dean Martin to the Beatles and Rolling Stones.

He says the early records he promoted — the Shirelles' *Tonight's the Night* and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles' *Shop Around* — were tough sells, especially with the program directors of "white-owned" New York radio stations. Through sheer determination and guts, Bennett plugged away and soon several of the big stations began to play the records he promoted.

He was soon regarded by record industry types as a marketing whiz, an Italian kid who could get airplay for new artists.

"Pete is one-of-a-kind and the personification of the independent promotion man, he's probably the originator of it," says Seymour Stein, chairman of London-Sire Records, who signed Madonna to a record contract in 1982 after seeing her perform in New York clubs.

Darin (*Splish Splash*) and other artists.

Bennett moved from record promotion to personal management in the mid-'60s, taking on Nat King Cole at a time when the singer had no hit records and was largely forgotten by the public.

"Nat comes to me and he has his flunkies with him. He plays me *Rambin' Rose* and six acetates of new songs. I said to him I love *Rambin' Rose* out of the bunch, I could make it a hit for you."

The singer was not convinced Bennett could turn the ballad, which had yet to be released, into a hit.

"Why do you love that record so much?" Bennett asks in a deep, gravelly voice, impersonating the late singer. Bennett told Nat to give him the song and he'd waive his standard promotion fee.

sensitivities about how they should be treated, he makes sure he puts together the right team," says Camillo, who represents Regis Philbin, Bill Cosby and Wayne Newton.

"Pete does not have to do 400 shows, lose on 150, win on 100 and break even on the rest. He understands quality, not quantity; that's how best to describe him."

Bennett was thanked by Paul McCartney in his book *Many Years from Now* for helping to promote the Beatles on the radio. "In one of the outer offices lurked Pete Bennett," McCartney wrote, "a vast bulk of a man with a round Italian face, looking more like a bodyguard for Sinatra than the promo man responsible for getting the Beatles on the radio."

WHEN THE BRITISH INVASION hit America, Bennett was at

## I said to (John) Lennon, 'You're the boss of songwriting. I'm the boss of promotions'



Bennett's promotion skills touched the careers of both Elvis and Beatle John Lennon. Bennett promoted Elvis's hit *Suspicious Minds*. Later, when he met Elvis in Las Vegas, the singer hugged him and said 'he's the one who made the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.'

Stein says he first met Bennett in New York about 40 years ago when he worked for *Billboard* magazine and Bennett was promoting records.

"Pete worked at Cambridge Distributors and he actually put them on the map. He was skilled in getting the records on the radio and he had relationships with all the top disc-jockeys at the time. It did not take long to strike up a friendship with him because he was the type of guy you can get to know pretty fast."

Bennett says record promotion came easily to him and he had no hesitation leaving his musical career. "Promotion," says Bennett, "was something that I fell into. I could not believe it. I was making money, more money than I had been making as a musician."

After the Shirelles, Bennett took on Bobby "Boris" Pickett (*Monster Mash*), Sam Cooke (*Cupid*), Stevie Wonder (*Fingertips*), the Supremes (*Where Did Our Love Go?*), Dionne Warwick (*Walk on By*), Bobby

Bennett immediately drove from New York to Philadelphia, hitting a snowstorm on the way, to meet Georgie Woods, a rhythm-and-blues disc jockey on WDAS. Woods played the record on his evening show and the switchboard lit up. Listeners loved it.

Woods phoned Bennett the next morning and told him the record was hot. Within a week, it had sold 40,000 copies in Philadelphia and soon radio stations around the country were putting it on their playlist.

"The song went to No. 1 and Nat called me afterwards and thanked me. He said 'Kid, you were right.'"

"Promotion," stresses Bennett, "is the name of the game, without that you go nowhere, no matter who you are."

Kenny di Camillo, an agent at William Morris Agency in New York, says Bennett is one of the last independent record promoters and likens him to a Damon Runyon character.

"Pete understands the artist's

the centre of the musical revolution. He caught the wave of the many young British bands coming to North America, helping to sell the records of Herman's Hermits, the Dave Clark Five, the Who, Chad and Jeremy, Peter and Gordon, Donovan and Lulu. In 1964, when the Rolling Stones first came to the U.S., Bennett was by their side.

"There's a big promotion in New York with the Rolling Stones to celebrate the release of their album. We were on a yacht called *The Princess* — which was used by Sinatra — and I told the Stones that the Beatles were playing at Shea Stadium and did they want to go see them. They said sure."

"So I called Shea Stadium and talked to the promoter that I wanted to bring the Stones. He said fine. We docked the boat in Long Island and took limousines to the stadium."

The Beatles were already performing and the Stones and their entourage discreetly slipped into the stadium, set-

The British Invasion



When the British invasion hit America in the 1960s, Peter Bennett was at the centre of the musical revolution. He began promoting the Rolling Stones' records and when the Beatles launched Apple Records they, too, signed on with Bennett. 'It was crazy being with the Beatles during those days.'

ting into the baseball dugout, says Bennett. "Some of the fans see that the Stones are there and start yelling out 'The Stones are here, the Stones are here.' The fans start throwing things and I said to the Stones, 'Let's get out of here, we're going to get killed.'"

Bennett promoted such Stones hits as *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*, *Paint It Black*, *Ruby Tuesday* and *Jumpin' Jack Flash*. But the song that gave him the most trouble was *Honky-Tonk Woman*.

After the Stones sent an advance tape of *Honky-Tonk Woman* to Bennett, he realized there was go-

The station manager wanted proof of the actual lyric and asked Bennett for the lead sheet (sheet music with lyrics) of the song. The Stones had given Bennett the original lead sheet, but he whited out the words "laid a divorcee" and typed in "played a divorcee."

The radio executives were satisfied with the change and the song went on to be a smash for the Stones. In the early '60s, the Beatles were managed by Brian Epstein, but after his death on Aug. 27, 1967 they needed someone to manage their business affairs. The Beatles, ready to launch Apple Records,

turn our cars over when they saw us. The would sneak into our hotel rooms, we'd be in the room and we'd find fans in the closet. They would bribe anybody just to get close to the Beatles."

Bennett spent weeks with the Beatles, sitting in on such classic recordings as *Lady Madonna*, *Hey Jude*, *Get Back*, *Come Together* and *Let It Be*.

"The Beatles trusted me," says Bennett, of his long association with the group and later with each Beatle after they began solo careers.

"I broke their records and worked hard at promoting them. I

"There was also the Yoko Ono factor. She's a great gal, wonderful really, but the others resented that John had married her. She had a big influence over John, she wanted to sing, but they could not see it."

Bennett says he played it straight in the record promotion business despite the fact that radio's early days were notorious for payola, whereby disc jockeys were paid to play certain records. Bennett says payola was happening, but he was not part of any schemes.

"One thing I learned since I got into promotion was that I didn't give anybody lip service. That's the way the Beatles liked me, I didn't go out and say their record was a smash if I didn't think so."

Bennett is trying to get his life story published and has worked with a New York writer on an outline and sample chapters in an effort to pitch his story to a few publishers. He's also had preliminary talks with longtime Hollywood producer Howard W. Koch (*The Manchurian Candidate*, *The Odd Couple*) about turning his years in the record business into a movie.

"Yeah, Robert De Niro will play me in the movie," jokes Bennett about his buddy "DeNiro."

Bennett has hardly slowed down, spending his days meeting longtime radio friends for dinner, attending fundraising functions in New York, raising financing for a proposed film with Michael Madson (*Reservoir Dogs*) and trying to get a film about Apollo 14, featuring astronaut Edgar Mitchell, off the ground. He keeps his ear to the ground, still looking for the next big thing, undiscovered talent that could benefit from the Bennett promotional spin.

"I still have the drive, Bob Hope had the drive up until two years ago, George Burns never retired."

"I don't ever talk about retirement, I'll retire in my coffin. How could I stop if I see someone with potential, I'd want to see them get right up there."

Tony Lofaro writes for the Citizen.

'Pete is the personification of the independent promotion man, he's probably the originator of it'

ing to be a problem getting the song airplay because of the line "I laid a divorcee in New York City." In 1969, says Bennett, a record with such a risqué lyric could be banned by radio stations. He brought an acetate tape of the song to New York radio station WMCA and played it for radio station executives.

"They said there was no way they could possibly play the record on the air. I said what's the problem. They said the lyric is bad. I had to bluff, so I said no, it says 'played a divorcee, not laid.'"

were looking for a promotion man to handle their records on the new label.

Lennon asked Mick Jagger who was promoting the 'Stones' records and was told it was Bennett. At the end of 1967, Bennett joined the Beatles, working with Allan Klein who was managing the Stones as well as taking on the Fab Four.

"It was crazy being with the Beatles during those days," remembers Bennett. "The fans wanted to be with them, they would be rioting and trying to

be honest with them and they liked me. They felt secure with me and they could talk to me, we had a lot of laughs together."

He says the Beatles were no different from other rock groups — they "needed promotion just like everybody else."

"Everybody thought a Beatles record would always sell ... Without the right marketing and promotion it's not going to happen."

Years after the Beatles broke up, McCartney brought Bennett a new song he had recorded called *My Love*, hoping he could help promote it to the public.

"Paul thought the record was a piece of s---, I said to him I love it. I put it out there and promoted it and it became a No. 1 hit for him. He was surprised."

The Beatles' breakup was inevitable, says Bennett. "The downfall started with Lennon and McCartney, it was like who was writing the better songs, who had the bigger name. I also got the feeling they did not want to be the Beatles anymore, they wanted to branch out."



Paul Bennett's career has brought him in contact with generations of stars, from the likes of Brooke Shields to legendary comedian Bob Hope.

Record promoter Peter Bennett has worked with dozens of celebrities over the years. Here are some of his favourite stories.

On Elvis Presley:

"The first time I met Elvis he was in the army, we became friends. Years later when he opened at the International Hotel (now the Hilton) in Las Vegas I was invited. He remembered me because I had promoted *Suspicious Minds*. When he went out on stage he seemed like he didn't know what he was doing. He was saying things like 'hi everybody' and 'gee, there's a lot of people here.' He had just got out of the movies and he had never seen that many people onstage. The audience reaction was great, keys were thrown on stage, but he would stop after every song."

"I was invited by Elvis back to his dressing room, but he didn't allow the owner of the hotel to come into his room. Elvis kissed and hugged me and he kept calling me the Italian kid and saying he's the one who made the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. He got a big kick out of me and when I told him his ring sparkled on stage he gave me his pinkie ring. I said I don't want it, the silver ring had 55 diamonds. It's worth a fortune, that's why I have it in a safe."

On Bette Midler:

"I was in my New York office working on some figures with George Harrison. Songwriter Paul Jabbara and Saul Swimmer come in the office with this girl who looked like she needed a good meal. She was wearing a ripped rabbit jacket and a stained blouse. I had a dark suit on and she was shedding all over me. Paul is saying to me you got to come and see her tonight, she's great."

"So the next morning this girl comes in and she's making everyone in the office laugh. She says again to come and see her that night, so I end going where she sings, it's a real dive. I sit down in this club and who walks in — Johnny Carson and his talent co-ordinator. She gets on the stage and in the first 20 minutes she's breaks everybody up. She sang like the Andrew Sisters. Carson says right away that he wants her for five shows. She finishes her stuff and I go backstage and Carson asks me who handles her. She says to Carson that I am, so I negotiate the deal. People from Atlantic Records see her and love her. I could not sign her with Apple Records until John Lennon — who was president of the record label — sees her. So Atlantic puts out her album and then she appears on Carson and she's a big hit."

On Bob Hope:

"Bob is a great guy, he trusts you but don't lie to him. The mighty dollar is big to him, he's probably worth about \$5 billion. He owns land all over the world, especially in Orlando. When you stay at a hotel fans send gifts all the time, bottles of scotch, champagne, whatever. You have to tip the bellboy to help you bring down all this stuff. When it comes to tipping Bob has holes in his pocket. So I'd have to reach into my pocket and give the bellboy about \$200."

Bob usually gets \$150,000 for one appearance, plus transportation, but he usually would keep the plane tickets because he has his own airplane. He would always make sure I got the fuel money which was about \$8,500. At the end of the concert we would be walking to the plane and he'd be asking me if I got the fuel money, I'd say yes I got the money and he said where's the money and I had to hand the envelope with the money in it and he'd be looking at it."



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