

# Tony Bennett's struggle with Alzheimer's revealed

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As Tony Bennett releases what may well be his last album, his family has

disclosed that the 1950s crooner who became popular with younger audiences decades later has Alzheimer's disease.

His wife, Susan, made the announcement in an interview published in AARP magazine. She said Bennett, 94, is content and happy and took the diagnosis calmly.

"But that's because he already didn't understand," she said. "He would ask me, "What is Alzheimer's?" I would explain, but he wouldn't get it. He'd tell me, "Susan, I feel fine." That's all he could process—that physically he felt great. So, nothing changed in his life. Anything that did change, he wasn't aware of."

But Bennett, who was still playing more than a hundred dates a year when he married Susan in 2007 at age 80, noticed something was wrong during a 2015 tour, AARP reported. He told Susan he couldn't remember the names of the musicians on stage. She thought it was normal aging. He wanted to see a doctor.

Dr. Gayatri Devi, a neurologist at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, diagnosed Bennett in 2016. She told AARP that he has "an amazingly versatile brain."

"He is doing so many things, at 94, that many people without dementia cannot do," Devi said. "He really is the symbol of hope for someone with a cognitive disorder."

Devi attributed Bennett's high functioning to his strong family support—especially from Susan, his primary caregiver.

"I am humbled by the level of devotion," Devi told AARP. "She also expects a lot from him. I think her background as a teacher helps, but she's also very much in love with him. And he rises to her expectations."

According to the magazine, Bennett has so far been spared the disorientation that can lead Alzheimer's patients to wander from home, as well as episodes of terror, rage or depression that often accompany the disease. But Bennett is not always sure where he is or what is happening around him, according to the magazine, and common objects like a fork can be baffling to him.

Documentary footage of his work on the new album with his protege Lady Gaga revealed a more muted presence than before, according to the magazine. Bennett rarely spoke and seemed halting when he did. Often, he appeared to be lost or bewildered.

Gaga, who was aware of his condition, spoke to him in short, simple sentences, as recommended by Alzheimer's experts. At one point, according to the magazine, she told Bennett he sounded so good. "Thanks," he replied.

"The pain and sadness in Gaga's face is clear at such moments," author John Colapinto wrote in AARP. "But never more so than in an extraordinarily moving sequence in which Tony ... sings a solo passage of a love song. Gaga looks on, from behind her mic, her smile breaking into a quiver, her eyes brimming, before she puts her hands over her face and sobs."

Bennett's family kept his secret for four years, but decided to break their silence now with the release of his new album. The disclosure is a way to remove some of the stigma associated with the incurable disease, they said.

"Being open about a diagnosis in such a public manner takes great courage and compassion," said Beth Kallmyer, vice president for care and support with the Alzheimer's Association.

"Tony's brave transparency will help encourage important conversations around early detection and diagnosis while helping families access crucial care and support services," she added.

And the need for support will only grow.

Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia among older people. More than 5 million Americans have it—a number projected to soar as [baby boomers](#) born between 1954 and 1964 get older.

**More information:** The Alzheimer's Association has a list of 10 early signs and symptoms of [Alzheimer's dementia](#).

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