

Bennett's songs full of meaning and memories

By Chris Kocher

ckocher@pressconnects.com

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On one of his traveling bags is a sticker that sums up Arlon Bennett's outlook on life in five words: "Failure is not an option."

Music

► Who: Arlon Bennett

► When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

► Where: 6 on the Square, 6 Lafayette Park, Oxford

► Tickets: \$12 online; \$15 at the door (get tickets at www.6onthesquare.org)

► More information: www.arlonbennett.com

The motto, made famous by NASA during the heady space race of the 1960s and '70s, has guided the Rockland County singer/songwriter on his musical career. After all, the guy quit his day job in information technology four years ago to write and perform full-time. Talk about gutsy.

"I think that resonates with a lot of people, when you feel like you're not fulfilled in a day gig that

doesn't really meet your needs," Bennett said in an interview last week. "So I prepared; then I handed in a resignation with two weeks' notice, and got out there on the road. That's a big part of me — I really believe in doing what you're meant to do, and persisting at it without taking 'no' for an answer."

Luckily, the decision was no mad leap into the unknown: Bennett had already released two albums and was regularly performing on week-



Photo provided

ARLON BENNETT

ends. It also helps that he's a talented storyteller and songsmith in the tradition of Harry Chapin, James Taylor and the best folk balladeers past and present.

Bennett's latest CD, "Summer's Voice," shows a broad range not only of subjects but also of musical styles. The jazzy opener, "Forgive

Me," is a plea to a wronged lover, while the neo-folk "Be the Change" draws parallels between the struggles of Rosa Parks and Mahatma Gandhi with what we face in our own lives. "Just Like Them" is a gentle tribute to a 63-year marriage: The man and wife see themselves in a younger couple they've met, and vice versa.

The country-tinged "Bandana Man" chronicles a Vietnam veteran's search for meaning while journeying on the back of Harley. "That's a composite story of a trip I took cross-country on a motorcycle 10 years ago — it was a dream of mine to do that," Bennett said. "I ran into many of these guys on the road. ... The effect that they had on me was so deep and profound that I knew I had to sit on that idea for a long time, and finally it all came flying out years after that trip because it was ready to be delivered."

The album's title song is a tribute to New York Mets sportscaster Bob Murphy, who died in 2004. The memories seem so poignant that Murphy's death is like "the day the music died" in Don McLean's classic "American Pie": "The radio booth is silent where the jets pass overhead / a million grownups say their childhood is dead / there were times I listened to every word he said / Oh, summer's voice." The song was used for a tribute video to Murphy shown at Shea Stadium.

"I've been a Mets fan all my life — I know up there in Binghamton, you have the Double A Binghamton Mets — and I grew up with the Mets with Bob Murphy on the radio and TV," Bennett said. "When he passed away, it was like a part of me passed away. It struck me that

I never thought these guys would ever go away, and when he did, I felt compelled to remember him and my experiences growing up — how much I loved hearing the Mets on the radio and how much his voice really made it come alive to me."

It's not the first time Bennett has brushed with greats of the sports world: His first CD included a song about tennis great Arthur Ashe called "The Ace in Grace," which was used during a statue dedication in Ashe's hometown of Richmond, Va. Asked if he planned any similar tributes, Bennett laughed but also said he'd love to write about Olympic track star Wilma Rudolph, who overcame childhood polio to be one of the fastest women alive.

Although Bennett knows when to be serious, he's just as likely to stir in a little humor. "Red Light Kiss" and "Fender Bender Baby" tell two tales of car-related love, and he covers a Johnny Cash song from the Sun Records years called "Straight A's in Love."

But it's the rockabilly number "Small Body Blonde" that really stands out. Bennett admits that its subject matter — which is not about a hot babe as you might suppose — gave him a chance to be "a little bit of the naughty boy."

"That (song seems) ... so unlike me as a person and an artist, but that really is the core of who I am," he said. "I love innuendo, I love fun, and I love telling a story that really fools everybody at the end."

So what's the real story behind "Blonde"? You'll just have to go to Saturday's Oxford show and demand that he play the song. When you do, you'll understand more of what Bennett is all about — and you'll laugh out loud.