



Mathis, Johnny (b. 1935)

by Linda Rapp

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With more than sixty gold and platinum albums to his credit, Johnny Mathis is one of the most successful recording artists in the world, trailing only Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley in the number of albums sold. His interpretations of romantic ballads have brought him fame and wealth, but he is notoriously reticent about his own romantic life.

Although he has acknowledged his homosexuality, he has refused to discuss it in any depth, and its effect on his art and life must remain speculative.

Born John Royce Mathis in 1935 in Gilmer, Texas, he grew up in San Francisco. The circumstances of his family were modest. His father Clem was a limousine driver and handyman, and his mother Mildred a domestic worker. Both parents encouraged him to develop the musical ability that he showed from an early age, but Mathis acknowledges in particular the role of his father.

When Mathis was eight years old, his father bought a used piano for him. The elder Mathis, who had been a vaudevillian in Texas, began to teach his son vaudeville routines, introduced him to the music of such singers as Lena Horne and Ella Fitzgerald, and urged him to participate in church choirs and talent contests.

When Mathis was thirteen, he met Connie Cox, an opera singer and voice teacher, who was so impressed with his singing that she offered to give him free voice lessons. He studied classical technique for six years and credits Cox with teaching him to sing the soft, high notes that are a signature of his style.

After high school Mathis received an athletic scholarship from San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University). He competed on the track team, setting a school record in the high jump. His impressive athletic performance earned him an invitation to participate in the 1956 Olympic trials.

The very same week, however, brought the opportunity to sign with a recording company. Mathis decided against trying to make the Olympic team but maintained an interest in his sport. He sponsors the Johnny Mathis Invitational track meet, which has been held annually at his alma mater since 1982. In 1997 SFSU chose him as the Alumnus of the Year.

During his college years, Mathis developed an interest in jazz and began to work in local clubs. When he appeared at the Black Hawk nightclub, Helen Noga, the co-owner of the establishment, quickly recognized his talent. She undertook the management of his career and secured bookings at more clubs in the area.

One such appearance, in 1955 at a San Francisco gay bar called the 440 Club, found George Avakian, a record producer at Columbia, in the audience. Although impressed with Mathis's potential, Avakian did not sign him immediately. He did, however, return to San Francisco the following year, at which time he offered Mathis a contract to record an album.



Johnnie Mathis in concert at the Chumash Casino, Santa Ynez, California, in 2006. Photograph by Dwight McCann. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License 2.5.

The debut album, *Johnny Mathis, a New Sound in Popular Song* (1956) did not do particularly well. The "new sound" was flavored with the jazz style of the music that Mathis had been performing in California. He was soon, though, to discover another sound that would propel him to stardom.

Following the release of the first album, Avakian brought Mathis to New York, where he continued working as a jazz singer, performing at various clubs and concert halls, including the Apollo Theater.

Avakian, however, felt that Mathis needed to take a different direction to achieve greater commercial success. He therefore brought Mathis together with producer and arranger Mitch Miller.

The pairing proved inspired. In collaboration with Miller, who was known for his lavish string arrangements, Mathis began singing romantic ballads. His first such recording, "Wonderful, Wonderful," was a Top 20 hit in 1957. He released five more extremely successful singles that year, including the chart-topping "Chances Are."

In 1958, he released an enormously popular album, *Johnny's Greatest Hits*, which held the number one spot on *Billboard's* pop chart for three weeks and remained on the chart for a record total of 490 weeks. The album included such standards as "The Twelfth of Never," "It's Not for Me to Say," and "Misty."

Mathis's career skyrocketed in the 1960s. He put out three or four albums a year throughout the decade and was much in demand on the concert tour. His rigorous schedule--with as many as 101 consecutive one-night shows--took a physical toll on him and caused him to become addicted to sleeping pills for a time.

In 1964 Mathis decided to take charge of his own career. He left his previous manager, Helen Noga, and started his own company, Rojon Productions. The break with Noga was rancorous, but they later reconciled their differences.

Mathis's albums of the 1960s and 1970s featured a variety of styles and material. On *Olé* (1965) he sang in Spanish and Portuguese. On albums such as *The Long and Winding Road* (1970), he covered the songs of other pop artists. He also recorded disco music. His albums sold millions of copies.

Singles by Mathis, on the other hand, tended not to make the pop charts. This changed in 1978, when his duet with Deniece Williams, "Too Much, Too Little, Too Late," became his first number-one hit since 1957. It also brought Mathis, whose fan base had previously been primarily white adults, to increased attention among African-American and younger audiences.

Following the success of his duet with Williams, Mathis recorded duets with several other singers, including Gladys Knight, Dionne Warwick, Natalie Cole, Barbra Streisand, and Nana Mouskouri.

Mathis's enchanting love songs have always appealed to the romantic side of his fans. Their effect on listeners has given rise to certain waggish comments such as one in *People* magazine that "Mathis has often been blamed for the last 10 years of the baby boom." But his work appealed to gay and lesbian couples as well, many of whom may have intuited the singer's homosexuality.

Mathis's own love life, however, remained a mystery. He deflected interviewers' questions about his bachelor state until 1982, when he acknowledged his homosexuality in an interview in *Us* magazine. He spoke of his first love at the age of sixteen and said that being gay was "a way of life that [he had] grown accustomed to."

These disclosures had little if any effect on the public's perception of him; indeed, the public hardly seemed to notice them. In 1992 a group of gay activists attempted to "out" Mathis, only to discover that his sexual orientation was already on record.

Mathis claimed, however, that it should not have been. In 1993 he told an interviewer from the *New York Times* that he had intended the information that appeared in the article in *Us* to be off the record. He has declined to make any further comments about his sexuality.

Mathis continues his career as a highly successful vocalist. Indeed, he is one of the most gifted interpreters of romantic ballads in the history of American popular music. After more than four decades in show business, however, he no longer tours as he once did, though he still gives concerts. He has performed at various charity events and at the White House.

He even had the chance to participate in two Olympic games--as a singer.

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