

JOHNNY MATHIS

A HIGH-JUMP TO SUCCESS



by HELEN ITRIA

SON, it's a slipping business you're in," Clem Mathis told his boy Johnny. "So keep your feet on the ground. Practice being real in your little self. If you balloon it up, people read you and quickly get off the wagon."

"I'm trying, Daddy, I really am," Johnny said, and boarded a plane to keep singing engagements at the Black Orchid in Chicago, the Chase Club in St. Louis, the Copacabana in New York.

His father's cautioning words were nothing new to Johnny Royce Mathis. He had been reared on them. But they were especially timely now, in the face of success overwhelming enough to turn any young man's head.

For Johnny Mathis had just completed one month's appearance at the plush Fairmont Hotel in his home city, San Francisco, for an average of \$4,000 a week. Before that he had been held over at the Crescendo on Hollywood's Sunset Strip. He had been paid \$25,000 to sing a song in 20th Century-Fox's *A Certain Smile*. He had sung "Wild Is The Wind" for this year's Academy Award audience in Hollywood.

He was about to sign a movie contract. He had two gold records (over a million sales) to his credit—"It's Not For Me To Say" and "Chances Are." And it was estimated that he would earn close to half a million dollars this year of 1958.

Yet a year and a half ago, few people were aware of this young tenor with the reedlike body and voice to match. He did not even have the price of a ticket to New York for his first recording session for Columbia Records. The ticket, plus money for two suits, was provided by his manager, Helen Noga.

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In college, he set a high-jump record. At this point, he had lost hope for a singing career.

Johnny Mathis is just 23 years old, though he appears a hungry, vulnerable 17. When he sings a romantic ballad in high falsetto, his large, dark eyes gaze out over the heads of his audience as if in shy search of someone. Without resorting to typical nightclub gestures or hip-swaying, he lets voice tell the story, giving lingering, quivery care to certain key words or phrases.

Then he breaks the saccharine atmosphere just this side of stickiness with a jump tune, racing from a high trill to deep baritone. Animal spirits, impish pleasure leap into his eyes and possess his thin, wiry frame. Through it all he remains impeccably neat and well-groomed.

Offstage, his manner is frank, open, humorously brash. While Johnny marvels over the money coming in, he finds little to spend it on, other than sweaters, records and his family (his only extravagances). His favorite foods remain Mexican dishes and fried chicken. He claims to "gag at the sight of steak." Any cars he drives are rented (Thunderbirds and Cadillacs as a rule). He reads nothing but the comic strip "Peanuts." He has no special interests, no hobbies, no close friends to confide in.

Singing rules Johnny's life; it always has. A good performance sends him flying with elation; a poor one sinks him into despondency. In either case, he celebrates or licks his wounds in solitude, reiterating to himself the words of his father: "This has happened before and you got over it, so you will again. But learn from this mistake."

And he says his prayers and goes to bed.

JOHNNY MATHIS was born in a dark, discouragingly dingy basement flat on San Francisco's Post Street, on the fringe of the Fillmore district—a poor colored area, and a

J O H N N Y M A T H I S

tough one. Johnny was the fourth of seven children. Until three years ago, the Mathis family, plus a nephew, lived in those five rooms below street level.

Father Clem admits: "We were social outcasts on Post Street because we were in a *basement* flat." But their crowded home was neat, and Mother Mildred was always washing and scrubbing after her day's work as housemaid and cook elsewhere. "I say a person cannot be close to God and yet be living in filth," she states firmly.

Clem and Mildred were saving continuously toward the day when they could buy a home with enough room for all. Also at the back of Clem's mind was an unfulfilled dream: to be connected with show business. A chauffeur and handy man, he had once dabbled in vaudeville but abandoned it because his people considered it "evil."

When Johnny was eight, Clem bought an old upright piano for \$25. It was so big he had to take it apart to get it into the tiny flat. Johnny hung around it as if it were magic. At three in the morning, when Clem put the last section in place, he sat down and played "My Blue Heaven" for his drowsy audience of one.

"I could see it in his face, that he loved music, too," says Clem today. "I taught him that song. He got it in nothing flat—and he put something into it. That's when I felt it—I felt that the sound I heard, if it was cultivated, maybe a lot of people would love the sound. And that's when I knew I had a job to do. . . ."

Johnny needed little encouragement to sing for friends, in school productions, church choirs and amateur shows all over town. When he was 13, Connie Cox, a young Oakland singing teacher, heard him and for six years thereafter gave him voice lessons without charge.

Johnny became the first Negro student body president at Roosevelt Junior High School. He maintained a "B" average and was on the honor roll. At George Washington High School he was a six-letter athlete, playing basketball, running the hurdles and high jumping.

Later, while at San Francisco State College, he set a high-jump record which still stands today (6 feet 5½ inches). He was majoring in physical education, having given up any real hopes for a singing career. Too many attempts to get a start had ended in discouragement. According to a former classmate at State, he was "very well-liked. He didn't seem to pal around with anyone in particular, though; he sort of stayed in the background."

Johnny finally marshaled enough

JOHNNY MATHIS

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COLUMBIA 

The first album (1956)

nerve to ask to sing with a jazz sextet led by Virgil Gonsalves, another student, who recalls, "He was so polished, he stood out. I wanted him in the group immediately."

Virgil became one of Johnny's few close friends and finally induced him to drop in occasionally at the Black Hawk nightclub on week nights and Sunday afternoons for jam sessions. "He was scared—but people loved him," Virgil remembers.

One Sunday, Helen Noga, short, blonde co-owner of the club, told her husband John, "I want to manage that boy and push him to the top."

They had just lost money on another venture and John Noga was sceptical. But when Helen Noga's mind is set, an earth-moving machine can't budge her—and her husband capitulated.

Then she went after Johnny. Neither the boy nor his father had ever encountered such aggressiveness before—certainly not in skirts.

"Look," she said at last. "If I get you a recording contract, will you then sign with me?"

"Well," Johnny hedged, "I won't leave school unless I have something in writing."

One hot summer night, when he was singing at the 440 Club where he had landed a weekend job, Helen announced that George Avakian, popular-album producer for Columbia Records in New York, was there to hear him.

"You've got to come out and sing your best song first," she ordered.

"But it's a ballad—I can't open with a ballad," Johnny protested.

"Do it," she said shortly. "That's all he has time for, just one number."

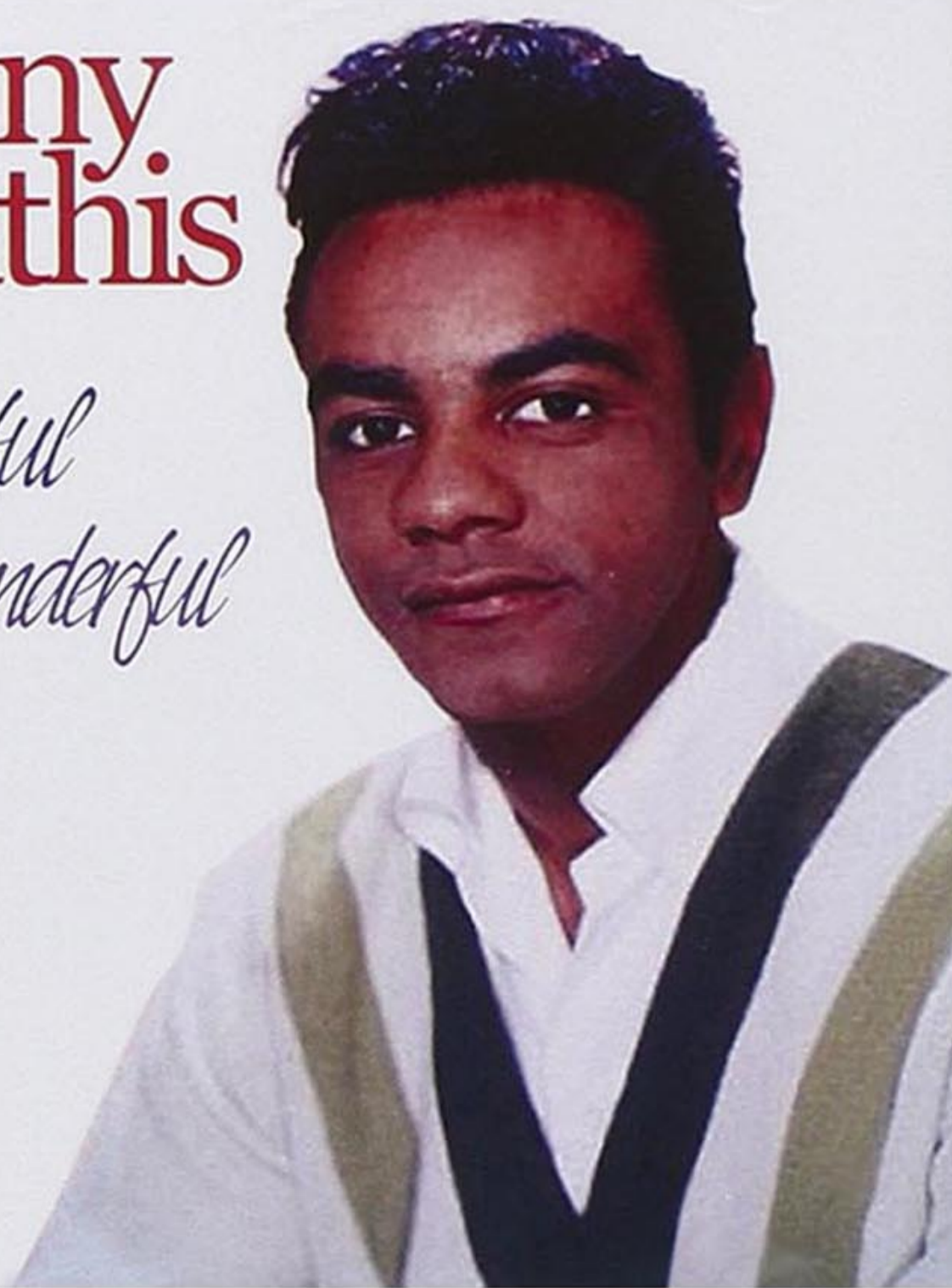
She didn't tell him that even though the vacationing Avakian was suffering from an acute case of poison oak, she had dragged him to the club. Ten minutes in the humid room was all the poor man would be able to endure.

Johnny came out shaking with nervousness. "But I was so mad I got through it," he recalls. "I sang 'Tenderly.'"

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Johnny Mathis

*Wonderful
Wonderful*



His second album (1957)

Avakian was brief when they met later: "I want you to sign a contract with Columbia."

Johnny was both stunned and elated. But when he asked his father to sign (he was still a minor), Clem balked.

"Was this man drunk?" he asked cautiously. "Lots of drunks hang around those places."

"No, Daddy. Mr. Avakian doesn't even drink. Please sign."

Clem deliberated for seven days, praying that he would do the right thing. He talked to friends, who related hair-raising tales of sons who had fallen prey to dope, alcohol, wild living in New York. Finally he said to Johnny, "I know you want this and I don't want to stand in your way. But if it is going to make you do things that are not right, and ruin your character, I don't want it."

Johnny assured him he'd be good. And Clem signed the contract.

Avakian told a wildly happy Johnny Mathis to continue singing in clubs for additional experience until contacted. Six months later Columbia called and he was off to New York for his first recording session—and his first trip away from home—accompanied by his triumphant manager.

While there, Helen Noga badgered the owners of the Blue Angel and the Village Vanguard into letting Johnny perform. He sang in these and other clubs almost a year, building his career while waiting for his records to catch on.

Used to Helen's tactics by now, Johnny and his family regard her with wonder and gratitude. Few managers ever worked as hard for a client. She personally wrote every disc jockey in the U. S. and Canada until they were on a first-name basis. She never let up in her campaign to see that Johnny got the right clubs, the right material, the fattest contracts. She watched over him like a clucking hen, putting him on allowance, cautioning him of pitfalls.

"He 'went Hollywood' for just

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JOHNNY MATHIS

WARM

COLUMBIA

Percy Faith
and His Orchestra

His third album (November, 1957)

one week," she says. "I'm not going to have any smart-aleck kid on my hands. I finally sat him down and said, 'Now listen here. Either level out or get yourself another manager!' He snapped out of it quick...."

Three years ago, Johnny's folks had finally scraped together enough money for the down payment on a big three-story house on 32nd Avenue, with a fine yard and a view of the Presidio and the top span of Golden Gate Bridge.

"It's a \$16,000 home," marvels Johnny. "They did it all by themselves, saving up all these years."

His first act, when his career took shape, was to toss out the old, battered furniture and replace it. And success brought his greatest pleasure when he was able to tell his parents, "You don't have to work any more." He put them on his payroll to take care of his fan mail, and this year paid off their mortgage.

Success has brought an even deeper reward—the family, which had scattered, has become a close unit once more. The three younger children consider Johnny a hero, an example to follow.

Looking far ahead, Johnny Mathis hopes one day to be an executive with a record company, in a position to help other newcomers like himself. But at the moment, he simply wants to become as smooth a performer, as solidly entrenched, as Nat "King" Cole and Lena Horne, whom he considers the "ultimate."

He knows he is not yet a star, though his home city honored him last year by setting aside December 18th as "Johnny Mathis Day."

But there is much work yet to do, much learning ahead. And some way Johnny must find time for a fuller life with some personal meaning . . . and solidify the foundation that so far has kept him from losing his sense of balance.

Until then, he has his father to remind him: "Son, precious gifts come from somewhere. I feel yours came from God. It is good to show a little bit of gratitude. . . ."

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Singer as toddler

Coronet

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