



by Ken Hoyt

The word *legend* is tossed about with some regularity and applied, without irony, to things that can scarcely bear the weight of such an accolade. Legends may well be born, but they generally require seasoning, and it is essential that they stand the test of time. Only then can the title be awarded without reservation.

Johnny Mathis is, in fact, a legend. His cherubic face, velvety voice, and long sustained notes have launched many top selling songs. It helps to start early if you want a long career (although that's not exactly insurance — see one-hit-wonders).

Mathis began in his career in 1956 and he's been on the charts every decade since, with over 73 albums that have hit the Billboard Charts and a tidy 350 million records sold. At seventy-seven years old, Mathis and his voice are in fine shape as he continues to travel extensively for concerts.

It seems that where Mathis is concerned the world is blissfully colorblind. Even so, he began his career prior to the Civil Rights struggles of the 60's, and yet he doesn't recall much strife. "So many times," he says, "I wondered when it would come up. I was a little naive, and very fortunate. When I came along Nat (King Cole), Ella (Fitzgerald) and Sammy (Davis Jr.) had blazed the trail and had taken the brunt. I didn't have to deal with it. I've been very lucky."

Mathis began his career at Columbia records, a giant in the industry, but not known as a "race" label. The world was different too. Recording artists were heard long before they were seen. "Columbia," says Mathis, "had mainstream Caucasian performers. I sounded like them." His wavy hair and boy-next-door looks made his race more difficult to determine.

Mathis credits a lot of his early success with Percy Faith, a bandleader, composer and arranger known for his use of string instruments in his lush orchestrations. The romantic sounds that Faith produced were a perfect match for Mathis's rich vocal quality.

Mathis recounts following the legendary Mahalia Jackson into the studio to record all afternoon. "Then, I was off to the Copacabana," Mathis recalls, "to do five shows a night." There was a dark side too. "Amphetamines," he remembers, "were prescribed to keep performers going. No one knew they were harmful, but I was under the influence for three years. I went through hell and fire like everyone else."

Unlike many of today's crop of teen idols, Mathis was better equipped to enjoy a lengthy career. That longevity may well have to do with a voice that he had help crafting and developing. His father, Clem, bought a piano when he thought his five-year-old son was showing interest and promise. Johnny sang everywhere, church, school and local festivals. When he turned thirteen his father decided it was time for him to get professional training. He studied with local voice teacher Connie Cox

for six years. "I would help out around her house," Mathis remembers, "in exchange for lessons."

The wisdom of that vocal training is evident today. His sound is unchanged to most ears. Mathis insists, "I've let go of certain songs that I don't have the chops for anymore." The tunes that he's quietly retired do not include the songs he calls "the holy trinity:" "Chances Are," "The Twelfth of Never," and "Misty." "Those," he notes, "are the songs the audience is waiting for at every concert."

On a sweet separate note Mathis mused, after hearing a recent recording of himself, "Now, I sound just like my father."

To have a long career is a blessing, but one that may have built-in difficulties. For instance, how does one keep a song sounding fresh, meaningful and heartfelt when one has been singing it for over fifty years? "The whole process of performing," says Mathis, "is so visceral. No way I can go on and not sing from the heart. I can't lie to people. I have so much respect for an audience — I love what I do."

Mr. Mathis is open and warm in conversation, but there are things he prefers not to discuss. Like many gentlemen of his era he prefers not to discuss the intimate matters of his life. Early in the 80's he came out in an interview. He hasn't talked about it much since. There is also a strong suggestion that the death threats that followed his openness in that original interview have made him very wary.

He has been entertaining thoughts of a new album, but nothing has solidified. He hasn't ruled out the idea of an autobiography, although he's in no hurry to tackle the project. In fact, outside of regular touring dates he's content to work on his golf game, which he does most days.

To some readers, Mathis will be most recognizable as a frequently played Christmas artist. To date, Mathis has recorded five Christmas albums with lots of songs that have become holiday standards including, "The Sounds of Christmas," "A Marshmallow World" and "Christmas Is a Feeling In Your Heart."

"When I was growing up we didn't have a lot of extra money for gifts," Mathis remembers, "but there was always the smell of holiday foods cooking and music all around the house. It's always been my favorite time of year."

To some he has become the "King of Christmas," a title he enjoys almost as much as he does the season itself. When asked if he would ever have dreamed he'd get that moniker he replied, "I was so unsure as a child of what the future would hold. If I'd known that I would be the King of Christmas ... well, that would have been the star on the top of the tree." §

IN CONCERT Johnny Mathis, the King of Christmas, will be appearing with the Oregon Symphony on December 22nd at 7:30 p.m. Tickets and additional information are available at orsymphony.org.