

# FROM LAGUNA BEACH

## JOHNNY MATHIS INTERVIEW



# Johnny Mathis: A Look Back

By Glenn Swift

**A**s many of you know, I spend half my time in Southern California, the entertainment capital of the world. From time to time, I run into celebrities simply going about their normal daily lives. Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Johnny Mathis, who was more than willing to share a fascinating glimpse into his amazing life.

"My family made everything possible," Johnny said. "They were very loving and supportive."

The fourth of seven children, John Royce Mathis was born on September 30, 1935 in Gilmer, Texas to Clem and Mildred Mathis. As a small boy, the family moved to Post Street in San Francisco. It was there that young Johnny learned an appreciation of music from his father. "My father was a great singer who taught me my first song, 'My Blue Heaven.'"

Times weren't always easy for the Mathis family. "We weren't poor. We just didn't have any money," laughed Johnny.

At age eight, his father purchased an old upright piano for \$25. When he brought it home, it wouldn't fit through the front door. So, that evening Johnny stayed up all night to watch his father dismantle the piano, get it into the small living room of their basement apartment, and then reassemble it. Clem Mathis, who had worked as a musician back in Texas playing the piano and singing, would continue to teach his son many songs and routines. Of all the Mathis children, Johnny was the most eager to learn all about music. Before long, the star-to-be was singing in the church choir, participating in amateur shows, and performing at community functions in and around San Francisco.

Then, at age 13, Johnny met someone who would change his life and help pave the road to stardom. "My father took me to meet Connie Cox, a well-respected voice teacher in the Bay area. We couldn't pay her, but I did odd jobs around her house in exchange for voice lessons."

The relationship with Cox blossomed and helped Johnny to cultivate his distinctive sound. "I worked with Connie for the next seven years. She taught me how to produce and conserve tones. Without a doubt, Connie provided the catalyst for my career."

As a student at George Washington High School in San Francisco, Johnny was as well known for his athletic abilities as for his singing. Excelling at basketball and track, Johnny developed a respect for physical conditioning, something that he has remained committed to over the years.

Heralded by several newspapers as the "best all-round athlete to come out of the Bay area," Johnny entered San Francisco State College with the idea of being an English and Physical Education teacher. Before long, Johnny set the school record in the high jump of 6' - 5 ½". He also began singing weekends in local jazz clubs. It was while performing at the Black Hawk nightclub that Helen Noga, co-owner of the club, took notice of Johnny. She was

so impressed with the young performer that she persuaded George Avakian, head of Jazz A&R at Columbia Records, to come down to the club to hear Johnny himself. It didn't take long for the phone to ring.

"I was taking part in the Olympic trials for the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne (Australia that is...) and was forced to make a decision. I could continue to train with the high probability that I would make the Olympic team or go to New York to record a record." Believing that this very well might be a once in a lifetime opportunity, Johnny packed his bags for the Big Apple.

Success came quickly. His first album "Johnny Mathis: A New Sound in Popular Song" enjoyed moderate commercial success, but turned a number of influential heads. The album also launched Johnny into the Manhattan nightclub circuit. Almost over night, a whole lot of heads were turning. A year later, in July of 1957, Johnny recorded the first of many signature hits, "Chances Are." A star was born.

The rest as they say is history. Over the next fifty years, Johnny Mathis would go on to win countless awards and commendations. His enormous talent would take him all over the world and bring immense joy to millions of fans of all ages, races, and backgrounds. And it all started with a loving family...and a \$25 piano.