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Role Models

Written by John Waters

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John Waters

Role Models



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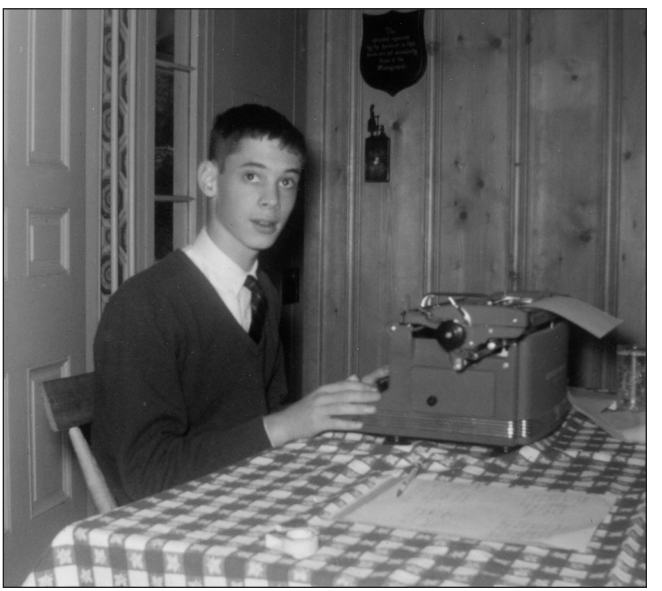
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IN MEMORY OF VAN SMITH

(AUGUST 17, 1945–DECEMBER 5, 2006)



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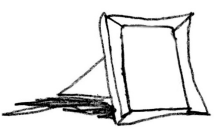
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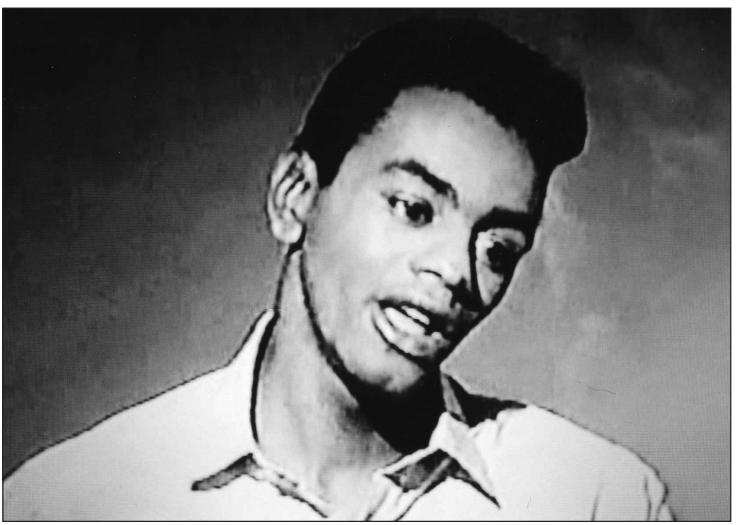
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JOHNNY AND ME





I wish I were Johnny Mathis. So mainstream. So popular. So unironic, yet perfect. Effortlessly boyish at over seventy years old, with a voice that still makes all of America want to make out. Heavenly, warm. Yes, I'll say it out loud—wonderful, wonderful. I saw Johnny Mathis in real life once, but he didn't see me—the best way to glimpse a role model. I had just pulled into the parking lot of Tower Video, off Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood, with my good friend the photographer Greg Gorman. "Oh my God," said Greg, who is never impressed with celebrities, having shot them for billboards, movie posters, and album covers for thirty years, "don't look up, but Johnny Mathis just pulled in next to us." And there he was. In a sports car with the top down and a cashmere sweater tied around his shoulders. Good Lord. Johnny Mathis himself. The legend you never hear about, never see on the red carpet, never read about in gossip columns. Highly successful but nearly invisible. Smooth for ever and ever. As my favorite girl group of the sixties, the Shangri-Las, might have said about how I felt that day, "That's called impressed."

I never got over seeing Johnny Mathis in the parking lot. I'd secretly think about those thirty seconds at odd moments, like when the Acela train between Baltimore and New York would have to stop so inspectors could examine the corpses of suicide victims who threw themselves on the tracks. Or waiting in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles to renew my driver's license. Or sometimes right when I woke up—bam!—for no apparent reason, there he'd be: Johnny Mathis in that car with that sweater. Is it because Johnny Mathis is the polar opposite of me? A man whose *Greatest Hits* album was on the *Billboard* charts for 490 consecutive weeks. Versus me, a cult filmmaker whose core audience, no matter how much I've crossed over, consists of minorities who can't even fit in with their *own* minorities.

Do we secretly idolize our imagined opposites, yearning to become the role models for others we know we could never be for ourselves? When I taught filmmaking at a jail in Maryland in the 1980s, I always got my class to loosen up by doing improv and asking them to play "the exact opposite of yourself." If Freud described psychotherapy as "transforming hysterical misery into common unhappiness," I figured this might be a revealing way to rehabilitate. Bikers wound up playing girls, blacks chose characters with wealth and power, whites became docile maids or butlers, and child molesters became tough guys. But did I need my own prison counselor because I kept reliving that Johnny Mathis "opposite" moment? Why would the mere sight of a performer so far outside the standard boundaries of my hero worship launch me into such a

blissful, rapturous obsession? At this point in my career, could my misplaced idolatry become a road map to ruin? Was I in danger of becoming a Johnny Mathis stalker? I figured I'd better try to meet him in a more legitimate way before I got in trouble.

It's not like I wanted to be Johnny Mathis as a kid. His music, however, *did* become the sound track for the end of my 1950s childhood innocence. Our thirteen-year-old babysitter, who lived across the street at the time, had a record hop, and because she wanted to borrow my 45 rpm records to play, she had to invite eleven-year-old me. Little did I imagine that the gathering would turn into a red-hot "necking" party! While her innocent parents (who were good friends of my mom and dad) were upstairs happily laying out refreshments, all the kids downstairs were grinding and French-kissing to Johnny Mathis's music, and I knew then that not only did I want to be a teenager—I wanted to be an *exaggeration* of a teenager.

But I had always felt nuts, not romantic. Too angry to be smooth. Too happily guilty to yearn for virtue. Before Johnny Mathis, Clarabell, the psychotic clown on *The Howdy Doody Show*, whose makeup later inspired Divine's, had been my role model. The man I saw in person in the early fifties at the height of *Howdy Doody*'s success, when I was just a child and my parents somehow got me on the show. The scary freak I watched from the Peanut Gallery who never spoke but communicated his hostility by honking twin bicycle horns or by squirting you in the face from a seltzer bottle. The same TV character parents complained about for getting their children too "excited"

before dinner. Excited? I was apoplectic. Especially every time Clarabell got near Princess Summerfall Winterspring, the goody-goody but sexy Indian maiden nonpuppet star of the show. If only he could have burst out of his glorious "muteness" to say her name out loud—the best name ever! The only other name I wish were mine today (except for Lord or Lady Haw-Haw, which I can't use because they were Nazis). Matter of fact, readers of this book, if you see me on the street and call me Prince Summerfall Winterspring in a nice tone of voice, I will probably respond.

I followed the careers of Clarabell and Princess Summerfall Winterspring forever, hoping that I, too, could someday have an extreme career in show business. I mourned the fact that I was unable (and uninvited) to attend the 1957 funeral of Judy Tyler (the actress who played Summerfall Winterspring) after her tragic death in a car accident right before the release of the Elvis movie she had costarred in, *Jailhouse Rock*. All "Doodyville" was there that day in Hartsdale, New York, and I bet Bob Keeshan was sobbing out loud. Yes, that's the real name of the first Clarabell the Clown, who went even further in television career lunacy and became Captain Kangaroo for thirty years after. Imagine his life, his schizophrenia. Am I Clarabell? Or Captain Kangaroo? Why are those children staring at me? Who am I? Claraboo? Captain Kangabell? God, what a life! What a career! Bob Keeshan, I wish I were you, too!

But would Johnny Mathis understand all this? Luckily we both were represented by the same talent agency, so I

called Steve Rabineau, my film agent, and he called Johnny's people, who suggested I write a letter to Mr. Mathis explaining why I wanted to talk to him. Hmmmmmm . . . "explain." Explain what? A role model? Someone who has led a life even more explosive than mine, a person whose exaggerated fame or notoriety has made him or her somehow smarter and more glamorous than I could ever be? A personality frozen in an unruly, blown-out-of-proportion position in society who earns my unmitigated respect for his or her other turbulent, ferocious will to survive frightening success or failure? Maybe Johnny Mathis *could* understand, but I'd better leave out the Princess Summerfall Winterspring part of my explanation. So I wrote a personal letter telling Mr. Mathis who I was (I still don't know if he had ever heard of me) and described the Tower Video parking lot imagery and how this book was an attempt to pay tribute to "amazing people who have inspired me." I added that I was not coming to him with any agenda (sexual, racial, ageist, or political), and I really wasn't. My Johnny Mathis lunacy was way beyond that anyway, but I tried to sound . . . well, reasonable.

Then I was told to get in touch with his legal representation, which, naturally, scared me, but at least I had passed the first audition. The lawyer was lovely on the phone and just what I expected; old-school Hollywood, incredibly loyal and protective of Mr. Mathis's career and, rightfully, suspicious of me. I explained my book idea as normally as I could and he asked if Mr. Mathis could approve what I wrote. I explained the journalistic mortal

sin of his request and he said he'd get back to me. Lo and behold, a few days later an assistant to Mr. Mathis called to set up the meeting at 9:30 a.m. at Mr. Mathis's West Hollywood home. I felt like Prince Summerfall Winterspring. Until the night before, when I got an e-mail casually mentioning that the lawyer would also be present. Great.

Hoping for the best anyway, and arriving on time at Mr. Mathis's lovely, unostentatious thirty-year home overlooking Los Angeles from the hills above Sunset Boulevard, I ring the bell. Here goes. "The King of Puke" meets "Mr. Wild Is the Wind." Opposites attract? We'll just see. An Asian housekeeper who has clearly worked here for decades lets me in and leads me to a cozy corner off the living room, and there he is with a handsome smile and an outstretched hand to shake. *And* the lawyer. "What? Did you Google me?" I joke, and the lawyer is caught off guard by my question but then laughs and admits, "Yes." I set up my tape recorder and the goddamn thing doesn't work even though I had tested it that morning! I'm sweating, losing my cool. Mr. Mathis offers me his own recorder, but I give up and take notes. Johnny is called John by all his real friends, I begin to notice (I'm Johnny only to two people—my mother, who can never switch from my childhood name, and a certain friend in prison you'll meet in a later chapter). Mr. Mathis is dressed just as I had hoped—all in white: white shirt, unbuttoned three buttons to reveal hairless gym-bodied chest; white pants; white thick socks, no shoes. Just like Johnny Mathis should look, like he always has. Effortless. Twenty or seventy.

Johnny Mathis is beyond fame itself—something I will never be.

We start off at the beginning—how he was "singing in white bars in the Tenderloin section of San Francisco" with his parents' permission, "doing great" right from the beginning and "feeling no racial prejudice." "Never?" I ask. "Not really," he says with understated charm. Amazingly, my own mother said to me after hearing I was going to meet him, "Johnny Mathis is black?" How could a beautiful black man who sang romantic love songs that white girls responded to not feel racism in the fifties? Maybe he's beyond race, too.

If Johnny Mathis has any regrets, it's that he listened to an early manager who advised him, "Don't mention jazz. There's no money in it." "I wanted to be Miles Davis," Johnny remembers. "Jazz legends. That's what I wanted to be. They were artists." He was "embarrassed around jazz people to be known for romantic music," "trivialized." When I mention that Johnny was a millionaire at twenty years old, he almost doesn't hear. "That had nothing to do with what I was about. I never wanted to be anything but a good singer."

God, who I wanted to be when I was six years old was Dagmar, the 5'11" supposed dumb blonde I watched on early black-and-white TV. Too young to stay up to see her on the show that came on at eleven p.m. and made her famous, *Broadway Open House*, hosted by Jerry Lester, I had to make do by catching her guest appearances on *The Milton Berle Show*. Predating Cher or Madonna, Dagmar was the first single-name bombshell, and I always knew

she was smart. She hung out with Bob Hope and Joey Bishop when I was just an obsessive toddler in Lutherville, Maryland, and I daydreamed about her all day in grade school, hoping to become a caricature of myself the way she was. But for a child to form a fan club for his idol, he needs more than himself in the audience, and I could never find another kid who knew who she was. I finally met Dagmar herself, the older version, when I tracked her down in 1979. She was long retired and living as a guest on an amazingly plush horse farm in Southbury, Connecticut, and I tried to talk her into playing Divine's character's mother in *Polyester*. This great lady may have turned me down, but joked when she heard I'd come from Provincetown, Massachusetts, that beautiful beach town on the very tip of Cape Cod so popular with gay people: "Oh, yes, I was there; I was queen of the fairies." Would Johnny Mathis understand?

Of course he would. Like myself, Johnny realized some of his heroes "would be odd." He "loved" Liberace because "he used his money." I bring up another of my role models, the hypochondriac and germ-freak pianist Glenn Gould. "Oh, yes," Johnny recalls, "when I shook his hand he gasped, 'Are you trying to kill me?!' " He knew them all—every single deliriously original musician whose vocation seemed to be "going to extremes." "Johnnie Ray?" I dare mention, only hoping Mr. Mathis had met the white guy heartthrob singer who was deaf, handsome, skinny, gay, and immensely popular for a short time right before rock and roll was invented. The sexy one who wore a giant hearing aid and was called "the first

great white soul singer." The crooner Frank Sinatra hated, who cried, sobbed, and made emotional breakdowns part of his song delivery. The guy who survived two "morals charges," arrested once in a bar and once in a men's room, and later had an intense love affair with the married, famously chinless crime columnist Dorothy Kilgallen. "Oh, yes," Johnny Mathis easily responds. "I visited him when he was dying [of liver failure]." "The Twelfth of Never," I silently title this beautiful imaginary hospital paparazzi photograph in my mind before realizing, hell, no—the two of them together in this situation could only be "The Thirteenth of Always."

Johnny Mathis's role model? "Lena Horne," he chuckles. "Some reviewer even said I stole everything but her gown." I know what he means; I have been copying Margaret Hamilton my whole life, and I am proud to admit it. The Wicked Witch of the West, the *jolie laide* heroine of every bad little boy's and girl's dream of notoriety and style, whose twelve minutes of screen time in *The Wizard of Oz* can never be topped. And her outfit! The Wicked Witch inspired my lifetime obsession with wearing weirdly striped socks (Tim Burton does, too). My God, this great character actress even worked later with William Castle in *13 Ghosts*, and appeared in *Gunsmoke*, *The Addams Family*, and *The Paul Lynde Halloween Special*! I never did get to meet Margaret Hamilton before she died, but she did send me a personally autographed Wicked Witch of the West photo, and the monogram "WWW" followed her signature. What an iconic monogram! Did her towels have "WWW" on them? Her sheets? If only I

could have visited her at her summer house on a private island in Southport, off Boothbay Harbor, in Maine. So what if it didn't have electricity or phone service? More quality time with a *real* movie star!

I ask Johnny if he's a recluse, since I never see him at award ceremonies, parties, or nightclubs. "No, I'm not a recluse," he explains, "but I don't like social functions and I don't feel that newsworthy. It gets in the way." "Of what?" I wonder, remembering the art dealer Matthew Marks once saying to me, "You have the best kind of fame: only the people you'd want to recognize you do." What does Johnny hate about celebrity? Free travel? Free clothes? Gift bags? I never mind. I fondly recall whispering to Jeanne Moreau, "More free food!" every time we had to attend black-tie dinners when we served together on the jury of the Cannes Film Festival in 1995. Johnny Mathis admits he does go to private events, and we both recall happily those wonderfully insane dinner party salons that the late Roddy McDowell used to give for the most bizarrely mixed guest list ever. "He included everybody," Johnny says, laughing, and boy, did he! I remember being lucky enough to be invited there and meeting George Axelrod, and how happy I was to gush to him in person about the brilliance of his screenplay and his direction of the movie *Lord Love a Duck*. Then I turned around and there was an elderly couple dressed in full fringed cowboy outfits with holsters and guns. "Oh, John," Roddy asked casually, "do you know Roy Rogers and Dale Evans?" "No," I stammered, almost speechless. How could I? I live in Baltimore!

Johnny Mathis understands a lot about me. I can tell. He's a gentleman who lives alone and he's from another era. "Who wants people to know everything?" Johnny asks shyly. "A lot of life is putting things in perspective." How right he is! One thing I learned early was that if you're in any way famous, guaranteeing yourself a private life is very important for your mental health. Fans can't be friends; neither can the press. And even if certain critics have been supportive, there will always be a future project of yours they might *not* like, so palling around with reviewers can be awkward. The ultimate level of celebrity accomplishment is convincing the press and public that they know everything about your personal life without really revealing anything. Mr. Mathis only once responded to sexual preference questions from the press, in 1982, and he answered in a lovely way. His preference was "a way of life one's grown accustomed to." I had promised "no agenda" but I bring up this quote and compliment him on it, and he smiles and says, "It's a normal everyday part of my life."

I've always been pretty up-front about my sexuality (even though Mink Stole today says she didn't even know I was gay for a long time), but I understand Hollywood royalty's reticence about revealing anything personal, hetero *or* homo. Gus Van Sant and I always joke about the press saying we are "openly" gay. What's that supposed to mean? It sounds like we're arriving at a premiere shrieking, "Hey, Mary! Got any Judy Garland records?" When I read about any celebrity baring his or her soul to a journalist, I just figure the star doesn't have anyone