Shaking the Closet: Analyzing Johnny Mathis’s Sexual Elusiveness, 1956-1982

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In 1982 Johnny Mathis inadvertently revealed his homosexuality during what he thought was an off-the-record interview. The notion that Mathis was sexually “closeted” is insufficient for understanding his career. Mathis, who debuted in 1956, authored a sexually elusive persona that relied strategically on a non-threatening sexual image to curb the “threat” he posed to white audiences. He also conveyed an ambiguous sexual romanticism with room for heterosexual and homosexual audiences to project their desires onto him without having to engage with his sexuality. Analyzing press coverage and various career documents reveals how sexual elusiveness was central to his commercial allure.

When R&B crooner Luther Vandross died in July 2005 mainstream publications like the New York Times and African-American niche publications like Jet magazine focused on his influence on contemporary R&B and his lengthy run of commercial hits (“Famed Singer Luther Vandross”; Leeds; Sanneh). A trail of alternative accounts regarding his sexuality followed these sanitized obituaries. For example, the urban culture magazine Vibe acknowledged long-running speculation about his sexuality and gay- and lesbian-themed magazines such as Out acknowledged the well-known “open secret” that Vandross was gay but “closeted” (Seymour, “Power of Love” 116–18; Weinstein). Considering Vandross’s immense commercial success his “closeted” identity seemed archaic; by the early 1990s he had successfully crossed over to a (white) pop audience (three gold albums, eight platinum albums and seven multi-platinum albums) and amassed a considerable fortune so he was financially secure (Whitburn, Billboard Albums 1093). Further, numerous established performers came out in the 1990s—including Elton John, k. d. lang, and Melissa Etheridge—and thrived. Whether Vandross was afraid he would lose some, or all, of his audience and permanently damage his “sex symbol” image or whether he was simply a discreet person will forever remain unclear. However, the roots of his reluctance, and the ongoing aversion of other contemporary black pop singers to coming out as gay or lesbian, may be illuminated by examining the career of Johnny Mathis. Mathis’s negotiation of race, sexuality, and industry expectations is a benchmark for engaging with black popular musicians’ relationship to the “closet.” Too often journalists
discuss the closet in universal terms devoid of attention to the social pressure on black public figures, particularly artists, to maintain an authentic connection to black audiences—typically their initial core audience—before they cross over to broader audiences. A tacit expectation that they serve as cultural role models frequently informs their efforts always to maintain public “respectability” among their black audiences, particularly in their intimate affairs.

Middle-class respectability (elaborated upon below) dominates understandings of black respectability and racial uplift. Farah Jasmine Griffin (83, 87, 94) has noted that poor and working-class blacks have an alternative narrative that more thoroughly considers how racism has shaped the ability of people of color to lead lives of dignity. There are racial, economic, and sexual undertones to this narrative that have differently informed the careers of many black public figures, including Griffin’s subject, Billie Holiday, and mine, Johnny Mathis. Mathis’s career required him to appeal to black audiences and white audiences without alienating either through his recordings and performances, racial presentation, and sex/gender address.

Speculation regarding sexual orientation is an enduring part of post-World War II era journalism, from Confidential magazine’s gay baiting of Liberace in the mid-1950s to Out magazine’s July 2007 cover story, “Gay/Post-Gay/Not Gay?” on British glam rocker Mika (Breen; Desjardins). The popular press has a longstanding fascination with sexual ambiguity, especially in an era when “coming out” has been mainstreamed. Coming out of the sexual closet has been a cornerstone of gay and lesbian liberation movements since the late 1960s and the ability of public figures to come out remains a commonly cited bellwether of social progress toward sexual equality (D’Emilio 235–40; Loughery 321–38; McGarry and Wasserman 158–77).

However, in the 21st century a number of scholars and journalists have questioned the presumed utility of coming out as a liberating paradigm for people of color. For example, a bevy of articles and books have addressed the so-called “down low” phenomenon of men, particularly African-American men, who identify as heterosexual but regularly sleep with men and prefer not to identify as “gay” (Edwards; Trebay; Venable). Journalist Keith Boykin has been instrumental in questioning the legitimacy of the “down low” as a recent phenomenon, since infidelity and closeted behavior have long existed and are not particular to one racial or ethnic group (see, for example, former New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey) (Boykin 61–74). Critiques of the “down low” phenomenon have also inspired critical discussions of the reasons why ethnic minorities may choose to avoid such labels and formal “coming out,” including everything from racism within white-dominated gay and lesbian communal spaces to fears of homophobia within African-American communities. The music industry provides a unique opportunity to explore the racialized nature of the “closet” and “coming out.” Many of popular music’s most notable African-American musicians have been haunted by speculation over their sexuality, including Tracy Chapman, Michael Jackson, Prince, Queen Latifah, and Vandross.

Though most of these performers began their solo careers in the late 1970s–late 1980s the 1950s is actually the place to start for examining black musical performers
who have negotiated the closet within the music industry. According to Charles White's biography The Life and Times of Little Richard: The Quasar of Rock, self-proclaimed rock and roll architect Little Richard overtly addressed his conscious strategy of employing flamboyance to deflect attention away from the perceived “corrupting influence” he posed to white listeners (65–66). Comparatively, pop crooner Johnny Mathis, who acknowledged his homosexuality “off the record” in a 1982 US magazine interview, has been more reserved in addressing his negotiation of his sexual orientation (Petrucelli 58–60). Unlike Liberace, Mathis was never hounded by the tabloids regarding his sexual orientation, and, compared to more contemporary “out” gay and lesbian-identified performers like Melissa Etheridge and Elton John, he has been virtually invisible in recent sexual liberation politics. Despite his lack of apparent struggle with the press and seeming distance from sexual activism and politics, Mathis’s negotiation of his sexual identity, in relation to the national gender and racial politics of his early career and music industry norms, is of crucial interest to understanding the diverse factors involved in “coming out” for people of color in the culture industry.

This article explores Johnny Mathis’s negotiation of his sexuality in relation to post-World War II masculinity, the “coming out” paradigm, and the racial politics of the music industry. A textual reading of Mathis’s public persona through popular press cover stories and interviews, album art, and musical choices spanning 1956–93 reveals a performer whose negotiation of sexuality occurred through an elusiveness he cultivated so that he could be defined in his own terms. I consciously frame Mathis as “sexually elusive” rather than “gay” because his persona was consistently ambiguous in a manner that negates an essentialist perception of how homosexually oriented singers conduct themselves publicly and the salience of sexual orientation’s importance to their own identities. Mathis’s elusiveness models a uniquely subtle and covertly forthright negotiation that eschews simplistic reductions of him as “progressive” or “closeted.” Beyond his individual career his strategy raises important questions about the commercial and political utility of sexual ambiguity for contemporary popular music. For example, much of the press hostility surrounding the sexuality of 2003’s American Idol runner up Clay Aiken, and the sexual baiting on the Internet that forced former *NSYNC member Lance Bass to “come out” in 2006, stems from the presumption that sexually ambiguous performers are dishonest, inauthentic, and apolitical (Cohen; “Lance Bass”; “Who’s Gay”). This hostility also stymies appreciation and consideration for the diverse ways public figures construct their sexual personae in relation to race, musical genre, and politics. Mathis is primarily synonymous with romantic ballads like 1957’s “Chances Are” and 1959’s “Misty,” but his “shaking of the closet” imbues his career with a social import that illustrates a different paradigm regarding the nature of the sexual closet.
Johnny Mathis’s immense commercial accessibility is inseparable from his carefully crafted, sexually elusive image. Rock historians commonly define the commercial “rock era” as beginning approximately in 1955–56 when performers like Bill Haley, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard began their commercial ascent (Garofalo 77; Gillett 37; Palmer 31; Szatmary 19–22). Though Mathis is more of a pre-rock-influenced crooner than a rock-oriented singer his career has spanned the whole era. Mathis is part of the first generation of what I term “rock-era crooners,” a group which also includes Eydie Gorme, Jack Jones, Andy Williams, and ’60s singers Robert Goulet and Barbra Streisand (Stephens, “Crooning” 160). “Rock-era crooners” emerged during the rock era and drew from the pre-rock “crooning” style established by singers like Russ Columbo and Bing Crosby, but were less jazz-oriented than swing-era singers like Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra. In the mid-to-late 1950s “rock era crooners” targeted teenagers through various trendy commercial singles and adult buyers with their LPs. As Billboard magazine established its “easy listening” chart in 1961, rock era crooners increasingly found that their commercial singles performed more strongly in the new format than on mainstream radio and achieved their greatest commercial success as albums artists (Whitburn Top Adult Contemporary).

Though Mathis is synonymous with “pop,” his debut recording was actually the jazz-oriented 1956 album Johnny Mathis: A New Sound in Popular Song. Todd Everett’s liner notes to the boxed set The Music of Johnny Mathis: A Personal Collection (20–24) state that the album’s commercial failure led his manager, Helen Noga, and Columbia Records producer Mitch Miller to steer him in a more pop-oriented direction. The shift in Mathis’s sound from jazz to pop made him more accessible to a broader audience, as did the careful tailoring of him as a “colorless” crossover artist to white listeners. In the liner notes Mathis notes how Noga and Miller urged him to sing in a soft, romantic style, to avoid overt association with R&B, and how “I think most people were very surprised when they saw me...they thought I was white because I sounded white on records” (24).

The “whitening” strategy paid off handsomely for Mathis. Trade chart expert Joel Whitburn’s research reveals that Mathis has been one of the rock era’s most enduring album sellers. He was the second most popular albums seller from 1956 to 1959 and ranked #10 in the 1960s, and #31 in the 1970s, when many “rock era crooners” were outside the commercial mainstream (Whitburn, Billboard Albums 1402–03). Like many “rock era crooners,” Mathis’s single sales began to wane in the early 1960s; he was the #11 singles artist from 1955–59 but was not a major singles artists in the ’60s outside the easy listening format (Whitburn, Top Adult Contemporary 160–61, Top Pop Singles 1139). In the ’70s, Mathis charted more sporadically, but he achieved some success by shifting to a “soft soul” sound that garnered him several multi-format radio hits including 1973’s “I’m Coming Home” and 1978’s duet with Deniece Williams, “Too Much, Too Little, Too Late” (Whitburn, Top Pop Singles 544–45). Mathis recorded for Columbia Records from 1956 to 1962 and Mercury Records from
1962 to 1966, and since 1967 he has recorded exclusively for Columbia and remains a popular concert act. Overall, Mathis is the sixth most popular album seller of the rock era (1956–2005) and ranks as the #61 best seller among singles artists from 1955 to 2006 (Whitburn, *Billboard Albums* 1395; Whitburn, *Top Pop Singles* 1125). In 2003 the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences (NARAS) rewarded him with their Lifetime Achievement Award, a clear measure of his endurance and influence in the music industry (“Lifetime Achievement Award”).

Despite the burgeoning early 1950s civil rights movement and the increased presence of blacks in mid-1950s popular culture a discernible racial divide permeated the social sphere and various culture industries (Franklin and Moss 511–32). Though the black and white racial divide was beginning to subside, in 1956 “black” performers were still a separate class struggling to gain access to the commercial “mainstream.” Mathis began his recording career only two years after hallmarks like the murder of Emmett Till and the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision (Franklin and Moss 453). He also debuted amid increasing hostilities from white supremacist groups (e.g. White Citizens Council of Birmingham) toward the crossover of black singers into mainstream popular music via rock and roll (Gillett 18; Szatmary 23). Mathis’s emergence during this contentious transitional period is important because it also amplifies the relevance of understanding his career in relation to other black male singers of the era and the role of black entertainers as contributing to the black struggle for social and political acceptance. For example, a white supremacist group attacked Mathis’s idol Nat “King” Cole in a 1956 concert and his TV show struggled to garner sponsors in large part because southern white audiences rejected Cole’s interactions with white entertainers, especially female guests (Cole, “Why I Quit” 29–34; Ward 129–34).

Stylistically Mathis followed in the crooner tradition of popular balladeers like Cole and Billy Eckstine. But as a vocalist he was somewhat of an anomaly as he sang with a feathery timbre in an era when the baritone sound was popular on black radio. His delicate, piercing sound—most memorably heard in his falsetto passage in the bridge of “Misty”—was also anomalous in its transcendence of the virile, masculinist tone of the 1950s. His musical approach was tenable because of a dual gender signification he was able to finesse. The crooner idiom allowed Mathis to occupy a unique space between feminine and masculine sentiments and vocal textures that gave him an intriguingly ambiguous sound.

For example, on his first charting album, 1957’s *Wonderful Wonderful*, some of the more common themes he sang about came in the form of popular standards concerned with fantastic (“That Old Black Magic,” “You Stepped Out of a Dream”), unrequited (“It Could Happen to You”), and introspective (“In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning”) aspects of love. His follow-up album, *Warm*, repeated these themes on songs like “By Myself,” “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face,” and “What’ll I Do.” Further, within the liner notes of *The Music of Mathis*, Mathis specifically cites male and female pop and jazz-oriented stylists like Nat “King” Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, and Sarah Vaughan as his interpretative models. Though none of his songs is inherently masculine or feminine, his repertoire provided a safe space
to express vulnerable romantic sentiments and incorporate a range of gendered singing conventions precisely because they were associated with singers of both sexes.

Mathis was a consistently popular singles artist from 1957 to 1965 and yet his albums were dominated by his interpretations of “standards” drawn from musical theater, film, and pop material standardized by pre-rock crooners, but not released as singles. He identifies primarily with this traditional material, as evidenced by his hand-picked selections on the boxed set. Only eighteen of his thirty-six Billboard Hot 100 singles from 1957–65 are featured on the set, in favor of traditional album cuts like “In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning,” “You’ll Never Know,” and “More Than You Know” (both recorded in 1959). Mathis’s song choices fostered an affective gentility typically associated with female interpreters, but he was also able to signify his alignment with the male crooning tradition that Cole and Sinatra represented. Understanding this skirting of masculine tropes is essential to appreciating fresh theoretical accounts of the pre-gay liberation era “closet.”

**The Virile Era and the Post-World War II Sexual Closet**

Johnny Mathis does not easily conform to the broad archetypes commonly associated with male gender performances of post-World War II American life such as “rebels,” “organization men,” and “men in gray flannel suits.” These archetypes function as anchors rather than absolutes, which enables us to examine how a public figure such as Mathis can be read against these historical anchors. Elusiveness was Mathis’s strategy for carving out an appropriate gendered public image that complemented the gently romantic tone of his music and provided a marketable image. He had to avoid being too virile and sexualized, lest he appear too “threatening” to white audiences but he had to be convincingly “masculine” in order not overtly to raise suspicion that he was a “sexual pervert,” to use the language of the postwar era.

Mathis was not particularly macho, rebellious, or delinquent in his image or sound; in fact, there was something downright conservative about a black male singer of Mathis’s age crooning popular standards rather than R&B or rock and roll. Pop standards signified romance and an erotic discretion distinguished from the ephemerality and prurience some critics associated with rock and roll material. Mathis lacked the heterosexual family unit and corporate drone image of the “organization man” and was not a war veteran, but, based on album cover art and visual images from press stories of the era, he had a neat, polished, formal look that conformed to the “corporate” look of other crooners. Mathis’s vocation for singing and his somewhat androgynous tenor sound could have signified effeminacy, but his background as an athlete and the press’s framing of him as a teenage idol for women may have balanced out his gender profile. For example, *Ebony* magazine’s first Mathis story, published in December 1957, noted, “He has the dark, glamorous good looks that appeal to women of a wide age range” and pictured him signing autographs exclusively for female fans (“Boy with the Golden Voice” 28, 30). In an accompanying photo Mathis—wearing swimming trunks—somersaults over producers George...
Avakian and Mitch Miller into a pool and the caption notes how he was “a high jump star at San Francisco College” (32). Mathis’s persona borrowed elements from the organization man and femme “types” which technically made him a more elusive and unique male type. Mathis’s persona was subtle and covert compared to more extroverted homosexual figures like pianist Liberace, 1950s pop vocalist Johnnie Ray, and rock and roller Little Richard. This ultimately makes his transgression of racial and sexual norms of the era compelling insofar as the tensions between his visibility as a black man and the invisibility, or transparency, of his gender transgressions created a distinct tension and ambiguity for observers. His pre- “coming out” career exemplifies the allure of the “open secret”; there is something mysterious, unsettled, and unresolved that is core to his aesthetic and persona. His sexual ambiguity and minority racial identity would seemingly contradict his commercial prospects, but his queerness uniquely offset these sexual and racial anxieties. The counter-historical nature of this is best understood through framing Mathis as a queer foundling.

Feeling Around in the Dark: Johnny Mathis as a Proto-historical Foundling

Gay and lesbian historiography traditionally concerns itself with “capturing lost information about past queer lives” and placing “the objects of their study firmly within the realm of the cultural, as articulate—if contingent—historical forms” (Nealon 17). This approach emphasizes an “ethnic model” of gays and lesbians as a discernible group marked by such features as “a self-conscious identity, group solidarity, a literature, a press, and a high level of political activity” (Rubin 17) among other characteristics that inform a historical arc away from invisibility to more modern liberated subjects. Though “ethnic” organizing became a national phenomenon in the 1950s through homophile organizations like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, 1969’s Stonewall riots are the ultimate activist moment that informs mainstream understandings of gays and lesbians as a social minority whose politics lie in liberation (D’Emilio 231–33; Loughery 314–20; McGarry and Wasserman 2–23). “Coming out” and generating visibility in politics, entertainment, and consumer culture are tropes of sexual liberation. The underlying arc of the ethnic model and the visibility paradigm signifies sexual outsiders’ transition from the social margins to the mainstream of American society. Clearly, though, sexual disclosure and burgeoning visibility do not exhaust the myriad ways queer sexual appeals and language existed prior to and during the homophile and liberation eras.

While tracing the increased visibility of gays and lesbians is worthwhile, gay and lesbian historiography is so deeply arched toward pride, visibility, and liberation that it has struggled to accommodate shame, isolation, and other dark or “negative” aspects of queer subjectivities. These “structures of feeling” are integral to the historical experience of queer people but have been difficult for traditional historiographers of gays and lesbians to capture, especially when their objectives have adhered to a trajectory aimed at recovery from stigma, social inclusion, and pride. Heather Love has noted how shame, isolation, and self-hatred are viewed as residues
of a pre-liberated, pre-political past that queers endured. Today they are sources of embarrassment that seem homophobic, retrograde, and depressing subjects to examine within the post-Stonewall paradigm (Love 4). This embarrassment inflects both traditional gay and lesbian historiography and some queer readings of pre-liberation queer culture; notably there is a presentist critical assumption that “we” (as modern queer or queer-friendly readers) have transcended the closet, especially feelings of isolation (Nealon 13). Yet the closet looms as something modern queers have to negotiate, and feelings of social isolation remain even with gains in visibility. The reluctance of artists to present themselves initially as homosexual also remains and embodies concerns voiced by various pre-liberation queer artists.

A queer studies-based counter-historical movement that aims to supplement presumptions within gay/lesbian historiography, and queer theory, has recently begun to historicize and in some instances theorize sexual shame, ambivalence toward sexual identity, and inarticulate utterances of homosexuality typically relegated to a distant past. This article draws its critical energies from three key works in queer studies—Love’s *Feeling Backward*, Christopher Nealon’s *Foundlings*, and Scott Herring’s *Queering the Underworld*—that feature a counter-historical emphasis which diverts from the ethnic model and pride. I employ these literary works because their readings redefine queer history by arguing for attention to how shame and non-identitarianism reveal much about pre-modern homosexuality and contemporary understandings of the closet, including the utility of open secrets. Mathis is part of a generation that authored many modern significations of queerness. Rather than entering into an established culture, he and other artists developed a cache of gestures that might seem apolitical to modern, post-liberation audiences but represent a queer culture-making in process. This trajectory is not organized around an explicit political end or sexual disclosure. Instead it was a process, an experiment in imagery and persona. The archive Mathis presents is, to borrow from Nealon, proto-historical—a history of homosexuality traceable through an inarticulate homosexuality evident among the pre-liberation artists Nealon examines, “in which their key stylistic gestures, choices of genre, and ideological frames all point to an inaccessible future, in which the inarticulate desires that mobilize them will find some ‘hermeneutic friend’ beyond the historical horizon of their unintelligibility to themselves” (23).

The article is specifically interested in reading the sense of what felt possible for Mathis as a queer black man living in an era notable for heightened homophobia and racism, and how contemporary racial and sexual struggles are inseparable from the path he walked. Embedded in his vocal persona, press interviews, and visual imagery is a supple and legible vocabulary of unnoticed sensory experiences (Nealon 14) notable for several elements.

Though Mathis was not an overtly virile singer, compared to many crooners, his unimposing persona and vulnerable visual image made him a safe and acceptable mediator of romantic music for heterosexual listeners. This does not foreclose his resonance with queer listeners but denotes how his sound and persona were not inherently molded to appeal to a singular audience. There was no gay target audience,
to use contemporary parlance. His effete vocal style and lack of publicized heterosexual relationships might have raised concerns about his sexuality were it not for a certain balance he achieved. Race is integral to this, since, as a prominent black entertainer of the mid-1950s, he had to present his sexuality in a way that was appropriately subdued for a cultural role model. He could be asexual but not gay, heterosexual but not overly salacious. This balance is inseparable from the commercial demands for black male singers to present to white audiences, particularly young female audiences, a sexually palatable image that was accessible through (presumed) heterosexual lyrics and traditional pop vocal performance conventions, but not too sexualized. Mathis's queerness is an unspoken, inarticulate force that enables him to bend to the will of the racial climate and simultaneously perform a rendition of sexuality on the cusp of heterosexual codes and something "other." The implicit silence seems infused with some psychic absorption of social shame, a well-honed survival instinct, and also speaks to ambivalence about sexuality as a marketable identity which, as I discuss later, Mathis has declared in the present. The slippery nature of this dance between identities could easily be subsumed under a strictly racial progress narrative or re-appropriated as a form of subversive gay genius, but my reading tells a more intricate narrative.

I examine key moments when revelation and repression are present and indicative of both a kind of knowing sense of ambiguity and a careful professional discretion. Mathis indirectly articulates a sense of gender nonconformity in his vocal style, his lack of female partners, and the archive I examine—his visual image and self-representation in interviews. He is careful but never fully repressed. His early career is a story of a "foundling" living in a proto-historical moment, feeling around in the dark, uncertain of the exact consequences of his inarticulate sexual subjectivity but still leaving a rhetorically rich site of critical speculation.

Infinite possibilities for queer recognition and signification by other gay men are discernible through visual representations of Mathis. One of the most striking photos in the gay and lesbian historical survey *Becoming Visible* is a black and white photo of a black man dressed in a white v-neck blouse and a skirt with a pearl necklace and bouffant wig from the collection of David Hibbert entitled "David and Johnny, 1960s." To the right of him is a poster of Johnny Mathis sitting with his arms crossed above his head—the album cover from his 1961 LP *I'll Buy You a Star*—above the caption "JOHNNY MATHIS EXCLUSIVELY ON COLUMBIA RECORDS" (McGarry and Wasserman 79).

This singular image suggests Mathis’s possible "idol" status among sexual and gender transgressors of the period in a manner that parallels Nealon’s assertion that recognition and signification were important pre-liberation threads for gay culture. It is telling that David was juxtaposed with a Mathis album cover as his covers perform a unique sexual function. Several of Mathis’s album covers from 1957–66 are illustrations rather than photos, which depict him as a towering figure with sculpted features resembling pulp novel imagery and comic book superheroes. For example, 1959’s *Heavenly* (see Figure 1) and 1963’s *Johnny* (see Figure 2) both feature paintings
of Mathis by Ralph Cowan, identified in *Heavenly*’s liner notes as a Norfolk, Virginia-based “personal friend of Johnny’s.” On *Heavenly* there is an inset painting, framed in black, of Mathis dressed in a white dress shirt and slacks, barefoot, holding a folded sheet of paper in his left hand. He is standing in the foreground with a swirl of clouds behind him in the background. *Johnny* features a painting of his head. Mathis, who sports a slick pompadour with a strand of hair touching his forehead, peers outward from a face with subtle accents that highlight his sculpted features.

Several of his Mercury albums also feature paintings of Mathis in various guises. Given Mathis’s elusive persona it is unsurprising that the covers depict him as a malleable figure who can adopt multiple personae. The images include: a contemplative Mathis depicted in profile on *This is Love*; a haunting photo of

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**Figure 1** 1959’s *Heavenly* album (Columbia) renders Mathis as a towering figure

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**Figure 2** The sculpted cover of 1963’s *Johnny* (Columbia) depicts Mathis as a matinee idol
Mathis as a kind of *noir*-like detective dressed in a white overcoat with an upturned collar in front of a hazy blue fog on 1963’s *Tender is the Night*; and Mathis as a conquistador draped in a black bolero jacket in front of three charging horses on *Olé* (see Figure 3). The most consistent visual theme is a presentation of Mathis as a contemporary “dandy”—stylish, sensitive, and introspective. For example, 1964’s *The Wonderful World of Make Believe* (see Figure 4) is an LP centered on fantasy-oriented songs such as “Shangri-La” and “When You Wish upon a Star” (from *Pinocchio*). On the cover Mathis is dressed in a powder-blue v-neck sweater in front of a sky-blue backdrop posed invitingly with his arms spread open and a gleeful facial expression. The softness of Mathis’s features, his laid-back body language, and his facial poses convey a tenderness and gentility that signify a persona different from
rebellious and macho archetypes without overtly conveying any singular idea about his sexuality. These sample images could easily be interpreted as sexually benign images, but they arguably sexualize Mathis as a heartthrob. The gender address of these images is fascinating in its sexual ambiguity. He could easily appear to be a crooner idol for female audiences but the persistent dandy imagery could also be an erotic and cultural signifier to male audiences. The images refuse to privilege a singular sexual interpretation and provide viewers with a smorgasbord of motifs to ponder, which underscores the broad accessibility fundamental to Mathis’s public image.

As for many “crooners,” Mathis’s album covers depicted him primarily as a solitary figure. Mathis was exclusively pictured alone on his covers until the 1978 release of the duet album *That’s What Friends Are For* with Deniece Williams (see Figure 5). The cover featured a smiling Williams and Mathis with their heads touching, Mathis’s right arm straddling Williams’s shoulders, and his hand cupping her thumb. Though their pose is benign rather than lascivious, and the *Friends* moniker above them suggests a platonic relationship, it’s one of the only heterosexually coded corporate images of Mathis. Unlike Tony Bennett, Robert Goulet, Jack Jones, Frank Sinatra, and Andy Williams, Mathis was not married or associated with a longtime romantic partner, nor was he a father. These absences imbued his image with a unique sexual ambiguity. The illusion of sexual availability is a common tactic for pop music idols, and the implication of availability pervades Mathis’s image, but there is also no explicit gender address. Audiences could more readily project a sexual identity onto Mathis’s image than his peers since he was unencumbered by public romantic relationships.

Mathis’s sexuality operated in concert with his identity as an African American in a socially segregated nation. Marlon Ross’s notion of a “crossover dynamic” among queer people is useful for understanding Mathis’s balance because it is an

![Figure 5](image_url) Mathis’s 1978 duet album (Columbia) is one of his few heterosexually coded visual images
anti-essentialist argument that recognizes how queer sexuality operates in concert with other elements of personal identity. First, Ross argues that queers represent every imaginable cultural group and bring this traditional cultural orientation with them when they enter into queer culture. Second, he notes how, for many queers, queer cultural affiliation is often secondary (always succeeding acculturation in some other racial, ethnic, religious group) and invisible. Such notions recognize queer complexity and suggest that a wide range of nuances inform the way queer people negotiate and express their identities. The “crossover dynamic” enables us to acknowledge the potential value of queer resistive strategies rooted in visibility. The dynamic also suggests that such approaches do not exhaust the possibilities of what strategies comprise progressive or useful representations of queer cultural history. Because queer communities resist essentialism there is no uniform or ideal vision of what defines justice and progress to queer historic images, which provides room for a vast range of representations (Ross, “Some Glances” 502).

For example, among many “queers of color” and postcolonial queer men, the concept of a self-conscious, “out” queer identity operates differently from the late ’60s American “coming out” paradigm. Scholarship on Chicano and Filipino queer men has addressed similar issues of cultural relativity and sexual identity.\(^4\) African-American gays and lesbians’ explicitly racialized sexuality has never been “normal” in US mainstream culture and their activism is part of a broad racial struggle to present notions of African-American intimacy and sexuality that counter colonially constructed sexual pathologies.\(^5\) The next section explores the strategies Mathis employed to gain commercial favor in the transitional period of the mid-to-late 1950s. Mathis had to negotiate carefully his queer sexuality and the “racial threat” presented by a black man singing romantic songs to white audiences in the 1950s. He projected an earnest, non-threatening approach to singing and self-presentation which required him to negotiate sexual and racial closets fostered by historic prejudices. His strategy reflects the complex historic realities of his era and what was probably an unnerving relationship to mainstream notions of racial and sexual “normalcy.”

**Who’s Johnny? Johnny Mathis’s Balancing Act**

As an African-American pop singer, and a homosexual, with a largely white following, Johnny Mathis had a precarious balancing act to maintain in the 1950s. Mathis had to finesse his way around potentially troublesome racial and sexual terrain to appease his audiences and maintain his identity. Yet, in order to be accepted by black music audiences he, or someone, had to assert his connection to black culture. For the sake of survival Mathis sculpted his public presentation of his sexuality by avoiding aggressively heterosexual behavior or overtly homosexual gestures. This manipulation filtered through his recordings, performances, and public persona. The black popular press was a central source for black entertainers of Mathis’s generation to display their personae and connect with black audiences and in “Authenticating Johnny” below I examine *Ebony* magazine’s Mathis coverage. I emphasize its depiction of Mathis in
relation to the African-American politics of cultural respectability and the sexually elusive subtextual currents that gradually arise in the magazine’s coverage of the singer. “Mathis on Marriage, Romance, and Sex” then explores the elusive current by examining his thinly veiled comments regarding marriage, romance, and sex in several publications. Finally, “Mathis and the Closet” addresses the role of context in understanding Mathis’s negotiation of personal identity and the more recent tendency of openly gay and lesbian artists to employ their sexual identity in public and political terms.

**Authenticate Johnny**

*Ebony* magazine has been an arbiter of African-American community standards since its 1945 founding and has consistently engaged in rhetorical gestures that highlight Mathis’s conformity to notions of black “progress” by emphasizing aspects of his life which affirm a traditionally masculine image of heteronormativity. Mathis, who came out in 1982, was the subject of *Ebony* cover stories in 1956, 1965, and 1976. A close reading of these stories reveals several efforts to define Mathis within black heteronormative conventions. Mathis gamely played along but gradually asserted his queer identity in subtle ways that grew more prominent in the 1970s.

*Ebony* self-consciously highlighted Mathis’s “authentic” blackness by portraying him as a black role model who exemplified the social, economic, and sexual ideals of respectability. Respectability, particularly sexual respectability, has endured as a trope of African-American consciousness, beginning with late 19th-/early 20th-century “racial uplift” ideology, which emphasized “social purity, thrift, chastity, and the patriarchal family” (Gaines; Higginbotham 185–229). A consistent emphasis on the nuclear family lives of black celebrities in black magazines like *Ebony* and the emergence of masculinist Black Nationalist politics of the 1960s, focused on reproducing the black family and maintaining separate gender roles as “cultural values,” were prominent elements of black cultural thought that emerged during Mathis’s career (Thomas). The culmination of these examples is the expectation of heteronormativity as a social norm for black public figures. Rhonda Williams addresses this pressure on black gays and lesbians, noting how, “[w]hether viewed as the products of broken families or betrayers of family life together, black gays and lesbians are a potential anathema to straight African Americans whose resistance to racist narratives inspires them to ‘clean up’ images of black sexuality.” A substantial national history of sexual exploitation and suspicion toward black bodies and the pressure for families to mold future citizens informs many nationalist notions of families as “the sanctioned site for the reproduction of authentic national racial ethnic culture” and efforts to “sanitize and normalize popular perceptions of black sexuality” away from the “hypersexuality, promiscuity, and danger” signified by black queerness (Williams 144).

The politicized currents of black heteronormativity, as a political project played out in cultural forms, operated complexly in *Ebony’s* reportage. *Ebony’s* articles simultaneously reified Mathis’s presumed heterosexuality and suggested he was
queer by presenting him as incomplete and underdeveloped because he was unmarried. A reading of Mathis's comments to the magazine reveals a discernible sexual ambiguity in Mathis, who both navigated the pressure to be sexually normative and signified sexual difference to attentive readers. In the mid-1960s Mathis subtly alluded to his distance from traditional heterosexual romance and later acknowledged his homosexuality with little consequence. Black cultural tolerance for Mathis's “open secret” in the 1950s–70s opened a space for future “queer-vague” or sexually ambiguous African-American singers such as Michael Jackson, Prince, and Vandross, whose perceived “queerness” has generated controversy but never deterred their ultimate cultural acceptance among black audiences. Mathis tested the waters and floated onward without losing his audience.

_Ebony_ aimed to authenticate Mathis to black audiences by positing him as a role model. The authenticating strategy emerged during a period of heightened political investment in assimilation and acceptance among blacks. As previously mentioned, two of the most prominent '50s era black male singers were Billy Eckstine and Nat “King” Cole. Throughout the 1950s _Ebony_ published numerous feature stories on Cole, Eckstine, and Mathis. The stories are of comparative interest for understanding Mathis because _Ebony_ focused on Cole's and Eckstine's interior lives, including their spouses, children, friends, and home lives. Such stories defined them as financially successful and “traditional” family men making an obvious “contribution” to black culture—raising strong black families. The nuclear family was seen as an anchor against social pressures like racism and as a source of moral training and strength, so the representation of black participation in such families became imbued with iconic significance for the politics of respectability. In contrast _Ebony_’s coverage of Mathis almost suggested that he had no interests or acquaintances outside his career and his parents. Despite Mathis’s virtually absent sexual self, _Ebony_ subtly used gender to assert Mathis’s connections to black life. Through careful choices _Ebony_ assured readers that Mathis conformed to 1950s notions of “manhood”—and focused on his financial independence, competitive athletic background, and close immediate family ties.

_Ebony_’s framing of gender in the text and photos of their Mathis articles vacillated between the presentation of Mathis as a traditional heterosexual man and images that signified liminality. _Ebony_’s stories marked him as potentially queer, because he was young, style-conscious, artistic, and, most importantly, unmarried—all potential signs of queerness in '50s America. There were numerous subtle signifiers in the written text and photos that suggested his gender deviance. For example, the December 1957 Mathis story featured a photo of producer Mitch Miller chatting with several black-suited white male executive-types and Mathis standing behind Miller drinking from a cup. The caption reads, “At recording session, Johnny sips coffee while bearded Mitch Miller and recording executives talk shop” (“Boy with the Golden Voice” 28, 30, 32). The caption juxtaposed Mathis, who is black, young, and a singer, with the ostensibly “serious” male executives who were white, middle-aged business people. While the male executives talked shop, Mathis drank coffee, deferred, and was a non-participant. “Talking shop” typically describes a male conversational
ritual about business or sports and usually excludes women. Mathis’s physical separation positioned him as an outsider to the masculine communication which surrounded him. The same article ended with Mathis virtually proclaiming himself as the proverbial “mama’s boy” when he said, “I wanted to spend Christmas at home with my family. I promised Mama I’d be home for Christmas” (“Boy with the Golden Voice” 28).

The magazine offset these potential queer signifiers by emphasizing masculine signifiers such as Mathis’s financial success and athletic past. Because Mathis emerged in both a virile era and during the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, *Ebony* predictably emphasized his identity as a cultural role model. Unspoken assumptions that black performers were cultural role models formed a unique expectation that heightened pressure for Mathis to appear “normal” and distinguished him from his white peers of the era. *Ebony* also focused on his budding manhood, especially his financial and managerial independence from the controlling Noga, and, as I discuss below, simultaneously questioned his bachelor status.

A March 1965 story on Mathis’s split from Noga described him as “often shy, quiet and sometimes child-like” which infantilized and even feminized him (Robinson, “Johnny Mathis: Millionaire” 100). The story also contrasted Mathis with the domineering Noga and noted, “Once early in his career when Mathis wore a wristwatch which Mrs. Noga did not feel was masculine enough in its design, she did not bite her tongue in telling him so; Mathis did not bite his in reply. ‘You can say what you want to,’ he retorted, ‘but it’s my watch’” (Robinson 100). The wristwatch incident performed several functions: it showed Noga’s concern over Mathis’s image, especially in terms of gender; it showed Mathis’s casual attitude about his choices; and it also showed that Mathis could defend himself, as any “man” should.

*Ebony*’s March 1976 follow-up article went further in its focus on Mathis’s post-Noga career. The article recounted his managerial lawsuit against Noga and found him owning up to his subordinated history under Noga, “We came to a point in our relationship where I was bored and tired of living with someone else....I was a man now; when she found me I was a boy. I had also decided that I wanted a choice in matters that pertained to my career and personal life. I didn’t have a choice when I was with Helen” (“Johnny Mathis” 48). This was a loaded series of statements because it almost implied a romantic relationship and/or mother-son relationship. Perhaps more importantly it reiterated the article’s thesis that he was now, finally at 40, a “man.” Neither Mathis nor the article’s author ever explored what the specific personal and career issues he was referring to were, but there was a slight suggestion of a queer subtext that some force was preventing his full exploration of a self.

Mathis complemented *Ebony*’s careful deflections from his queer signifiers through his resistance to revealing personal information. Though it is arguable what constitutes “personal” information, social, sexual, and familial relationships generally constitute contemporary notions of the personal. Mathis has always been reluctant to claim the identity of a “performer,” which allowed him to avoid taking personal risks. Though he was primarily a romantic balladeer he resisted the identification and did
not identify as a particularly romantic person. Mathis was selling the idea of romance rather than the experience, perhaps because his desire likely existed on the periphery of the romantic ideals of his era. The longing and unrequited affections he sang of were palpable but existed on the cusp between the generically accessible and personal. Thus, the audience could swoon to Mathis without necessarily engaging with the notion that he had a clear sexual identity. Such ambiguity gave him a broad appeal and accessibility safe for audiences of multiple racial backgrounds and sexual orientations. He was a multicultural conduit of his audiences’ fantasies who never overpowered the flow of their fantasies with his personal desires. That he frequently chose to sing romantic material with intentionally fantastical and surreal conceptions of love, such as the material he sang on 1964’s *The Wonderful World of Make Believe*, complemented his broadly accessible approach.

Mathis on Marriage, Romance, and Sex

During the 1960s when sexual behavior made significant shifts, reflected in rock and roll’s cultural impact, Mathis became more explicit in his cynicism toward romance and defensive of his bachelorhood. As with many stars of his era, Mathis’s representatives occasionally hired young women to pose as escorts lest Mathis appear as a conspicuous eternal bachelor in the post-virile era. For example, the March 1965 *Ebony* article noted model Beverly Gillohm’s then $40,000 lawsuit against Mathis for not being fully paid for an appearance. Gillohm was hired to accompany Mathis at the Seattle World’s Fair for photo ops and, according to Mathis:

> I did none of the foolish things people in my profession would do by trying to court affection. I thought people would want me to go to the World’s Fair and be photographed with a pretty girl. I never asked anything of Beverly that wasn’t a mutual agreement between both of us. She was angry that this association didn’t last longer. I found out she wasn’t the girl for me. But my intentions were very honorable. (Robinson, “Johnny Mathis: Millionaire” 102)

Mathis vaguely alluded to pressure from some force outside himself to appear with a woman for a photo op, illustrating the sex/gender expectations of the time. His tone was quite perfunctory; there is nothing leering about his comment or remotely indicative of an interest beyond the “job,” despite the fact that Gillohm ostensibly represented a heterosexual beauty ideal as a model. By declaring that Gillohm was not his type Mathis made a somewhat honest statement allowing him to be sincere without disclosing his sexual orientation.

The same article noted a Las Vegas altercation where a man who perceived Mathis to be arguing with his wife assaulted him. Rather than retaliating, Mathis left town, though he was supposed to perform. The Vegas incident left Mathis sounding either like a peacekeeper or a coward. The article quickly followed this moment of “weak” behavior with a discussion of Mathis’s romantic future with the “opposite” sex, noting, “Johnny maintains that he still envisions a future life with at least one
of its members. He is not, however, rushing the moment of matrimony” (Robinson, “Johnny Mathis: Millionaire” 102). The sequencing seemed to reassure readers that, despite Mathis’s dismissive attitude toward Gillohm and his “soft” nature, he was still a traditional man, thus heterosexual. However Mathis’s discussion of his marriage plans was functional and detached: “Of course I’m going to get married. But when it happens, I’ll probably just meet somebody and that will be it” (Robinson, “Johnny Mathis: Millionaire” 102). These words did not resemble those of an impassioned heterosexual desirous of marriage, but did not overtly mark him as queer. Such ambiguity was a recurring aspect of his public comments during this era. The fact that Mathis said “Of course” indicated the taken-for-granted nature of marriage at the time. It was also notable that Mathis said “somebody” not a woman or girl. He continued in a more cynical vein, “I don’t think you can expect too much out of marriage. Just wait and enjoy the surprise of marriage. My salvation as far as marriage is concerned is I’ve just been too busy” (Robinson, “Johnny Mathis: Millionaire” 102, emphasis added). Mathis seemed to be having a candid internal dialogue in which he weighed the socially constructed joys of marriage with his personal doubts about it. His reference to work as “salvation” from marriage pressure was a blunt admission that suggested his lack of interest in the union was more of a personal preference than an overt political statement. Again, Mathis’s overall tone disdained conformity with a casual, rather than declarative candor, which was fundamental to his negotiation of sexuality.

During the mid-to-late 1970s in press interviews Mathis disowned any semblance of himself as a romantic person and questioned the pursuit of love and romance. A June 1974 interview reports the following: “I think love chose me,’ he says. ‘I didn’t choose it. It just happened. I don’t know why I ended up being the love song singer’” (Renee 30). The article also noted, “His love life was traumatic, moving from the ridiculous to the sublime—full of fantasy. ‘I’ve finally gotten over all of my fantasies,’ he says, ‘like falling in love, being spurned, and of course getting revenge and not seeing your lover as miserable as you’” (Renee 31).

In an unusually forthright 1976 interview with the gay and lesbian-themed magazine The Advocate Mathis expressed some sexually progressive, even risqué perspectives and acknowledged his connection to gay culture without explicitly stating his sexual identity. For example, he identified as a regular reader of the magazine—a highly unusual “admission” for a presumed straight male pop singer in the 1970s—and acknowledged having a sex life, noting the joy of being able to “seduce to your own music. I’ve balled a lot of times to my own music” (Stone 35–36). This is clearly not the Mathis of the 1950s. The article invoked Mathis’s careful negotiations and defined him as someone who “wouldn’t be caught dead marching in the Christopher Street parade” but privately contributed to the L.A. Gay Community Services Center. Mathis casually referred to his financial contributions as a response to the stigmas attached to venereal diseases during his childhood, particularly in an era of cohabitation and noted, “In this day and age we don’t need that stigma anymore” (Stone 35–36).
Toward the interview’s end, when pressed to address “coming out,” he referred to it as “very difficult...the most difficult thing in the world,” but said “I wouldn’t come out in any publication and say that I was anything, because it would certainly give the impression that I was really strong, strong, strong this way or that, and I’m not.” Interestingly, when asked what would happen if a phalanx of celebrities came out, he viewed it as “terrible,” “awful” because “Everyone knows who’s gay. It’s almost redundant” followed by what the interviewer brackets as a “wicked laugh.” This quotation epitomizes the ethos underlying Mathis’s sexual elusiveness, a belief that artists may not feel obliged to “come out” if they sense that their audiences are not, in fact, closeting them. The interview concluded with Mathis dismissing the investment in celebrities “coming out” because of its potential ramifications for an individual’s family and friends and the overwhelming singularity gay identity imposes. Mathis noted his pride in his human relationships, his family, and “my contributions to the gay liberation movement” but was leery of an overt political banner because “it’s all these things that have to make up your life” (Stone 35–36).

Mathis’s holistic view of identity is important here because he includes sexuality as merely one dimension of life alongside friendships and family but does not privilege it as the most salient part of his identity. This is also relevant to his career since in 1976 a highly politicized sexuality might have overwhelmed audiences’ engagement with Mathis the crooner. Mathis is not an apologist for homophobia and clearly not “apolitical.” Instead he responds to homophobia by acknowledging how silence and invisibility have rendered sexual disclosure as overwhelming to artists’ public images. His refusal is unusual in the way it refutes the presumption that sexual identity can operate as the essence of an individual’s personae and moral character. This is a presumption Michel Foucault has tied to the 19th century, wherein “homosexual became a personage” and grew to be perceived by social scientists as “a species” (43). One way the “species” has attempted to resist medicalization is through authoring “reverse discourses” that articulate identity and selfhood. It is crucial to understand this tactic complexly as sexuality, race, and other social contexts inform these articulative gestures.

Mathis’s semiotic versatility makes him difficult to comprehend through one lens since his chameleon nature challenges what we think we know about race, sexuality, and the pre-liberation era. This quality speaks directly to Herring’s critical enterprise in Queering the Underworld of questioning the tropes of sexual knowledge. The key parallel with his study of slumming literatures is the way Mathis’s rhetoric “muddle[s] what ‘normal’ society likes to think it knows about ‘perverse’ bodies” (16). Arguably, embedded in Mathis’s performances of race and sexuality are anxieties regarding how an overtly sexualized identity would hinder his commercial appeal and its ability to essentialize him, which makes his “distancing mechanisms” (Herring 14) significant. The singer’s anti-identitarianism suggests an awareness of how unrevealing knowledge of his sexuality is; there is no obvious “politics” or clear “community” he is obligated to embrace. His initial refusal to identify and ongoing resistance to employing his sexuality as a niche means audiences have to “remystify” their understanding of his
performances and recordings (Herring 17). Not only are they uncertain of whom he is addressing but they may also have to reconsider whether this information is essential for their enjoyment.

For Mathis it is more important to be understood as he originally presented himself and retain an air of mystery than to reveal one element and enable it to define him. At the outset of his career he appeased white audiences by presenting himself as a docile crooner rather than a more “threatening” R&B or rock and roll type. Carefully presenting an anodyne sexuality provided him with wide audience access and allowed him to manage his public sexuality in a manner that disallowed perceptions of him “as sexual” and inhibited his reducibility to either a “gay” or a “straight” singer. His stated antipathy toward coming out, low-key “activism,” and framing of sexual relationships as a dimension rather than an essence are covert subversions of stereotypes towards African Americans as hypersexual and gays as an interchangeable monolith. Mathis may appear to have compromised his sound and image, but he has refashioned these seeming compromises into a uniquely individualistic ethos rooted in a savvy understanding of sexual ambiguity.

A 1978 interview conducted on the heels of his popular Deniece Williams duet, “Too Much, Too Little, Too Late,” was even more revealing of Mathis’s romantic cynicism and hinted at a burgeoning openness about his sexuality (Windeler). The article noted his charitable contributions to the Los Angeles YMCA and L.A. Health Clinic for Gay People (renamed from the L.A. Community Services Center), about which he commented, “It’s where you go to get your VD shots. It’s a great thing for young people—not just gays—who are afraid to go to their parents.” Pictured below this, Mathis plays pool with a muscular, younger white man whom the caption identifies as Wayne Safine, his personal assistant. The juxtaposition of Mathis’s charitable giving to gay iconic spaces and the peculiar photo of him and his assistant could easily tip readers off that Mathis’s real life sharply contrasted with his stage persona. Such ironies were elucidated when the article noted: “As for romance, ‘I’d rather sing about it,’ Mathis says. ‘I’m as romantically inclined as anyone, but I’ve never had a relationship that’s lasted longer than a few months....The situation I’m most comfortable in is single and single-minded. Marriage is sharing. I want to do exactly what I want’” (Windeler).

There was a subtext of choice, freedom, and even promiscuity that belied the image Mathis initially established through song without overtly declaring anything about his orientation. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and through the early 1980s Mathis adopted the single-minded philosophy. In another 1978 interview he declared, “I like to spend a great deal of time by myself. I want to be alone to balance off the rest of my life, where I have to be in the company of someone all the time” (Shindler 69, 71). In the authorized biography Johnnie, Mathis discussed his love of aloneness and privacy, was adamant that his career came first, and said his life revolved around family, home, cooking, and golf (Jasper 151–52). More recently, in an October 2002 interview, the interviewer noted that Mathis was homosexual but, “[l]ike a proper Victorian, he would probably like to be known as a ‘confirmed bachelor’ and leave it at
that” and quoted Mathis’s belief that “‘Music is what I do best, so that’s what I should espouse. I will leave other causes to people whose talent is making speeches’” (Shelden 17). The interesting aspect of Mathis’s quotation is the near-defensive, seemingly outdated implication that one would publicly discuss homosexuality only as a radical, political topic rather than a mere personal reality. Mathis seemed to be reiterating the “open secret” logic he identified in the 1976 interview and subtly interrogating the presumption of a uniform way to be openly gay.

For the sake of posterity it is crucial to reiterate that Mathis was part of a generation of performers for whom privacy and discretion were hallmarks of savvy queer entertainers, such as Liberace. Mathis also emerged at a time when African Americans were arguably more apt to treat gender and sexual deviance among performers as “open secrets” that did not require a spectacular articulation; the perception spoke for itself. This silence is less a sacrifice than a way for black performers, already socially “marked” by race, to have some modicum of privacy and freedom from the society’s tendency to essentialize homosexually oriented performers as “gay.” A new generation of black androgynous performers, such as Prince, emerged in the 1979–84 era and ushered in sexually androgynous performers whom black music audiences broadly accepted. However, the late 1980s/early 1990s assertion of masculinist hip-hop culture has turned black hypermasculinity into a more palatable commodity fetish. The industrial acceptance of hypermasculine black expression has dominated contemporary black radio, video channels, and record label rosters since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Such narrow notions of black masculinity threatened to erase black queer male expression from popular culture except in comic ridicule and moral scapegoating. They also marginalized gender complexity from the black public sphere in the visible and influential forum of popular music. If Mathis and those he inspired in the ’70s through the early ’90s represented the end of an era of casual tolerance and broad commercial marketability for sexually elusive black performers, one wonders how black queer performers could find a place in contemporary black popular gender economies. In this respect Vandross’s reluctance to “come out” is understandable since he had to appeal to his core audience and promotional outlets willing to play his singles and broadcast his videos within the milieu of contemporary hip-hop-influenced R&B.

**Mathis and the Closet**

In the liner notes for *The Music of Johnny Mathis*, numerous pages feature slender columns that address Mathis’s experiences as an athlete, stage singer/performer, and master chef (17–25, 37–45, 51–53). These personal highlights are interesting because they reveal much about Mathis without ever alluding to his life beyond his career and hobbies. From the descriptions of these seemingly benign activities we can extract that Mathis preferred his personal distance to maintain his professional illusion, a strategy surely tied to the era of his public commercial emergence. Though Mathis noted sexual relationships with men in a 1982 *US* magazine interview, he has never overtly aligned himself with any major gay political or cultural movement, though perhaps
his declaration of homosexuality was enough (Petrucelli 58–60). A 1993 interview illuminated Mathis’s demeanor:

Campy around his chums but publicly shy, Mr. Mathis has always been evasive about personal matters. Queried about his love life by People magazine in 1978, he responded: “I’d rather sing about it. I’m as romantically inclined as anyone. But I’ve never had a relationship that’s lasted longer than a few months.” When US magazine revealed his homosexuality in the early 80’s (he says he was quoted off the record), it barely caused a ripple; apparently few people had doubted it or even cared. But since then he has barred all questions about his sexuality, breaking that barrier only inadvertently. “I was always embarrassed by being called a romantic singer,” he admits. “You spend all your time being a man, and then they put you in this romantic category. It bothered me when I was a kid. But you go through it, and then you accept what people perceive you to be” (Gavin 36).

Rather than simply branding Mathis as “closeted,” it is important to consider the 1950s context of his origins. His potential to be seen as a sexual and cultural threat to white female audience members, his potential alienation from black music audiences had he declared his homosexuality, and the subtle “queer” indicators he projected had to be managed to survive the racial and sexual pressures framing the late 1950s–late 1960s commercial music industry. Rock-era crooners were mainstays of the adult-targeted albums market and easy listening radio. Indulging in activism could have stalled Mathis’s commercial momentum and alienated his audience. The momentum he achieved during his strongest commercial period, 1957–63, tapered off in the 1970s, though he scored occasional hits through the early ’80s. Mathis is now primarily a concert performer who only occasionally releases albums. Commercially Mathis has little to lose by aligning himself more overtly with sexual politics or discussing his sexuality, but his reluctance seems less about the silence, dishonesty, and apoliticism of “the closet” than a discreet personality and an enduring commitment to a tradition of unspoken but palpable “knowledge” that circulates among queer performers and their audiences. Mathis publicly declared his sexuality and retreated from restating it as an identity; such an approach encompasses the persuasion of signification over the literal declarative statement. Even if Mathis never identified as gay, many listeners probably presumed and accepted that he was and it failed to disrupt their engagement. Since his declaration had no obvious sales impact (negatively or positively) it is clear that many listeners have had a willing and enduring love affair with a homosexually oriented performer, a notion that challenges perceptions of the closet as a source of either repression or empowerment.

Open Secrets in the 21st Century

In the Out magazine story, Mika states, “Anyone can label me, but I’m not willing to label myself. Does it limit the way that I live my life? No. I still do whatever I want. Nothing like that can be a business decision” (Breen 49). Mika’s refusal of labels seems neither homophobic nor dishonest. He is critiquing the way a “gay singer” tag can lead audiences to essentialize artists, overshadow appreciation of music, and constrain
musicians’ explorations beyond their initial identities. In such instances identity can become more of constraint than a liberating force. For example, 1970s British punk-rock artist Tom Robinson—singer of the anthemic 1978 single “Glad to Be Gay”—shocked many when the gay-identified singer announced his relationship with a woman and the birth of a son (George-Warren and Romanowski 828). He did so without disclaiming his queer identity and his support of gay rights.

Desire defines sexual identity more than sexual activist politics and the echoes of inarticulate desire come in diverse forms including the visual, experiential, and musical language of elusiveness Mathis emitted. Johnny Mathis played the role of sexually elusive crooner and black role model in an era when this was a commercially and politically savvy approach. As he settled into his career—and perhaps his sexuality—he grew more personal and revealing about his perceptions. His off-the-record “coming out” was a confirmation for those who had followed his career closely and detected something “different.” For those unaware it may have been only a mild shock, but its impact on how he presented himself and how he was understood seems minimal. Mathis’s integrity and his adherence to his sense of values are evident in his comments on marriage and sex as well as his charitable contributions. These gestures were unusual for a pop crooner of the era without a formal/declared sexual identity or a homophobic distance from it either.

Mathis’s negotiation may well represent a strategy inaccessible to a new generation of singers who face a press and a blogosphere averse toward “open secrets” and “glass closets.” The singer’s career can hopefully motivate more critical attention to the rich contours of open secrets. What is unspoken and inarticulate is not always ideal fare for traditional identity politics or historiography but offers a vivid textural subjectivity to historical understandings of queerness. Tension, allure, and mystery are central to what compels and fascinates audiences about cultural figures. They also are key for artists’ abilities to experiment and transform their art and personae. The tragedy of Vandross’s loss is both the sanitization of his sexuality and the reduction of him to a “closeted” figure. As Johnny Mathis demonstrated—from 1956 to 1982—the cultural vocabulary of sexuality must go beyond stigma and policing so that it speaks to a range of experiences mediated by various elements of social identity, political climate, and artistic medium.

Notes
The author has made every effort to seek permission for use of the artwork featured in this article.


[2] Marlon Ross notes how among many African-American queers there is “not a binary of secrecy versus revelation” but rather “a continuum of knowledge that persists at various levels according to the kin and friendship relations within the community. Although sometimes imprecisely referred to as an ‘open secret,’ such attitudes express instead a strong sense that it is impossible not to know something so obvious among those who know you well enough.
In such a context, to announce one's attraction by coming out would not necessarily indicate a progress in sexual identity, and it would not necessarily change one's identity from closeted to liberated as conceptualized in the dominant closet narrative (“Beyond the Closet” 180).

Michael Kimmel (223–58), discusses ’50s masculine types including delinquents, deviants, “men in gray flannel suits,” and “organization men.” Various scholars have addressed ’50s-era anxieties about male effeminacy including Vito Russo’s analyses of the films Tea and Sympathy and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (113–15). Julia Grant traces maternal anxieties about homosexual sons during the ’50s in “A Thought a Mother Can Hardly Face.”

Two relevant discussions of ethnicity and the limits of “the closet” are Tomás Almaguer’s “Chicano Men” and Martin F. Manalansan IV’s “Searching for Community.”

Roderick A. Ferguson’s “queer of color analysis” is an intersectional paradigm that addresses social constructions of African-American culture and sexualities as existing outside the “boundaries of gender propriety and sexual normativity,” within the “genealogy of liberal, capitalist economic and social formations” (2).

In Nelson George’s discussion of black commercial assimilation strategies in 1980s pop music he noted that, despite Jackson’s “disquieting androgyny” and “alarmingly unblack, unmasculine figure,” he was “the most popular black man in America”; regarding Prince he noted, “No black performer since Little Richard had toyed with the heterosexual sensibilities of black America so brazenly” (174). Critic Dave Marsh discusses the controversies surrounding Jackson’s sexuality and a bizarre 5 September 1984 Los Angeles press conference where Jackson’s manager read a press release stating Jackson’s intention to marry and have a family in response to press comments regarding his effeminate appearance and sexual speculation (106–17). Seymour’s Vandross biography features several passages noting AIDS-related and gay rumors and Vandross’s unwillingness to verbalize his sexual orientation (Luther 195–200, 279–83).

For example, a 1961 Variety magazine concert review detected his plaintive multi-sexual appeal when it noted that “he is a singer with a gimmick. He just sings” and continued by framing him as “A romantic with a style which gets to the females and doesn’t antagonize the males” (66). Mathis has also commented on his intentional emphasis on the purity of music over overt performative stylization. As he notes in the liner notes to The Music of Johnny Mathis, “I was always adamant about the fact that I was not an entertainer, I was a singer” and he admired the way singers like Cole, Eckstine, and Vaughan, “would always stand there; nothing would get in the way of the music” (37).

Some relevant discussions of contemporary black masculinities in relation to hypermasculinity and homophobia in the hip-hop era include: Mercer (130–70), Harper (10–11), Neal (166–68), and Stephens ("Pop Goes the Rapper").

Musto defines the “glass closet” as “that complex but popular contraption that allows public figures to avoid the career repercussions of any personal disclosure while living their lives with a certain degree of integrity. Such a device enables the public to see right in while not allowing them to actually open the latch unless the celebrity eventually decides to do so herself” (52). Incidentally he mentions Aiken (53–54). In 2008 Aiken came out in the People magazine article “No More Secrets” (Caplan).

Works Cited


