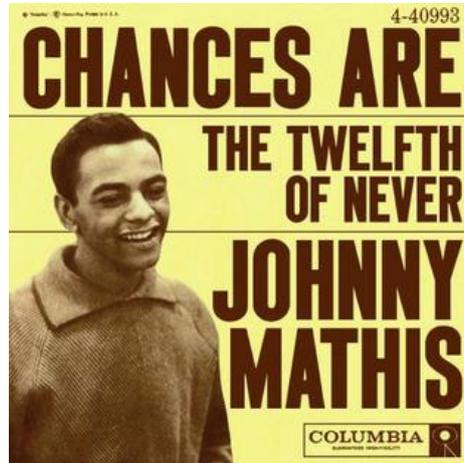


“Chances Are”—Johnny Mathis (1957)

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Essay by Jakob Baekgaard (guest post)*



There is a crucial difference between a one-hit wonder and a signature song. Whereas the former is a brief glimpse of fame in a music career that is otherwise mostly forgotten, the latter is a pinnacle that somehow allows the achievement of a musician to be distilled in a single song. Whereas the one-hit wonder narrows the universe of an artist into a fleeting moment in time, the signature song becomes a prism that widens the scope so a whole constellation can be seen instead of just one quickly fading star.

All the great singers have signature songs and they inevitably become associated with their aesthetic approach and personality. Name the song and you know who owns it: “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” “Strange Fruit,” “Respect,” “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” and “My Way.” Add “Chances Are” by Johnny Mathis to this prominent list.

When Johnny Mathis (born September 30, 1935) entered his second year as a recording artist in 1957, the question was not so much if he would be a one-hit wonder or a legend with a signature song, but rather if he would have a hit at all.

In 1956, July 16, Mathis had already released his self-titled debut on a major label, Columbia Records, and was poised for success. In the liner notes, the prominent producer, George Avakian, told how he had discovered a singular musical talent at Helen Noga’s jazz club, The Blackhawk. The album itself was also jazz-inspired, an ambitious offering including A-list conductors and jazz musicians. Mathis was comfortable in this advanced company and gave highly personal interpretations of standards like “Angel Eyes” and “It Might as Well Be Spring.”

The album promised “a new sound in popular song” and delivered on the promise, but the problem was that too few people listened. Helen Noga, Mathis’ manager, who had been skeptical of the jazz concept all along, understood the problem and contacted Mitch Miller at Columbia Records. Famous for starting the careers of several singers, he knew how to recognize a hit, and immediately started finding songs that he thought would suit Mathis.

The Miller-effect was evident from the beginning. Mathis' first single under the auspices of Miller placed him on the chart. "Wonderful! Wonderful!" was released on November 5, 1956, and reached number 14 on the Billboard charts. It was followed by "It's Not for Me to Say," which was released February 2, 1957, and reached number five on the Billboard charts.

Within months, Mathis had transformed from a no-hit wonder to a singing sensation that climbed the charts with awe-inspiring pace. From his first single to the second, he made the jump from top 20 to top ten on the Billboard Hot 100, but the best was yet to come.

Robert Allen (1927-2000) and Al Stillman (1901-1979) were experienced songwriters who had already provided hits for Perry Como and The Four Lads. They came into Mathis' orbit when they gave him his first top ten hit with "It's Not for Me to Say" and, naturally, Mathis was interested in more. In the notes to the box set "The Music of Johnny Mathis: A Personal Collection" (Columbia Records, 1993), he recalls how he first contacted Robert Allen whose music he already knew:

[“Chances Are”] was the second song Bob Allen wrote for me. I met him on the street and said, “You’re the man who wrote all those songs for The Four Lads. It would be wonderful if you’d write me a song.” So he did. He wrote “It’s Not for Me to Say,” and after that success, he wrote “Chances Are” for me. By the time he wrote the piano arrangement, there was really not much for the arranger to do. This is the song people seem to associate most with me. It’s the one that gets most requests.

“Chances Are” was recorded with Ray Conniff and His Orchestra and Conniff also did the arranging. Unlike the albums, the singles were a rather quick affair. Mathis has recalled how he would usually spend three to four days to record a dozen songs for an album, but with the singles, it was three hours to do four songs.

In fact, this economical approach to recording turned out to be a stroke of luck. The problem with Mathis's debut had been too much complexity in terms of arranging and instrumentation. It was art music rather than pop music. Now the focus shifted to his voice and the things it could do instead of showcasing the interplay between voice and orchestra.

The song begins with harp strings that are briefly touched before a tinkling cocktail piano enters on a waltzing bed of gently strummed guitars. If the setting is a bar, it is placed in heaven and not on earth, and then, after 12 seconds, comes a voice to match the celestial setting as Mathis sings the opening lines: “Chances are 'cause I wear a silly grin / The moment you come into view / Chances are you think that I'm in love with you.” This is a perfectly sculpted unit of thought like a stanza in a poem. Mathis's voice hovers elegantly with subtle use of vibrato and strings only enter as an afterthought. They are allowed to shine in a brief interlude with horns (1:48-2:00), but it is Mathis, who is the orchestral center of the song. The freedom and flexibility of his voice are underlined when he incorporates jazzy phrasing and sings “Guess you feel you'll always be the one and only one for me” (1:23-1:31) in a way that stretches time and highlights a detail of the lyrics. It is a teasing proposition that is elaborated in the following lines: “And if you think you could / Well, chances are your chances are awfully good.”

At the core of the song is suspension, lyrically and musically. It is all about anticipation rather than fulfillment. The song stages a lyrical “I” that imagines how the beloved one, the “you” of the song, feels, but it is all smoke and mirrors, or in the words of the song, magic, moonlight, and starry skies.

However, the quality of “Chances Are” is that it embraces this mood and leaves room for the listener, as Mathis always has done in his songs. One could say that he is a transparent singer, and the pronoun of the song invites the listener to fill in the blank space, whether it is a teenager falling in love for the first time or the nostalgic reverie of a senior citizen. This is not the reality of the saloon songs sung by Sinatra that carefully define a narrator, a scene, and a place.

“Chances Are” is a timeless song for dreamers who are young at heart. It is the signature song that rightfully established Mathis as the voice of romance, an image he has since had a hard time escaping. Because the truth is that the song is only one among many defining and diverse songs in a career that stretches across several genres and decades. The one thing that connects all these songs is not the idea of romance, although it is an omnipresent lyrical motif, but the love of music itself. To fall in love with the music of Johnny Mathis is to fall in love with sound for its own sake. It is not a coincidence that his own idols were singers from the world of jazz and opera like Nat “King” Cole and Leontyne Price who both used the voice as an instrument. Mathis is also an awe-inspiring instrumentalist with a vocal range and a sense of time and texture that allows him to go anywhere musically.

Listening to Mathis singing “Chances Are” is the opportunity to hear one of the most purely musical singers in American music, but you do not have to think about the technical aspects to enjoy it. In fact, it is the other way around. Mathis is so accomplished a singer that he just sets the music free and lets the listener do the dreaming. Unlike romances in real life that come down to earth, “Chances Are” is a rare moment of pop escapism that still soars high in heaven.

Jakob Baekgaard is the author of “Misty: The Music of Johnny Mathis.”

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.