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Matthew Morrison Revealed

Ditching class? Singing with Don Ho? The star of "Glee" spills about his high school days in O.C.

By Tina Dirmann / Photographs by Brian Bowen Smith



Matthew Morrison Revealed

Ditching class? Singing with Don Ho? The star of "Glee" spills about his high school days in O.C. by Tina Dirmann

Photographs by Brian Bowen Smith

With Broadway roles in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show" and "Hairspray," a Tony nomination for "The Light in the Piazza," and a starring role in the hit Fox series "Glee," you might think Matthew Morrison would struggle to pick his favorite career highlight. But just mention Don Ho, and listen to him perk up with shall we say it? glee.

"Oh yeah, that was great," recalls 31-year-old Morrison, who was just a freshman at Los Alamitos High when he sang with the late pop legend. "It was such a big deal, but we were performing in this dinky little room [in Hawaii]. We did a few of our numbers in Don Ho's show, and we sang backup for his iconic songs Tiny Bubbles' and Pearly Shells.' It was great!"

Despite his prime-time TV role, Morrison's heart remains in theater; he's developing a musical based on the life of James Dean and hopes to play the starring role. But the actor, who was born in Fort Ord, Calif., and now lives in New York City, has never forgotten his roots.

It all started at the Orange County High School of the Arts. Morrison studied there during its years on campus at Los Alamitos High School, before it moved to Santa Ana in 2000. In fact, the 1997 graduate still makes guest appearances to support the program that launched him.

"He comes back and dedicates his time and talent, performing with the kids

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at least once a year," says Heather Stafford, Morrison's acting teacher at the arts school. She was there when, fresh off his successful "Hairspray" run, Morrison returned to sing selections from the musical for the school's annual fundraiser.

And what was he like back in high school? "Very popular," Stafford recalls. "The girls always did swoon over him."

Really? Well, that was enough to send us digging deeper for more secrets from Morrison's formative years. The still-single actor spoke to Orange Coast from his New York home, shortly after learning his musical TV series had been picked up for a second season. He reminisced about the high school program that prepared him for his career and it sounded awfully similar to the song-and-dance club his character, Mr. Schuester, leads on the show.

Your high school acting teacher, Heather Stafford, says the faculty thought you had something special, even as a teenager. Were you aware of that?

Awww, come on. They're just saying that now because I'm famous. [Laughs.] It's just so funny to me because I still don't think that. I still have issues with not being confident enough. But as an actor, you should never lose that. It makes you hunger for more, to get better.

It sounds like the School of the Arts is a lot like the club your character leads on "Glee." Did the show's casting team realize this?

No, I don't think so. It's just definitely kismet because the people I auditioned for didn't know this was my background.

One of the series' story lines is about a jock who believes he must choose between football and the glee club. Was that your experience, too?

I can totally relate to what the character, Finn, is going through. I was at a crossroads, too. I was really heavy into soccer with aspirations to play on the Under-17 Men's National Team. So, I was going to quit [the arts school], but a couple of the teachers talked me out of it. They said, "We see something different in you. We strongly suggest you stay on this path."

You almost gave up show business for soccer? I hope you've thanked those teachers.

Oh yeah. [Arts school founder] Ralph Opacic is still one of my great friends. We talk all the time.

Another bit of reality on the show maybe a little too much for some is the subject matter. Some criticize it for addressing high school sex issues. There's a story line dealing with homosexuality that's controversial, and Rolling Stone recently called "Glee" the "Gayest Show. Ever."

I haven't heard much of the criticism. But yes, it does go there. I mean, we're living in a different world now. Kids aren't sheltered. High school kids are having sex, it's not a secret, and it's OK to talk about that. And I think kids these days are much more mature than their parents give them credit for.

You're saying kids today know what it means to be gay and have gay friends?

If we show a gay high school student and make him a lovable person who has dreams and is great just like everyone else, I think that's a good thing.

So, back to your high school days The Fantastic Four?

[Laughs.] We were fantastic! It was me and three of my high school buddies [Mevina Liufau, Russ Ruffino, and Ryan Green]. We were all in the musical-theater program and we just latched onto each other as freshmen. We rolled together, and I think some juniors started calling us that. There was another group, very prestigious, called Kids Next Door. Everyone wanted to be in it, and freshmen usually weren't. But when they went to Hawaii to sing with Don Ho, the four of us got to go with them. And we got the name then.

Did you get into trouble together?

Well, here's a story most people don't know. I think it was our sophomore year. None of us could drive yet, but I had my learner's permit. We ditched school and stole another classmate's car. We got his keys somehow and I drove it to Westminster Mall. I swear, there was a cop behind me the whole time. I started sweating. And then there was this funny smell and we were like, "Hey, what's burning?" Turns out we had the emergency brake on the whole time.

Did your buddy ever find out you stole his car?

Nope. Car was fine; he never found out.

You grew up in Cypress and it sounds like you really loved high school. Is that why you go back so often?

I just remember when I was in high school and Susan Egan [Class of '88 and Tony Award winner for her role as Belle in "Beauty and the Beast"] would come back and talk to us. It was so inspiring to realize, you know, she was me. And if she can do it, I can do it, too. So I like to go back now for that reason. I go back and give master classes or maybe have the kids act and critique them.

So, in a way, you are a high school performing-arts teacher in real life.

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Well, I always said, if I didn't end up getting into New York University and having some success in New York, I probably would have ended up going to Chico State and then coming back to the High School of the Arts to teach. I really believe that. So, when I got this role, I thought a lot about that path and where I'd be. Would I be a teacher? Would I be married? Would I live in Orange County?

And? Would you?

I think, yes, I probably would be all those things.

Tina Dirmann is an Orange Coast contributing writer.

For gallery image of Matthew Morrison, click [here](#).

Eight Things You Never Knew About 'Matty Fresh'

Most fans don't know that Matthew Morrison has a quirky side, one that keeps him grounded. After all, it's easy to stay humble when you're nicknamed after a brand of kitty litter...

1. An early TV appearance led to his goofy nickname. "My first real job was back in 1999 on The Late Show With David Letterman. I was part of this skit with a fake boy band called Fresh Step, you know, like the kitty litter. And it just stuck after that. Now, everyone calls me Matty Fresh. In fact, now, it's just Fresh. As in, Hey, Fresh! What's up?"
2. He also dreamed of being David Beckham. "I would rather be on a soccer field than anywhere else."
3. He can't tan. "It's in my contract. The show supposedly takes place in Iowa, so I can't look like I just got back from Hawaii."
4. He's a college dropout. "I went to NYU for a year and a half and then left. I didn't feel I needed any more from there because I got such a great start at the High School of the Arts. They taught me so much, I felt ahead of the game."
5. Favorite high school hangout: Mustard's on Katella Avenue in Los Alamitos. "I always ordered The Snappy. It was a hot dog and it kind of, like, snapped. I don't know how to explain it. But it did! It snapped when you bit into it!"
6. Favorite grownup hangout: Matiki Island Barbeque in Anaheim. "I get the No. 6 combo short ribs and teriyaki chicken with a side of white rice and macaroni salad."
7. He's working on an album. "It will be sort of Dean Martin-esque. Just me and a big orchestra doing some standards and some original songs."
8. He didn't make the first cut after auditioning to get into the High School of the Arts. "I was wait-listed. I was totally bummed out. I thought maybe I wasn't talented enough. But, that said, things happen in life that make you work harder. So, when I was allowed in, I was honored to be there."

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