



THE NATIVE BOYS

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

(As Told By Lead Tenor Fred Romain)

Inspired by the outpouring of patriotic fever following the bombing of the World Trade Center, Fred has just finished up a pair of demos he hopes to sell in support of all those who lost their lives during the 9/11 conflagration. "A Tribute" and "The Lady," the latter a song celebrating the Statue of Liberty, come from Fred's pen at a time when, in dialysis, he needs a healthy kidney in order to continue living a normal life. Amazingly enough, not only his daughter but Barbara, his New-Orleans born wife of twenty years, present perfect kidney matches. Soon Fred and Barbara will be side by side on the operating table as doctors go through the procedure of having the couple share Barbara's kidneys.

As Fred waits for the doctors to come for him, he could well try to picture in a series of events all the joy he had creating music for his group, his fans and all his friends. Here is how he might remember the course of events.

Fred was born in Port Arthur, Texas, 30th of January, 1938. He grew up in a middle class, Catholic environment. The family moved to L.A.'s East Side when Fred was two or three years old to seek a better life. Most of the family's neighbors were from Texas. Fred was sixteen years of age before his sister and two brothers were born. Fred's mother, Annie Bell, was a homemaker. His father, Francis Romain, after working for the Military at Century Metal Craft, labored almost around the clock trying to hold down two or three jobs. Francis' principle occupation was serving as waiter and barkeeper at the Club Alabam. He also worked at MacKesson and Robbin Drugs.

Francis' life was full of music and black entertainment. This certainly rubbed off on the young and impressionable Fred. Back in Texas, Francis worked as caretaker at The Lincoln Theater. On one occasion, Francis brought Louis Armstrong home with him for dinner. Among the many performers at The Lincoln, Fred remembers his father taking him to see Herb Jeffries, the tan cowboy and singing idol of the swank club circuit. Francis also took Fred to see Dusty Brooks and The Tones, otherwise known as The Four Tones, at The Lincoln. Annie Bell's cousin Art Maryland, played guitar for The Tones who recorded their most successful sides for Columbia in 1951.

Whenever The Tones came to L.A., they would stay with the Romains on East-sixth Street and later on at East Fifty-ninth. When Fred saw The Tones in action, he knew that this was what he wanted to do. To round out the young man's musical education, Francis took Fred to both the Million Dollar and Orpheum Theaters to catch Peg Leg Bates who is best remembered for dancing at the Appollo with Bunny Briggs, The Ravens, Ink Sports, Nat King Cole Trio, Ella Fitzgerald and Sonny Til with The Orioles. But it was Jimmy Ricks and The Ravens who made the most lasting early impression at stage shows. Later on, Fred was awed and inspired by The Five Keys and The Moonglows. Fred later got to know Nat King Cole pretty well. This was partly due to the fact that they patronized the same barber.

As a kid, Fred mugged around, aping impressions of popular entertainers for folks who called at the house. Peter Lorre was a particular favorite. At age five, Fred started taking tap dance lessons at the popular Wille Coven Dance School on the East Side. He kept this up for thirteen years. He attended the Catholic St. Patrick's Grammar where he met Vincent Weaver in second grade. Vincent was full of fun and into baseball. The pair soon became firm friends. Fred became close to Vincent's folks as well. They came like-minded Harry Rosemond, a wild kid with a passion for football and basketball. The three become inseparable. They messed around and played tricks on each other for fun.

When the trio moved into a Cathedral Catholic High, an all-male parochial school north on Broadway, a couple of miles from downtown L.A., they hooked up with Eddie "Sack": Saunders who also conveyed a strong sense of humor and was into baseball and track. The guys called him "Sack" because he bore a striking resemblance to a come book character called "Sad Sack."

The 5 Keys were the cool group of the day, and Fred and his buddies wanted badly to be like them. In Steve Propes' article on The Native Boys in his book, "LA R&B Vocal Groups, 1945-65" (Big Nickel Pub., 2001), Propes asserts that the foursome considered themselves different from other black kids their ages. Like their white brothers, Fred and his pals would not think of hanging out late at night on a street corner, waiting for a piece of excitement.

Chuck Mathis, a neighbor of Eddie's, also wanted to join the quartet, and soon they were five young aspiring doo-woppers rehearsing in locker rooms at various public parks. The boys had a portable reel-to-reel tape recorder onto which they recorded their favorite vocal group tunes for practice. They also utilized the machine to record their favorite vocal group



tunes for practice. They also utilized the machine to record themselves for correcting mistakes. Pretty soon Fred and his buddies were performing at local parties and dances under the name The Mellow Tears, wearing matching shirts and their group name embroidered on the backs. The guys lived in a neighborhood teeming with aspiring vocal group singers. Members of The Ermines and The Flairs were practically neighbors. Everyone knew everyone, and word got around that The "Mellow Tears" were pretty good.

Fred befriended Jackie Wilson of Billy Ward's Dominoes when both he and Clyde McPhatter sang lead in the group. "Billy Ward was looking for singers to go out as The Dominoes to fill West Coast engagements they couldn't honor because of other work elsewhere," recalls Fred. "We went over and auditioned for them, but we really weren't professional enough, so nothing came of it," Fred added.

One day, Eddie called local A&R man Bumps Blackwell who was always on the look-out for fresh talent. The group was invited around to Bump's house where they nervously auditioned. The group sounded ragged, but Bumps saw a measure of worthwhile potential. Bumps took The Mellow Tears over to Modern Records in Culver City where the group was introduced to A&R director Maxwell Davis. The Mellow Tears had a couple of original songs they wanted to record, "Native Girl," written by Eddie and Vince and lead by Vince, and "It Won't Take Long," penned by Fred and lead by Henry.

"Native Girl," a jump ditty written to cash in on the current calypso craze, underwent eight or nine takes. "It Won't Take Long," a song written around the come-on required to score with the opposite sex, also underwent less than ten takes. Fred remembers his parents having to sign the recording contract as he and his buddies were all under age. "Native Girl," says Steve Propes had the group's name inadvertently misspelled as by The Nature Boys when it was released in the late summer of 1954 (on initial 78 rpm pressings), the result of carelessness on the manufacturer's part, no doubt. This mistake was rectified on later pressings. Both songs were ripped off by Modern's Bihari Brothers who ascribed song rights to their own sobriquet-Josea-on the label. At first, the Bihari's thought The Mellow Tears' moniker did not fit with the content of the record. They soon re-christened the outfit The Native Boys to fall in line with this.

"Native Girl" was recorded the same day as Shirley Gunter and The Queens were waxing their soon-to-be nationwide hit record "Oop Shoop." The Gunter family was pretty close friends with members of the freshly anointed Native Boys. After the Modern session, Shirley Gunter and The Native Boys drove over to Buck Ram's house where The Platters were rehearsing in Buck's garage-studio. Everyone had a high time and partied for hours. Hunter Hancock helped break "Native Girl," but it was Dick "Huggie Boy" Hugg who really got behind it. Nevertheless, the platter failed to take off, and Modern dropped the group.

The Native Boys continued to play private parties and appeared at El Monte Legion Stadium. The group remembers an open air engagement at a park in East L.A. The crowd was mainly Hispanic. After they had only been singing for a minute, a fight broke out between two rival gangs. "This was one of the scariest moments of our career," says Fred. "Luckily we were hauled off to safety."

After "Native Girl" failed to click, Harry Rosemond up and quit, disenchanted with the uncertainties of the entertainment business. Harry was replaced by George Le Brune, who lived in the neighborhood close to Eddie and Charles. George was a close friend of lead tenor Cornelius Gunter of Ermines, Flairs, Chaimes and Hollywood Bluejays fame. According to Steve Propes, in early 1955, Fred happened to be visiting Cornel Gunter at his parents' home on West Fifty-fourth Street. The Gunter house was a popular hangout for local kids with musical talent who were looking for a break into show business.

Gunter was without a group at the time. The Flairs were in temporary disbandment. Gunter got a call to do studio work on a few fresh songs. As Fred was not doing much, Gunter recruited him, along with ex-Flairs baritone Obie "Young" Jessie, tenor Pete Fox and baritone/bass Randy Jones. Billed as The Jac-O-Lacs, they recorded "Cindy Lou" flipped with "Sha-ba-da-ba-doo" (Tampa 103) for Robert Scherman and Irving Shorten's tiny label on West Pico Boulevard.

Tampa had only The Dooley Sisters under contract at the time and was looking for quartet action. As later with The Sparklers and Flannels, Scherman would often call singers down to his studios whenever he had put together certain

PHOTO'S: (left to right)

On page 18: Edward Saunders, Fred Romain, Vincent Weaver.

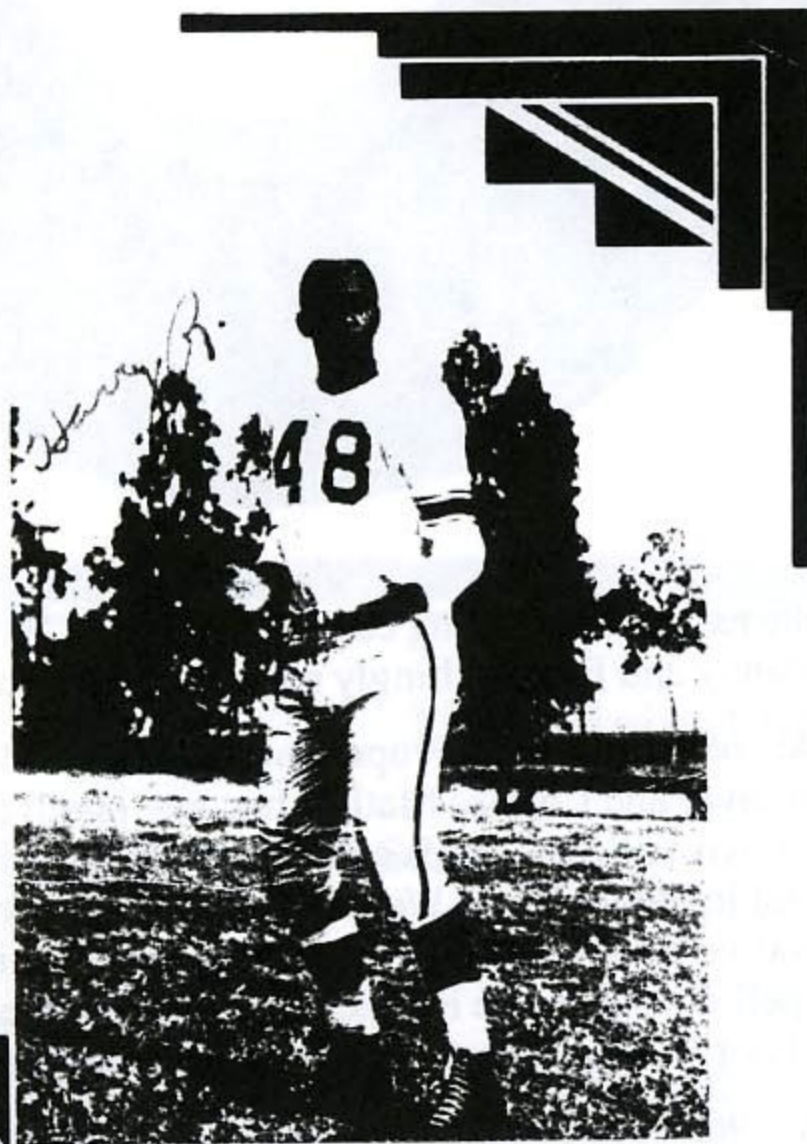
BELOW MIDDLE:

Harry Rosemond

BOTTOM: *The Mellow Tears* (1954)

Ed Saunders, Vince Weaver, Fred Romain, Charles Mathis, Harry Rosemond.

(all photos Opal Louis Nations collection)



vocal-oriented charts. Fred remembers the group piling into his beat-up old 1950 Chevy to get the group down to the studio on time. "We had two flats," said Fred, "one going down there and one coming back."

It was a grueling six-hour session. The Jac-O-Lacs had a hard time getting the parts down correctly. "Cindy Lou" is a jazz-laced tope-tapper, more in the jump & jive tradition than the prevailing doo-wop one. Cornel gives the song his hammed-up best. "Sha-ba-da-ba-doo," a dance craze opus, is in the same mode and is crammed with quirky lyrics and open harmony, augmented by Barney Kessel's Oscar Moore-like guitar ornaments. As with The Native Boys' initial waxing, "Cindy Lou" went nowhere. Both songs were re-released on a V.S.O.P. collection entitled "West Coast R&R Vol. 1" (VSOP 88, 1994.)

After this Cornel formed a new group called The Ermines whose recordings on Loma were some of the finest in the vocal group genre. Fred turned to working up songs for the beleaguered Native Boys. Ed called Vernon "Jake" Porter at Combo Records on North El Centro to try and get the Native Boys an audition. Porter, who had heard "Native Girl" and liked it, said he was willing to try them out. According to Steve Propes, Vince told him that Porter was not exactly spilling over with enthusiasm at the time. However, contracts were signed.

The group recorded four songs on a March 1955 session. These included a weepy ballad Vince had written around a girl friend of Fred's named "Cherrlyn," the perky "Strange Love," written in the East Coast jump vocal style by Fred, the beautifully romantic "Tears" (in my eyes), again written by Fred and sung in wistful melodic strains, plus Ed's bluesy "When I Meet You," sounding every bit like an Ermines waxing. Vocal parts included George on tenor and Ed and Fred alternating on bass.

Fred told Propes that the group had always set their sights on being a cross-over group, but it is difficult to imagine that any of their so-far recorded songs had the prerequisite cross-over ingredients. All of their records sounded solidly black and distinctly R&B. The four tunes, sandwiched by a single Peppermint Harris release, hit the streets during the fall of 1955.

A March 1956 Billboard heralded "Strange Love" by the Native Boys as breaking big on the Eastern market. "Ask Johnny Halonka in New York, Harry Finfer in Philly, Henry Nathanson in Baltimore, Harry Levin in Detroit and Cecil Steen in Boston," he ad followed. Indeed it looked like the group had a smash. Even Alan Freed at WINS gave it a whirl. Jake Porter's sister was brought in to teach the group a few basic stage routines to prepare them for personal appearances. These were, according to Propes, mostly record hops at local schools or occasional appearances at the El Monte Legion Stadium as a supporting act. They appeared with Thurston Harris and The Lamplighters at a hotel in Santa Monica, but by and large, Jake Porter did not have the cash to pour into adequate promotion.



A Native Boys song program, apart from their own material, took in covers of The Platters' "Only You," The Five Keys' arrangement of "Glory of Love," the Clovers' "Blue Velvet," Little Walter's "My Babe," The Crickets' rendering of "You're Mine," and the hot "Ruby Baby" by the Drifters.

Fred remembers a show at Huntington Park where they got up on stage to sing "Earth Angel." When Fred opened his mouth to sing the first note, he let out a burp. This caused the assembled crowd to break out in shrieks of laughter. The group had a tough time singing serious ballads after that.

A second session was conducted at Combo in 1956, netting Fred's bright, bouncy "Laughing Love," arranged to sound rather like a Flairs waxing, Ed's touching "Valley of Lovers," an ode to true love, the ethereal "Oh Let Me Dream" with Vince climbing the high notes and Fred's chipper "I Got A Feeling," a calypso ditty with a Latin beat that momentarily quits at the dirty sax bridge.

As with the first batch, The Native Boys' final two Combo releases were issued almost at once during the summer of 1956. But disappointing sales and lack of work lead to the group's disbandment. "I've Got A Feeling," "Strange Love," and "Tears" were re-released on an Ace Combo CD collection in 1998 (Ace CD 599). After the break-up, Fred resumed his music writing. George Le Brune, staying with Combo, cut two sides as lead singer, "Devil Kissed an Angel" "My Darling," with a freshly assembled vocal group called The Continentals, but Jake Porter saw fit not to put it out.

The next part of the story is told by Steve Propes. Curtis McDaniels, a close friend of Fred's (in fact as close as a brother, according to Fred), was painting the exterior of Lee Rupe's house. The lovely Lee Rupe was the former wife of Specialty Records owner, Art Rupe. In the spring of 1957, Lee Rupe was fixing to start up her own record company on South Western Avenue. Rumor has it that Lee had it in her mind to get back to her ex-husband by planning to cut into some of his trade. McDaniels told Rupe that he knew a singer, Danny Kristian, a.k.a. Arthur Murray, who had formed a singing quartet of thirty-somethings consisting of Kristian (who Fred says considered himself a black Sinatra), lead tenor, Fred Romain (who was the only soldier under thirty), second lead tenor, George Hollis and Kenneth Byle. The group had worked on many of Kristian's compositions at his house in East L.A.

With Rupe's approval, McDaniels took the group over to the Capitol Records studios on Hollywood and Vine. As Lee Rupe's kick off quartet, The Ebbtones recorded with full orchestra Fred's second, more soulful version of "I've Got a Feeling" with Fred erroneously billed as Freddie Romaine, Danny's hauntingly beautiful "Danny's Blues" with Buddy Collette's excellent flute part, Fred's unreleased "Jamaica Town," Danny's long unreleased "Trinidad woman" plus the long-in-the-can "Fool for Affection."

"I've Got a Feeling" was issued in 1995 on the English Ace label (Ace 524) and along with "Danny's Blues" issued again in Fantasy's Specialty series (SPCD 7072) in 2001. The Fantasy collection also offers us the first time release of



the exotically exciting calypso "Trinidad Woman" lead by Danny and Fred's liltingly melodic "Fool For Affection."

According to Steve Propes, two ex-Native Boys, Vince Weaver and Charles Mathis, become involved in a group known as Billy Woods and The Emeralds who recorded for Dot in 1960. Vince Weaver joined The Flairs when The Native Boys split up and was with them again when, with a spell-change to the Flares, the group recorded the hit-selling "Foot Stompin' Part I" for Felsted Records (8624) in 1961.

In 1963 Fred fell in with Chuck Mann, part-time actor and disc-jockey, who at one time sat in for Dick "Huggy Boy" Hugg at KRKD. Man was interested in starting a record label - Spindletop - and had signed up guitarist/arranger Buddy Harper to help him out.

Mann put out a limited edition of one release, Spindletop 301. One side featured a guitar instrumental by Buddy Harper, the other spotlighted Fred's extremely rare and tough to find "Be My Girl." The record was made exceedingly more collectable by the fact that Fred was backgrounded by the great Brenda Holloway and her sister, Patrice. Almost non-existent promotion and distribution lead to its instant demise in the five cent bins.

After a second stab at getting his chart "Fool For Affection" put out through Jimmy Saville, Fred called it quits. In 1970 he embarked on a thirty year career as programmer/analyst, moving to Northern California, and living in various Bay Area locations, finally ending up in Suisun City. His last stretch of gainful employment was with Charles Schwab of San Francisco. He love traveling and has made two trips to Africa, one to a handful of Western nations, the other to Kenya. After a six week recovery from surgery, he is planning, and indeed looking forward to, an African Safari. This will not, of course, be with The Native Boys.



DISCOGRAPHY

MODERN 939 It won't take long/Native Girl (1954,
COMBO 113 Cherrlyn/Strange love (1955)
115 When I met you/Tears (1956)
119 Valley of lovers/Laughing Love
120 Oh let me dream/I've got a feeling

(ALL COMBO'S ARE PURPLE-2ND PRESSINGS ARE RED)

Label photo's: Melody Lane Archives.

