



BLUES &
Rhythm

The Gospel Truth

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BOYD RIVERS

JOHNNY BASSETT

SONNY BOY WILLIAMSON

TONY "CHICKEN" HARRIS

The "Chicken Baby Chicken" Man

The Story of Tony Harris - Part One

by Opal Louis Nations

May 1957 marked the release of Tony Harris's zany "Chicken Baby Chicken" (Ebb 104), a stone-crazy, Crescent City sounding dance craze record in the smouldering vein of a Little Richard/Cosimo studio classic. This was due in part to the audible presence of Cosimo Matassa's studio stalwarts, Lee Allen, the legendary tenor sax blaster, veteran sessions whiz Earl Palmer on drums, plus Alvin Tyler and Edgar Blanchard. The session was supervised by veteran pianist-producer Paul Gayten. Harris was under contract with Ebb Records, owned and operated by Leona Rupe, ex-wife of Art Rupe, head of Specialty Records out of Hollywood. Leona used her alimony and savvy gleaned from working for Specialty to run a label she hoped would confront her ex-husband with some stiff competition. She set out to do this by signing up as many of her ex-spouse's artist rejects for as nominal a price as she possibly could.

"Chicken Baby Chicken" was written by Harris on the train to the session from Los Angeles to New Orleans and was not a song Leona had agreed to record. When Harris reached Cosimo's studios and called Leona on the phone, she sounded supportive and urged Harris to include the new song on the master tape. By June 1957, "Chicken Baby Chicken" was noted for being pick of the week by Billboard in the San Francisco Bay Area. For some reason Billboard had to be pressed by Leona to get the record listed in the Hot Hundred, by July the record had topped the Golden Gate city's R & B charts and was moving like wildfire through L.A. and Atlanta.

In August, the record was picked up by Mel London of United for nationwide distributing. Come October, Harris, now inked with the Big Apple's Jack Archer booking agency and having headlined a show at Harlem's Apollo Theater alongside Della Reece and Huey Smith, was touring in a package show with the likes of Big Maybelle, Lowell Fulson, and The Jimmy "My Happiness" Beasley Orchestra. The tour took Harris into Texas and close to the place of his birth, Austin.

Tony Harris was born March 1934 in Austin City Limits. Leaving the young Tony with his grandmother, his parents relocated to San Antonio, then picked up and moved on to Los Angeles shortly after World War II. Harris's mother found a job waiting tables at The Cony Island Chinese café, a popular eatery on Central Avenue, half a block from the famous Lincoln Theater. Harris's father, George, hung out at a local Central Avenue pool hall every Monday. George had found that scouts looking for movie extras often stopped by the hall on Mondays searching for talent. George worked on and off in the motion picture industry for six months, then was offered a contract by Warner Brothers. George Harris played minor roles in films starring Humphrey Bogart and Clark Gable throughout the late forties. Meanwhile, Tony Harris moved with his grandmother to Johnson City, Texas where at the local black Baptist church he



Tony Harris. A 1958 publicity photograph. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

developed a taste for music. He attended a staunchly conservative private school, The Montopolis School of Travis County, where loud, uninhibited, popular, African American race music was most certainly forbidden. The sounds of the country blues filtering from local beer parlors were the only songs he heard matching those of his own cultural background. Harris did however, have access to the household radio on which he devotedly tuned in to The Fairfield Four's regular weekly broadcast from Nashville sponsored by Sunway Vitamins.

Harris was determined to teach himself how to sing like the boys in The Fairfield Four. While at Montopolis, he befriended a cousin with whom he planned to instigate a gospel singing quartet. With a tenor-singing friend from a farm close by, Harris, his cousin, plus a school chum rehearsed at a place some six miles walking distance from home. They called themselves The Montopolis Quartet and sang the rounds of local country churches. The boys' parents were pleased and the girls thought they looked neat, but nothing really happened with the group.

Harris's grandmother got herself a job as a fry cook at a roadhouse called The Blue Dahlia, and the young Harris helped out washing dishes for spare change. The Blue Dahlia was a popular

venue for country and western artists, and Harris will always remember the time when Bob Wills and The Texas Playboys came to play the supper club. Bob gave Harris a silver dollar (a lot of money in those days) in exchange for a long, tall, cold glass of water.

After Harris's mother had settled in Los Angeles for a few months, she took a trip out to Texas to fetch her son and take him back with her. Now enrolled at Lafayette Junior High in Los Angeles, Harris signed up for a fine arts course. The boy's music teacher, Elze Knox, was much impressed with Harris's voice, and had him solo at special programs at The Hollywood Bowl alongside country music luminaries and at The Shrine Auditorium on West Jefferson Boulevard.

Knox introduced the young Harris to virtuoso pianist Evelyn Burrell of the L.A. Bureau of Music, who selected youngsters to play benefit concerts around town. Harris was picked to sing at veterans' hospitals and on USO programs in Hollywood and also hitched up with another gospel-singing outfit called The Golden Jubilee Singers. He had been introduced to the group by his parents who also sang in the aggregation. Out of these singers, an all-male quartet, The Golden Jubilee Quartet, was formed. The Golden Jubilee Singers were first organized in Los



Tony Harris (bottom right), and The L.A. Spiritual Singers, 1948. Photograph courtesy Opal Louis Nations

Angeles in 1943. Most of the original members had migrated from Shreveport, Louisiana and the twelve-year-old Harris was picked to sing in The Golden Jubilee Quartet alongside director/manager James Reamer, Judge Brown, L.C. Jacobs, Henry Lenoir, L.B. Davis, et al.

With The Golden Jubilee Quartet, Harris toured the Southern part of the state, performing on concert programs in both Riverside and San Diego. In 1947, Harris tried again to form his own quartet out of friends and a cousin of Sam Cooke's, but nothing came of it. A year later, Harris joined The L.A. Spiritual Singers who were then comprised of Alabama-born tenor and manager Ed Cammon, Elvin Hunt, Charles Bodsford, Bedile Goldsmith, Pete ?, and Marvin Buford. The L.A. Spiritual Singers recorded for John Dolphin's Recorded-in-Hollywood label, the teenage Harris sang lead on "In My Heart" backed with "Old Blind Barnabus."

Two years later, in 1950, four Dolphin titles from two 78 recordings, were reissued on the Phoenix label: "No Room In The Inn" / "That Lonesome Journey" (Phoenix 021) and "Build Right On That Shore" / "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" (Phoenix 023). The L.A. Spirituals appeared on Big Ed's (Ed McMahon) poolside TV show on Channel Eleven sponsored by the All-State Insurance Company. Ed's guests would gather around the pool at the old Beverly Hills Hotel to put on their acts. The L.A. Spirituals' baritone singer, Bedile Goldsmith, became Harris's voice coach. The knowledgeable Goldsmith knew every quartet on the road and later went on to organize The Sensational Wonders who evolved into the famous Mighty Clouds of Joy with Little Willie Joe Ligon.

Harris sang in The L.A. Spirituals for a year during which time he had a flurry of offers to join other groups. Judge Brown, one-time singer in The Golden Jubilees, now sang in a quartet managed by Charles B. James called The Golden Wings. Harris was invited to join the group. The Golden Wings were formed in L.A. during the late forties by James who had sung in The Jubilee Wonders out of Dallas. Original Golden Wings members included James, Erwin McDaniel, Carl Lewis, Moses Harris, Rayfield Johnson, Hal Boughtley and Judge Brown.

Harris dropped The L.A. Spirituals and took up with the Golden Wings because of the group's ties with a Mrs. Greenwood. The much-respected Greenwood was a pioneer, independent, black gospel producer who ran one of L.A.'s first small

gospel record labels, Greenwood Records, on East Twenty-fifth Street. Greenwood picked her recording artists from aspiring acts on a talent show she helped organize at the famous St. Paul's Baptist Church at Twenty-first and Naomi. Groups came from all over the state to perform at the church pastored by John H. Branham, known as the pool hall preacher. Professor J. Earl Hines was music director at the church and was featured soloist in his own group, The Goodwill Singers, as well as director of The Grace Memorial Church.

Other star performers of the day, such as Ruth Black, Cora Martin, and The Sallie Martin Singers, were all being recorded at this location by Capitol Records. St. Paul's enjoyed a weekly Sunday morning radio broadcast which was syndicated across the nation. Mrs. Greenwood's roster included Kylo Turner and The Pilgrim Travelers whom she later introduced to Art Rupe of Specialty Records. Rupe built his fortunes on the success of early Pilgrim Travelers recordings. Mrs. Greenwood marketed her releases through the two record stores she operated, one on Central and Twenty-fourth, the other located in San Pedro. Harris frequently hung out at the

Greenwood mansion to watch The Pilgrims rehearse.

The Golden Wings were not that talented an outfit and after six months disbanded. It was during this time that Bedile Goldsmith was organizing and rehearsing a resurrected contingent of The Clouds of Joy. The group cut one record that year (1949) for the Murray label. Harris was tempted but did not join The Clouds. The group seemed not to be that good at the time. Harris was also asked to join Charles B. James's outfit, The Spiritual Chords, but nothing came of that either.

Back in class at Lafayette High, Harris was confronted by Mary Yarborough, a singing prima donna at the school. Yarborough, a student a year older than Harris, said she admired the ninth grader's singing and invited him to join her vocal group. The outfit rehearsed across the street from the Continental bus company on Central Avenue, near the Fifteenth and Newton police precinct. That same week Harris enlisted in the Junior Youth Society's gospel singing group. The aggregation fell under the guidance of Rev. Richard McDay of Chicago. Members included John Earl, pianist and musician with The St. Paul's Baptist Youth Chorale, Greta Grays, soloist, Mary Yarborough and along with Harris, a singer remembered only as Robert. Rehearsals were held in a local chapel.

While a member of the JYSS, Harris befriended gospel keyboard virtuoso, Billy Marshall, a gaily attired Black Muslim. Yarborough introduced Harris to the impetuous Ella Cleveland, known variously as "Ella Vee" or "Little Bit", an attractive gospel keyboardist who bounced up and down on the piano bench when the spirit took her. Ella Cleveland was pianist for the famous Gospel Pearls long before Bessie Griffin had any dealings with the group. The Gospel Pearls at this time were composed of the busy Mary Yarborough, soprano, Jerry Moss (who stayed in the group up to and through the Bessie Griffin period), soprano and alto, Ruth Sharpe, soprano, Melvin "Big Red" Brown, tenor, and Rev. Timothy Green, tenor. Harris sang in the group for a short while. Weeks later, Yarborough quit The Pearls, changed her name to that of an exotic African princess and joined a jazz trio of little distinction as featured soloist.

The year was 1950. Harris, now at Jefferson High, joined the school choral group who regularly beat out all the competition comprised of gospel groups from other schools. It was here that Harris met up with Jessie Belvin, Curtis Williams, Richard Berry, and two of Berry's cousins, one of



The Golden Jubilee Singers. Photograph courtesy Opal Louis Nations.



Mrs Greenwood's House at 811 East 25th St. Los Angeles. Photograph courtesy Opal Louis Nations

whom, Harris proudly states, was the son of Ralph Bunch. James Ervin and his cousin, Oscar B. Cook, a blood relative of Sam Cooke, were Harris's closest pals. Both were members of the California National Guard. Oscar B. Cook joined The Chosen Gospel Singers as baritone in 1952 and stayed for a year, after which he is thought to have sung off wax in The Swan Silvertones. Harris had known Ervin and Cook for four years, during which time he constantly bugged them to join him in forming a singing group. Curtis Williams taught Harris how to play basketball and help find and assemble the parts of his first bicycle. Williams sang bass with Richard Berry and The California Flamingos in 1951 before co-founding the famous Penguins with Cleve Duncan two years later.

Gospel Pearl Melvin "Big Red" Brown also sang "the devil's music" and regularly crossed over into the blues. Brown and Harris often took trips into Watts to catch Johnny Otis at The Barrelhouse Club. The popular drink at the time was white port and lemon juice. It was Brown's intention to enter Otis's talent show, do his Roy "Good Rockin'" Brown imitation, and win. This he planned to do by offering to pay his girlfriends and would-be supporters with a white port and lemon juice party in exchange for their cheering and hollering like crazy when he got up under the lights to sing. His shenanigans did not work, however, and he did not win.

Harris had lied about his age to join the National Guard. You had to be sixteen and he fell a year short. His reason for joining was to be with his buddies, all a year older, who he thought were prime candidates for singers in a gospel quartet he had dreams of putting together. In early 1951, his dream came true. Harris, along with Oscar Cook, James Ervin, John Motley, and singer/guitarist James Arline, formed The Varieteers. James Arline had served in The Nightingale Jubilaires, a group that originated in Richmond in the San Francisco Bay Area. The quartet settled in Los Angeles in the late 1940s. Members included Roosevelt Glass, Calmus Fuller, Sammy George, Leo Wilson, Arline, and Eddie Draper. The outfit cut seven extremely fine 78 recordings for Jack Lauderdale's Swingtime label.

On one of their jaunts into town, the fledgling Varieteers sneaked into a talent contest at The Brass Rail and won first prize, the grand sum of fifty dollars. They also did radio spots on KVES and KPRL and played a hotel gig in Paso Robles. Harris stayed in the group and on weekends sang alongside Melvin "Big Red" Brown in The Gospel Pearls. Harris's Varieteers were for the most part a gospel quartet and should not be confused with the secular Varieteers who recorded for MGM and Hickory Records.

The group gigged in the L.A. area, performed on KTTV, and sang on the Dolphin's of Hollywood program on Sunday nights over KGPJ. The group's theme song was "Lord, look down upon

me." Harris, now a member of the National Guard attached to the 1401st Combat Engineer Battalion of East Garrison, was stationed at Camp Roberts, and took cooking classes, getting a job as first cook. In March 1951, Harris was assigned to duty in Seattle. Remaining members of The Varieteers were scattered over various locations, thus the group became temporarily disbanded.

James Ervin later joined Harris in the Evergreen State, but Oscar Cook got himself shipped out to Germany. In Seattle, Harris resurrected a second Varieteers group with the assistance of National Guard chaplain, Major Hunter. Hunter traveled extensively throughout Oregon and Washington and the group performed wherever he went. The new Varieteers were not good singers but could get the church to move. The quartet hooked up with a Mrs. Rass, a local gospel concert promoter, who found them work around Seattle. Harris can only recall two of the group's other members, Jessie Tillman and Charles Adams.

In Seattle, The Varieteers appeared on a program with Rev. F.F. Billups and The Kansas City Gospel Singers, one of three groups Billups managed. Harris knew Billups and the group from back in the old Los Angeles days. At this juncture, The Kansas City Gospel Singers were made up of manager Billups, Billy Marshall, tenor, Robert Holley, baritone, Frank Holley, bass, Charles "Buster" Thompson, tenor, and Courtney Mason, second tenor. A older composite of the group included bass singer Staci Gaston and The Rev. Robert Foster, Soul Stirrer Paul Foster's cousin. Both Gaston and Foster settled in Los Angeles,

picking up a first tenor singer by the name of Gilmore, tenor/baritone James Roberts, and formed The Kansas City Soul Revivers who recorded for Dootsie Williams' Dootone label in 1956.

The Varieteers stole the show away from The Kansas City Gospel Singers who were billed as headliners. This upset Billups who, after damage assessment, wanted Harris to join his group. Harris told Billups that his tour of duty came to an end in July 1952, three months hence and that he could not possibly join a professional touring group until then. Billups wanted Harris in three months and would wait for his return to civilian life. Harris's National Guard unit was on red alert, men were being sent overseas to fight in North Korea, and that was where Tillman Adams and two other members of Chaplain Hunter's Varieteers ended up. As Harris had less than three months to serve and had not re-enlisted, he was permitted to stay at home base. He had made a friend of Joe Lewis and would stay at his place in Portland. Joe was a member of The Portland Aires Quartet.

The group enjoyed a regular broadcast on a local radio station. July rolled around and Harris had still not decided on whether or not to join The Kansas City Singers, but the offer of \$150 a week salary and an open account at Brockman's Clothing Store to buy uniforms won him over. Harris, now a member of the prestigious Kansas City Singers (who once performed for President Roosevelt) played major church venues. One day the group performed to a black audience in Pasco, Washington and a white one in a nearby town the next. The group at this time was headquartered in Seattle at the Billups mansion. Billups also proprietored rooming houses and a downtown hotel. Billups and The Kansas City Singers had developed a strong reputation in the west and across the southern states. Six years earlier, in 1946, the quartet recorded for Modern Records, run by the Bihari brothers out of L.A.

By the fall, The Kansas City Singers were breaking apart. Baritone Robert Holley made a decision to retire when the group reached Spokane and Thompson and Mason quit. This left Harris, Frank Holley, bass singer, and Billy Marshall, lead. The K.C.'s driver, Jim Ellis (otherwise known as Jimmy "Preacher" Ellis) was an aspiring singer who wanted to join the quartet. Ellis was taken aboard with new member Grover Mincey, first tenor, from Atlanta. As Billups kept the group on the road pretty much all of the time, Frank and Billy decided to rename the group The Traveling Four. It seems that Rev. Billups went along with the name change. Both Frank Holley and Billy Marshall had been former members of the original Traveling Four Quartet out of Los Angeles and had recorded for the Mesner brothers' Aladdin records' gospel subsidiary, Score, back in April



Tony Harris (left) and the Travelling Four, 1952. Photograph courtesy Opal Louis Nations

1951 and February 1952. The group had split up after these dates.

Billy Marshall, still under contract with Aladdin, called the Mesners who were interested in recording the new Traveling Four after their return from Alaskan engagements. The group rehearsed when and wherever they could, in hotels, parks, and in the car on the way to Anchorage where they were chosen to run a revival meeting. During the time of the revival, a tragic incident occurred. The church, pastored by a white preacher, ministered to a white flock. The white preacher rented out his church basement to a black minister whose congregation was African American. The two services ran together and a fracas ensued ending in murder. The black minister had shot the white preacher. It was later discovered that the black minister was having an affair with the white preacher's wife, and the white preacher in retaliation had made death threats. The revival was canceled and Billups found a gig on the Fort Richardson Army base.

This was followed by an appearance on the nearby Air Force base, a guest spot with The Salvation Army, mini concerts for the YMCA and the YWCA, and ten-minute appearances at the Lions and Rotary clubs. The group rented expensive rooms in private homes, and heavy snows were forecast. In an effort to avoid severe weather, the outfit headed south-east on the Alaska Highway, stopping at a gas station two hundred miles beyond Dawson Creek on the way to Edmonton. Billups told the attendant that he was traveling with his gospel quartet and that they needed singing jobs to pay their fare home. The attendant said he could find work, and as there were no concert halls or churches thereabouts, he would find manpower and hurriedly build them a suitable place for the occasion.

Stunned, The Traveling Four gave a concert to an appreciative audience under a makeshift wood and canvas structure two days later. The next day, they drove north and gave a performance at White Horse for The Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The bill was shared with Monty Montana and his trick-performing horse. From White Horse, the group headed for the tiny town of Leduc, Alberta, just south of Edmonton where they gave forth at the new ice palace and arena. The program was sponsored in part by radio station

CJCA out of Edmonton. While at CJCA, The Traveling Four were hired to sing commercials for the ice hockey league. The group would do anything to raise gas money to get them back to Seattle.

In Edmonton, the guys befriended a pair of businessmen named Harvey and Flynn. Harvey and Flynn got the fellows gigs playing opposite country comics Homer and Jethro. The group found themselves booked for six months. En route to Seattle, the group played a weekend gig at the Crossroads Inn in Billings, Montana, then on to a show lounge booking at Club Horizon in Great Falls. The guys played a week at the Starlight Club in Kalispell backed by a jazz combo, The Mad Geniuses, up from San Francisco. (The Starlight burned down only days after the group touched home base in Seattle.)

Soon they were heading south. Stopping in Portland, the group played Thomas Wyatt's formidable Wings of Healing church. After a concert in Salem, Oregon, The Traveling Four played a string of dates in Los Angeles, including Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple. On April 30, 1953, The Traveling Four entered the Radio Recorders studio in Los Angeles and recorded six well-prepared numbers for Aladdin Records. Three singles hit the record stores during the summer and fall of 1953. "What He's Done For Me," the group's best-selling effort, fires along at a breakneck pace. Harris's soft tenor weaves in and around the refrain as the support tries to strengthen the pace with increasing energy. "This Little Light Of Mine" on the flip seems to follow the same formula but Harris's tenor breaks from the mold at explosive points during the relentless chanting cemented with Rudy Toomb's piano figures.

The group never drastically strays from the basic framework of the songs as they were originally written, hence the two offerings remain excellent examples of good, traditional gospel singing. The aggregation's other four efforts are of similar stripe, although in later years when one of the songs, "Traveling Shoes," was reissued on an Imperial label gospel album, heavy, out-of-sync rhythm instrumentation was dubbed over with disastrous effect. After staying for a while in Los Angeles with relatives, Harris and the group were back on the road armed with boxes of freshly

minted records. Heading through Texas and Louisiana, the group made the rounds of out-of-the-way radio stations before landing in Galveston. "What He's Done For Me" sold well in southern black communities and brought welcome work to the group. A second most popular deejay behind Dr. Hepcat in the Galveston area was George Prater, one of the first black record spinners in Texas. Prater had an R & B program as well as a gospel show on KJBC which he conducted without getting out of bed, usually while wearing pyjamas.

Prater's career in radio began through announcer friend Harry Martin. After an automobile accident severed Prater's spinal chord and paralyzed him from the neck down, station owners built a studio around his bed at home and put a glass front on his house so that his fans could see him while he did his show. Harris loved Prater who always seemed cheerful despite his disability. Prater broke "What He's Done For Me" in the Gulf Coast area. The Veteran Cab Company of Galveston became the group's promoter in the Baytown and Texas City areas. The boys went on to appear in Beaumont. Later, they were caught in a flood for a month during a revival meeting in Jennings, Louisiana. The guys were afraid to venture outdoors as surrounding flood waters were rumored to be full of water moccasins. After escaping, the group headed for Eunice where they played the Grant A.M.E. Church.

On their way to Houston following a date in Crowley, the group drove to Crockett to visit Bill Marshall's family. Billups decided to head east over to Lufkin to visit with his old friend, Snr. Roy Crain, manager and tenor with The Soul Stirrers. The group's route plan was to head back down Highway 59 to Houston as opposed to Route 75. When they found Crain's house, Harris and Grover Mincey noticed Sam Cooke in The Stirrers' Cadillac with a half pint of hard liquor between his legs. The young, innocent, nineteen-year-old Harris was quite taken aback. He had always been given to believe that gospel singers practiced the life they preached. Harris was deeply disturbed. None of The Traveling Four touched a drop.

In part two of Tony Harris' story, Opal Louis Nations moves on to the mid 50's and beyond.

TONY HARRIS DISCOGRAPHY

With The L.A. Spiritual Singers (1948):

In My Heart/ Old Blind Barnabus

Recorded In Hollywood (# unknown)

With The Traveling Four (1953):

Free Lord / All On The Altar

Score 5047

What He Done For Me / This Little Light

Score 5048

Shoes, Wings & Harps (Traveling Shoes)/ To Canaan

Score 5049

With The Dap Daddies (1956)

The Teenhoppers' Ball / A Wonderful Time Up There

4 Star (# unknown)

Tony Harris (1957/58):

Chicken Baby Chicken / I'll Forever Love You

Ebb 104

Come Back / Why In The World

Ebb 115

Try This Little Ol' Heart / When I Get You Back

Ebb 120

You Fascinate Me / Swing, Swing, Swing

Ebb 128

With Marlene Gwynn (1959):

Don't Cry Baby / 2 Fishes & 5 Loaves Of Bread

Liberty (unissued)

Tony Harris(1960):

Christmas Everyday / Don't Cry Baby (remake)

Mercury (unissued)

With The Centuries (1962):

Geraldine / I Won't Stop Lovin' You

Dootone 469

With Loving You Unlimited (1981):

Double Portion LP 642

Satisfied mind

Praying Up

Deep River Deep

Rise Again

Sweet To Me

Good To The Last Drop

Respect Yaself (sic.)

Free Indeed

Don't Need A Handout

I Give Thanks