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**THE SARA MARTIN STORY**

**BLUES ESTAFETTE REPORT**

**TONY "CHICKEN" HARRIS Pt 2**

**ANDREW "JUNIOR BOY" JONES**



# The "Chicken Baby Chicken" Man

## The Story of Tony Harris - Part Two

by Opal Louis Nations



Tony Harris doing the Chicken with the Chuck Higgins band at the El Monte Auditorium, Los Angeles, 1957. Photograph courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

**I**n part one of the Tony Harris story we left Harris, then a member of the Traveling Four gospel quartet in Houston. We take up the story again in Houston, Texas where Tony moves into the world of Rhythm and Blues.....

Having arrived in Houston, the Traveling Four met up with Little Richard, his Tempo Toppers, and exotic go-go dancers. Johnny Ace was booked to play a major concert in town the same week the Traveling Four were slated to conduct revival services at the large Assembly of God Church. Billups tried in vain to get the group work through Evelyn Johnson's Buffalo Booking Agency. Johnson was in Don Robey's pocket and would only find work for artists under contract with Peacock Records in Houston. Lillian Cumber at Herald Attractions conducted business the same way, although both accepted major artists from the outside on a non-contractual basis.

After Houston, The Traveling Four played The Soul Stirrers' home turf of Tyler, then hit Sherman, Dennison, and Waco. The group's revival at The Pentecostal Church of God for white holy rollers on Texas Avenue in Shreveport coincided with the touring Joe Lewis R & B caravan starring Atlantic recording artists Ruth Brown and The Clovers, but the revival service was packed with souls. People hung from windows on the outside of the building, unable

to find standing room inside. Six days into the revival, the church's pastor and his wife pleaded with Billups to have the ongoing proceedings stopped. A bunch of racist rednecks had threatened to torch the church if the revival continued. Rumor spread that the threats were being made by the Ku Klux Klan. Services were terminated.

The group's next engagement was Bossier City, a Klan stronghold. Nobody knew this at the time, except Frank Holley but Frank never let on. The meeting started on a Monday and was shut down the next day. With the two revival meetings foreshortened and Billups away taking care of his business enterprises in Seattle, the group was out of work. Billy Marshall assumed leadership and drove out to surrounding towns to find gainful employment. Although each group member was guaranteed a weekly base salary of \$150, the guys missed the handsome cash bonuses.

The Traveling Four sought out engagements at white churches. Traveling Four concerts were met with mixed blessings. Some folks harbored prejudice, some did not. The Holy Roller church people were the least discriminating and Billy knew this, booking the group at The Holiness Church of God in Christ on the Arkansas border. The quartet witnessed much talking in tongues and laying on of hands. The Holiness Church would have nothing to do with other denominations. This did not help the group's referral business much. Billy had problems with his clothes. Only preachers and teachers in the south were exempt from wearing overalls during the work week.

The group found a three-day engagement at the black Methodist church in North Minden, not far from where Percy Mayfield was raised. Harris then took sick with tonsillitis and money disappeared with hospital bills. Church folk helped out a little. Frank Holley, Billy Marshall, and Jimmy "Preacher" Ellis took off to visit relatives in neighboring states. When Harris recovered, he walked fifteen miles from Minden to Cullen. In Cullen, he was taken in by preacher Elder Lewis and his family. The Lewis's felt sorry for the lad and sort of adopted him. Elder Lewis and Harris often tuned in to Daddy's-Hot-Rods program on KJCA.

Hot-Rod was Chester McDowell, old friend of Harris and founding member from Texas of The Traveling Four. McDowell later crossed over to R & B and recorded for Don Robey's Duke label. He was also lead in a group called Hunki-Dori on Sun. Lewis introduced Harris to a friend of his named Candy who often stopped by the house. Candy, who managed a gospel group, asked Harris to sit in on the group's rehearsals and maybe give pointers. Needing work, Harris took a job pressing woolen garments at a dry cleaning store but wanting something that paid more money, quit the cleaners and got a job at the local paper mill pushing bags of concrete on a wheelbarrow. From this, he graduated to unloading boxcars but was laid off. Finding no work, Harris with Billy Marshall in tow left Cullen and head for South Dallas where the pair met up with Elvin Pete Hunt, ex-member of The L.A. Spiritual Singers.

Harris and Marshall hung around South Dallas for awhile. Harris eventually found work hauling cement again. Just after Christmas, Harris and



Marshall pawned their suits for spare cash and set out for Abilene. After a brief stop-over, the two aimed for Midland where Harris found piece work at a dry cleaners, through a guy named Eddie who sang in a local gospel quartet. Frank Holley joined Harris and Marshall in Midland. Meanwhile, Jimmy "Preacher" Ellis had returned to Seattle. After Marshall fetched Ellis to Texas from Washington in a brand new 1954 Buick, the quartet sang in a youth rally at a Baptist church in downtown North Odessa, Texas. It felt good to be back singing as a unit again. Marshall drove the car on through Oklahoma into Colorado where the group stopped in Denver to play at a tiny African American place of worship.

The group's next stop was Wichita, Kansas where the guys again sang at a small black church. Here, the fellows met a man who managed a youth chorus. The chorus appeared on local t.v. every Friday on a program which customarily included three additional groups. The Traveling Four finagled a guest spot on the show. It was at this point the group met up with Curtis Bryant. Bryant was singing with one of the three local outfits and wanted to quit and join The Traveling Four. Bryant had a smooth baritone voice. Harris and Ellis thought he sounded too much like Keith "Doc." Barbour of The Pilgrim Travelers. Marshall, on the other hand, liked his sound and so did Rev. Billups who without further discussion brought Bryant into the group. Bryant also came with a shiny new Buick.

The Traveling Four (now five) made two TV appearances, one in Newton, the other in Hutchinson, Kansas. This was followed by a stint on The Billy Graham traveling crusade and rally held at a park in Hutchinson. Cold and penniless, the boys eventually ended up in Rocky Springs, Wyoming where, after scrounging five bucks from a travel bureau, ended up eating sandwiches and coffee at The Salvation Army. Rev. Billups came to the rescue and wired money overnight from Seattle. Driving through Pocatello, Idaho and on into Boise, the group hitched up with Rev. Johnson and his singing daughter Janice. The Johnsons were performing at a Baptist church where a revival meeting was in progress. The Traveling Four asked if they could join the proceedings in the hope of being blessed with financial handshakes.

The group was duly invited, sang two gospel selections, and were modestly rewarded. Two days later, the quartet was back home in Seattle in time for a special homecoming concert. The home based fans were anxious to hear the new singer, Curtis Bryant who they later nicknamed "too close" Bryant because he enjoyed singing Rev. Alex Bradford's hit song "I'm too close" on Specialty Records. In Seattle, The Traveling Four also played The Friendship Baptist on Jackson Street, The Mount Baker Baptist, and Brother Ralph's Revival Tabernacle downtown. After pocketing a cache of generous donations, the quartet headed for mountain country. At Yakima, the boys sang for Rev. Doyle Hart's congregation on Indian territory. Then the group went on to dates in Thorpe and Pasco.

Following the Washington trip, The Traveling Four headed south to Portland where they sang at The Wings of Healing Church under the guidance of senior pastor Thomas Wyatt. The seven Jessup brothers were in revival there at the time. All were ordained ministers. The Rev. Darrell Jessup wanted to hire and take The Traveling Four on the road with him but the boys were booked solid on a busy touring schedule. Next stop was a remote Mennonite church on the way to Salem. In Salem, the group played a church pastored by Max Wyatt. This was followed by an engagement at Max's father's church in Portland. A reunion with the Jessups from Gulfport, Mississippi at The Wings of Healing brought a promise to join their revival in San Francisco.

Driving south into California, The Traveling Four with the Jessups played an in-progress revival at The Noe Theater on Twenty-Fourth and Noe in San Francisco. Billing was shared with Sister Pakoley Kuntz, a Native American performer from Oklahoma. The Noe Theater proceedings were handled by assistant pastor Patterson who enjoyed a business relationship with KSAN radio and cable t.v. affiliate Channel

Harris rehearsed with Goldsmith's group for a few months, then took up again with Charles James from Dallas. James, you will recall, was Harris' old friend in The Golden Wings. James, at this point, managed a group called The Golden Chords whose repertoire and singing style matched that of their idols, The Dixie Hummingbirds of Philadelphia. Johnny Martin, then a member of The Golden Chords, did not really get along with the rest of the guys in the group. Martin asked Harris if they could switch quartets. Martin would join the fledgling Sensational Wonders and take on Harris's instructional duties, and Harris would take his place in The Golden Chords. This seemed an amicable arrangement to Harris as he too admired The Dixie Hummingbirds and their work although he did not much relish singing in a group who copied a more successful one. But Harris made the switch.

Today, Goldsmith manages The Angels of Joy out of Los Angeles. During the bus cleaning period, Harris befriended a Mrs. Mabel Weathers, a junior high school counselor from South L.A. and owner of the tiny Impala label. Weathers managed a handful of local up-and-

coming R & B acts, namely Clydie King of "Our romance" fame on Specialty (1958). Clydie later joined The Raelettes, recorded as Little Clydie, and changed his name again to Brown Sugar in the Seventies. Weathers also had Darlene Love (Franklin) under contract. Love later went on to sing lead in The Blossoms on Challenge Records. Darlene Love along with lead singer Marzetta Freeman recorded in a group called The Echoes who waxed the beautiful 1957 recording "Someone" also put out on Specialty. The Echoes backed Clydie King on his only Specialty release and previously recorded for Combo Records.

Harris signed a management contract with the Weathers talent agency. Darlene Love and The Echoes were

students at L.A.'s Fremont High. Weathers introduced Harris to Bumps Blackwell who took The Golden Chords over to meet Art Rupe at Specialty Records. Bumps had the group cross over to R & B and shortened their name to The Chords but later re christened the group The Dap Daddies to avoid confusion with other Chords groups. Harris had no problem whatsoever with switching from gospel to R & B. Blackwell cut a demonstration EP on The Chords/Dap Daddies. One of the songs was a cover of Pha Terrell's rendering of "In My Wildest Dreams supported by the Andy Kirk Orchestra from back in the early Forties. Harris spent his days at Blackwell's house. Blackwell was actively seeking material for Sam Cooke to record and as an avid bric-a-brac collector spent vast amounts of time organizing pottery and bronze exhibits.

The Dap Daddies meanwhile did backup work and demonstration records out in Pasadena for W.S. Stevenson, proprietor of Four Star Records. Stevenson, a song writing pseudonym for Bill McCall, wrote material for Patsy Cline, some of which he recorded. McCall,



The Travelling Four, mid 1950s, with Tony Harris in the middle. Photo courtesy Opal Louis Nations

18 at Twin Peaks. Patterson arranged to have The Traveling Four sing every other morning over KSAN. The live broadcast stretched to fifteen weeks.

Just before leaving Seattle on the tour, Jimmy "Preacher" Ellis had gotten married, and while sequestering in San Francisco, Harris, Bryant, and Holley also tied the knot. With new spouses to consider, the future of the group as a traveling entity seemed doomed. The inevitable happened, and the group split up. Harris headed south to Los Angeles to present Doris Marie, his new bride, to his parents. He then took a job with the Continental Bus Company, cleaning, driving, and parking vehicles. He hated it but needed the regular work. Harris's friend and old voice coach, Bedile Goldsmith, had discovered Little Willie Joe Ligon and was planning to build a group around him. The outfit was to be called The Sensational Wonders whose core members eventually evolved into The Mighty Clouds of Joy. Goldsmith invited Harris along to rehearsals. All prospective members in rehearsal at this time were in their teens or younger.



a.k.a. Stevenson, dealt mainly with country artists but sometimes made dubs for gospel groups like The Pilgrim Travelers. Harris wrote a dance ditty he called "The Teen Hopper's Ball." Stevenson cut a demo of the tune and had it aired two days later on a local radio station. Being busy working on other projects at the time, Harris never kept track of the song or the demo.

On the flip side, Harris recorded "A Wonderful Time Up There" whose arrangements were lifted and rewaxed in 1958 by the crooning Pat Boone on Dot Records. Harris and The Dap Daddies continued to cut demos for Bumps Blackwell but payment for services rendered took a long time coming through. Without a regular job and ready cash, Harris and his wife took a trip over to Art Rupe's office over in Hollywood. Rupe, after listening to Harris's demos, thought he sounded too much like Sam Cooke which might have been so as Harris was at that time cutting songs through Blackwell for Cooke to record. Rupe came to the conclusion that Harris could serve Specialty Records better as a songwriter than as label talent. But as songwriter Harris worked freelance and signed no contract.

Over Christmas 1956, Harris, Blackwell, and guitarist/arranger René Hall were sitting around in the Specialty Records basement on Sunset Boulevard listening to rehearsal tapes Sam Cooke had made for possible future recording when down the stairs came Art Rupe with the idea of secularizing the lyrics to one of Cooke's better-selling gospel charts. That same year Cooke and The Soul Stirrers of Chicago, the gospel group he had fronted since 1951, had released a song entitled "Wonderful" ("He's So Wonderful") written by Virginia Davis and Professor Theodore Frye. The song first met with nationwide acclaim back in 1951 when Sister Jessie Mae Renfro and The Blind Boys of Mississippi had a hit with it on Peacock Records out of Houston.

Harris states that it was Rupe's idea to have him corrupt the lyrics to "Wonderful" and make it into a love ballad. Daniel Wolff states in his biographical narrative on Sam Cooke, "You Send Me," that back in the early spring of 1956, Bill Cook, Roy Hamilton's manager, together with Cooke himself were already working on a secular rewrite of "Wonderful" to test the waters for Cooke's inevitable cross-over into the pop field. Be that as it may, Harris states emphatically that "Lovable," the bubble-gum rewrite of "Wonderful," came from his pen. Harris asserts that Rupe had planned to use "Forever" as the top side. Rupe's idea was to fool people into thinking that Sam was a fresh-off-the-street teen (in this case label copy stated that the artist was Dale Cook), a cat with no prior gospel exposure.

Rupe did not want to offend the legions of gospel sisters who purchased Cooke's holy renderings in appreciable quantities. This of course fooled no one, and by degrees church folk began to accept Sam Cooke as a freshly transformed, popular recording artist. "Forever"/"Lovable" did not do as well as was expected. In the end, Blackwell traded all his work, including back royalties, for Little Richard sessions and ongoing projects at Specialty in return for Sam Cooke's contract. Just at the time when Blackwell was searching around for capital to produce and record Sam Cooke, Harris stuck around at Specialty hoping to get a chance to record for them in Cooke's stead. At Specialty Harris enjoyed infrequent backup vocal work and collected advance royalties on his rewrite of "Wonderful."

In February 1957, Harris, despairing that Rupe would never record him, went over to Keen, a label owned by businessman John Siamas and operated by Bob Keen in Beverly Hills. Herb Alpert, a producer at Keen, liked Harris and wanted to try and work something out with him, but Bob Keen, like Art Rupe, thought he sounded too much like Sam Cooke, and as Cooke was already recording for them, this was not in their best interest. Not giving up, Harris skipped over to the offices of Leona (Lee) Rupe, ex-wife of Art Rupe and president of Ebb Records.

After Harris's tour through Texas, he hooked up with Little Willie John and Linda Hopkins and with The Jimmy "Good Rockin'" Beasley's Band played Tulsa and Oklahoma City. This was followed by a gig in Houston with Bobby Bland and Junior Parker. Back on the Lowell Fulson/Big Maybelle tour, Harris did the Chicken in Shreveport and Alexandria, Louisiana. Heading on down to New Orleans, he hit the clubs with The Chris Kenner Band. Driving back to L.A., he tied up with The Johnny Otis Show and appeared along with the Penguins, Shields, Medallions, Joe Houston, and The Chuck Higgins Band at the Long Beach auditorium. From there, he shared billing with Bobby Day, The Olympics, The Shades of Rhythm, Don and Dewey, and Chuck Higgins on a show hosted by KRKD's Dick "Huggy Boy" Hug at the El Monte Legion Stadium.

During all the seemingly endless touring, Harris was asked to play on Dick Clark's American Bandstand program but only under certain conditions: no paid transportation, no preview of his record, and no African American dancers on the studio set. The Chicken dance was thought too obscene for Clark's clean-cut image. Harris refused to play the show. He found that even at



Dancers doing the Chicken at the El Monte Auditorium, L. A., 1957. Photo courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

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**"CHICKEN BABY  
CHICKEN"**

and

**"I'LL FOREVER  
LOVE YOU"**

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the civic auditorium in deepest Georgia, white folks constituted the bulk of his fans, yet Dick Clark up in Philadelphia wanted to keep things nice and white and clean. Some of Harris's white fans in the Deep South followed him from white venues into African American ones without discomfort.

Another hard gig was having to play a two-month club engagement in Atlanta all on his own with only one hit on the charts. Major New York promoter Henry Winn had booked Harris to play with Gloria Lynn. Lynn could not make it, so her agent sent an untried, unknown female soloist in



her place. Harris had a rough time trying to hold an audience almost single-handedly every night for two months. When Little Richard "got saved" and gave up singing and playing rhythm and blues and turned to church music in 1959, he left behind strings of unfulfillable advance bookings which his agents were reluctant to cancel. Better to get a stand-in than to lose thousands on your investment. Dee Clark took Little Richard's band, The Upsetters, and played the East Coast engagements but Harris, who bore only a fleeting resemblance to the "Georgia Peach" took on the South and West.

Meanwhile, Harris's follow-up record, "Come Back," put out in October 1957, did poorly as far as sales were concerned, although the release of his third waxing, "Try This Little Ol' Heart," fared better when it came out a month later but did not generate enough play to keep him working all the time. "You Fascinate Me," issued in January 1958, failed to impress, and things were going downhill fast. Harris himself is the first to admit that the quality of the material he was given to record was poor. Leona Rupe, with three less than modest J.J. Jones-produced failures on her hands, did not want to chance making any more bad investments, and released Harris from his contract.

Following the Little Richard commitments, Bumps Blackwell got Harris a part in the stage production of "Portraits In Bronze." "Portraits In Bronze," produced and directed by Blackwell, was a cabaret interpretation of African American jazz, spirituals, and blues rendered by gospel singers with drama, fervor, and passion. Starting out in 1959 at the Los Angeles Cabaret Theater, the show met with enthusiastic acclaim. The cast included a back-stage choir which supported the shouting, syncopated voices of Bessie Griffin and The Gospel Pearls. The Gospel Pearls included Delores Addison (who later became a fixture on the Dick Van Dyke TV show), Jerry Moss, Patricia Bryant, Felma Johnson, Thelma Lewis, Eddie Lee Kendrix (piano), and Joe Clayton (congas.)

When Blackwell took the "Portraits In Bronze" cast into the Liberty recording studios, he substituted the back-stage choir with orchestra and chorus and kept the jazz and blues portion featuring Marlene Gwynn and Tony Harris, respectively. At the Liberty studios, Gwynn recorded a jazz standard, and Harris handled one gospel and one blues number. Harris's songs were "Don't Cry Baby" and "Two Fishes And Five Loaves Of Bread."

On stage, Harris played the wayward son, a nightclub blues singer, hence his reading of James P. Johnson's famous standard, "Don't Cry Baby." Harris comes in again near the close of the show singing "Two Fishes And Five Loaves Of Bread" in a pulpit and altar setting. "Portraits In Bronze" went the rounds of Hollywood cafés, playing in West L.A., Santa Monica, Hermosa Beach, Merv Griffin's Hollywood Palace, and The El Capitan. "Portraits" had spots on local t.v. variety shows. The Gospel Pearls played the Patti Page Show, and the entire cast guested on The Ed Sullivan Show. The ensemble traveled to honor commitments out in Las Vegas. For reasons never adequately explained, Gwynn and Harris were excluded from the final 1960 Liberty album release cut at the RCA studios. To this day, Harris has never heard the final mix of his two show tunes.

During this period, Bumps, through Quincey Jones, introduced Harris to David Carroll, A & R man for Mercury Records. Mercury set a sessions date for Harris on which he recorded "Christmas Every Day," a song first waxed by Frankie Ervin with Johnny Moore's Three Blazers in 1955 for the Hollywood label and "Don't Cry Baby," the blues song from "Portraits In Bronze." Harris's friend, Art Lassiter, who had sung in



Tony Harris & The Hallelujah Voices. Photograph courtesy Opal Louis Nations

The Trojans vocal group with The Ike Turner Band and had fronted The Rockers on Federal, played guitar on the session. But David Carroll chose not to push the songs for release. Nevertheless, Harris signed a recording contract with Mercury.

Following the aborted Mercury session, Harris hooked up with Bill Sampson, a deejay who hosted a regular radio show out of Jack's Basket Room on Central and Thirtieth Streets. Sampson became Harris's manager and regular work was found in Lodi, Modesto, Merced, Fresno, and Bakersfield. Sampson renewed the ruse of having Harris masquerade as Little Richard, but to avoid legal entanglements, the word "Jr." was added in tiny, tiny print to the end of his name on the handbills. Sampson took Harris to the Mexican border where he was slated to play a bullfighting stadium in Calexico. The people in the town, not knowing the difference between Richard Penniman and Tony Harris, treated Harris like royalty. Harris was ridden all over town atop a rear seat in a Cadillac. People on crowded sidewalks screamed "Li'l Richard! Li'l Richard!"

Ticket prices at the stadium were high, but paying customers were many. Just a few miles north, in El Centro, California, the billing changed. Harris played the water melon capital under his true name, alongside Bobby "Itchy Twitchy" Hendricks and Chuck Higgins. Heading back to the border, Harris hit Tijuana and had himself a good time. At a double program, headlined as Little Richard Jr. in Indio, East of Palm Springs, Harris was recognized by a female Little Richard fan who instructed her friends to demand their money back. Although many refunds were made, crowds of fans waited anxiously to buy their seats. Beside this, the young lady had reported Harris to the F.B.I. who stormed the dressing rooms. Sampson talked the agents around, and the situation was smoothed over.

Although living in Seattle, ex-baritone Traveling Four stalwart Jimmy "Preacher" Ellis made excursions to Los Angeles during the early sixties to record for the Romark label. In 1962, Ellis had made a deal with Dootsie Williams at Dootone Records on West First Street. Ellis longed for the old days and hooking back up with lead singer Billy Marshall and Tony Harris formed a doo-wop group called The Centuries. Ellis got the idea for the name from The Twentieth Century Exposition then housed in Seattle.

In early spring 1962 the trio entered the Dootone studios and recorded "Geraldine" backed with "I won't stop loving you." Dootsie Williams promised that if the single sold in

impressive quantities, he would sign Ellis and the group to an album deal. "Geraldine" is a chant-like waltz with a righteous gospel feel. A strong beat persists relentlessly, supported by good, solid harmony work. "I Won't Stop Loving You" is a jump song in The Five Royales tradition that bounces along punctuated by Harris's intermittent falsetto wails. The single did not fare very well. Consequently, the album deal was canceled, and The three Centuries split up and returned to their respective families.

Ellis continued to record for Ride, Movin', Kris, Space, and Round labels. Then, some time in 1969, he teamed up with arranger Zeke Strong and recorded the soul-drenched blues ballad "You Can't Pour Water On Me And Tell Me It's Raining" for Hip-Delic Records.

In the seventies, Harris road-managed The Oldies But Goodies Revue aboard The Queen Mary docked off the Long Beach Coast. He would sometimes sing on a guest spot alongside The Rivingtons, Myles & The Drifters, and Gary U.S. Bonds. Harris even sang in The Rivingtons group for a while. During the eighties, he split his occupational duties into two by both managing The Hallelujah Voices (a contemporary gospel chorus of eleven women) and resurrecting a new Traveling Four aggregation. The new Traveling Four enjoyed radio exposure on The Paul Kidd Jr. Show over KDAY and on "Spiritual Vibes," a seven-day-a-week gospel program on KMAX hosted by Ollie Collins Jr. who had at one time recorded for Peacock Records.

In 1981, Harris formed The Double Portion Record Company and recorded himself alongside members of his new Traveling Four group. At the Present Time Studios in North Hollywood, the group billed as Loving You Unlimited recorded ten songs in the contemporary gospel idiom. Session personnel included a ten-piece band, background singers, and a guest appearance by singer Lisa Nemzo of Firefall. The album garnered quite a bit of attention in and around the Los Angeles area at the time. Harris struggled to keep his new group together but fought a losing battle.

Tony Harris is still active on the Los Angeles music scene, just as happy singing gospel as he is R&B. He plans to develop The Chicken Baby Chicken Show together with his fashion model daughter, billed as Harris & Harris which just goes to prove there's grit in the old rooster yet.

**Opal Louis Nations: From autobiographical notes and conversations with Tony Harris.**