



The Creators / Dootones #2 Story

By Opal Louis Nations and Steve Propes

I have always counted The Creators' "Drafted, Volunteered and Enlisted" as one of my favorite wacky novelty B-sides, cut during a period when The Coasters gave us "Little Egypt (Ying Yang)," The Silks sang about the t.v. action hero "Zorro," the masked Mexican crusader, and The Clovers shot back with "Have Gun" (will travel). Being able to escape into total zaniness took people's minds off Kennedy's intrusion into The Bay of Pigs and the overthrow of Cuban liberator Fidel Castro.

The Creators were part of the L.A. vocal group phenomenon that was spawned out of Jefferson High. In fact, it is not too far fetched to think of Jeff High as being doo-wop's monument to musical maternity. More would-be L.A. warblers sprang from there than any other place of learning during the music's golden age.

This is The Creators / Dootones history principally from Gentry Bradley's perspective. Bradley was the bass and baritone singer in both outfits. Bradley was born in Louisville, in the bluegrass state, on October 14, 1943, on a patch of sod called The Bottoms just outside of Boot Hill. Boot Hill must have been a place our World War II troops thought about at the time as they pushed on the offensive into Italy. When Bradley reached the tender age of seven, he sang in his cousins' gospel quartet, The Eastern Star Gospel Singers, out of the Baptist church bearing the same name.

The Eastern Stars, beside Bradley, were Jessie Sebastian, Rufus Bradley, and Felton Bradley Jnr. Gentry Bradley learned harmony and stuck with the group for two years. He moved to L.A. in 1956, settling north of Florence at 69th and Main. The Muff and Puff Brothers (Charles and Robert Lewis), chums of Bradley, lived across at 71st

and Main. After a short period, the family moved north to 53rd and Avalon. To Bradley's surprise, Muff & Puff had also relocated to the same neighborhood and were now residing across the street. Muff & Puff could sing, and together with Bradley and others they formed a group called "4 Millionaires and 1 Pooraire" who concertized on occasion at Jeff High. Bradley was the one "Poor-aire."

In December 1960, Bradley, with his date Mary Brooks, a college friend of one of Bradley's cousins, went out to Donald Neal's birthday party. Brooks just happened to be Donald Neal's cousin. The party was held at Neal's place in Compton at 134th and Central. Neal was first tenor with The Creators who also attended and were remembered as singing their own modified arrangement of Blackburn and Suessdorf's 1944 nugget, "Moonlight in Vermont." Other members of The Creators that evening were Gerald Middleton, second tenor, and Thomas Harris, baritone. First tenor Donald Neal, nicknamed "Popsicle," married Gloria Govan, brother of Dave Govan, baritone singer in The Vibrations of "Watusi" fame.

The Creators at this juncture were survivors from different groups. They were in need of a good bass singer to fill out on harmonies. Bradley offered his services but was laughed at for looking too old (Bradley was only sixteen at the time.) Unperturbed, Bradley hung around. "Before Charles Perry came along, the group had a different lead singer," said Gentry Bradley. One day, according to Bradley, the group along with himself were heading over to the Nanc storefront studio on the northeast corner of 109th and Main for a practice session. The first lead singer was in the driver's seat. But then disaster struck. At 108th and Main, the lead singing driver knocked down and killed a pedestrian. The driver went to prison for eighteen months. Hillary Conedy of The Fascinators asserts that the driver of the car was Donald Neal. Local hero Charles Perry took his place, and Gentry Bradley was taken into the group.

The Creators wanted to stick with Mr. Nance at Nanc Records and did not want to have any dealings with Dootsie Williams who they had heard did not cut a square deal. As the cash-strapped Mr. Nance was not doing anything with the guys (who were by now becoming impatient), and Dootsie had offered the quartet a contract, Bradley took the document to his father for advice. The pair then showed the agreement to The Better Business Bureau who approved of its terms. The quartet rehearsed one of Perry's love ballads, "I've had you" and sent a tape of it to Dootsie Williams. Williams called the guys and had them come down to sessionsman Austin McCoy's studio at 135th and Avalon.

On the initial release, the ballad "I've had you" (whose studio arrangement was worked on at the time of recording by all of the singers) came out as the topside, and the comical "Drafted, Volunteered & Enlisted" (a Charles Perry song) ended up on the flip. To my mind, and contrary to the opinions of most vocal group aficionados, the ballad lacks luster and should have been switched with "Drafted" which is not only amusing but is totally together both vocally and musically. The switch could possibly have sold more copies and might have helped sales of "Zorro" (recorded some three years before by Charles McCullough & The Silks from Compton) and released around the time of "Drafted."

Bradley states that the record sold pretty well around L.A. and remembers cutting it at Ted Brinson Studios with Ted himself sitting in on bass-fiddle. "We played the Pacific Ballroom in San Diego, The Moulin Rouge and Palladium on Sunset Boulevard, The Long Beach Arena, and The El Monte Legion Stadium where

masquerading as The Penguins we backed Cleve Duncan. We did record hops for Hunter Hancock and can remember that the record starting taking off when we were sharing the bill with Vernon Green & The Medallions at Memory Lane. Later on, we masqueraded as The Drifters and performed their whole act on stage." My suspicion is that some of this activity took place when the group was in its Dootone and later Creations configurations.

After the single failed to chart, Charles Perry was lured away from the group by Jesse Mae Robinson who ran a promotional talent agency on Western Avenue. The number of successful tunes penned by Robinson is so extensive there is not enough space to mention them all here. One of her best remembered charts is "Black night," first recorded by Charles Brown on Aladdin in 1951 and since waxed by a host of others including Muddy Waters and Bobby Bland.

After Perry's departure, The Creators (who had chosen this moniker because they felt their musical ideas were fresh and original), split up. So much for fresh ideas. A group out of Compton called The Fascinators, consisting of Rev. (Duke) Hillary Conedy, lead, Charles "Bass Happy" Dunford, bass, Donald Dunn, first tenor, David Harris, baritone, and Joe Green, second tenor, got together as teens and shared a passion for singing. It all started when Conedy and Dunn met as ninth graders at Compton's Enterprise Junior High. In 1958, after a recommendation by Teddy Harper of The Penguins, the group recorded the ballad classic "Teardrop eyes" for Dootsie Williams' Dooto label. Both sides ("Shivers and shakes" being the single's underside) were awarded three stars each in Billboard's Record Round Up chart for September.

Although "Shivers and shakes" was plugged as the A-side, "Teardrop eyes" endures today as a quartet masterpiece both by The Fascinators and in its original version by The Dukes, recorded for Imperial in 1956.

Dootsie Williams never had the group record again. Out of despair, some members left and some stayed. In 1962, The Fascinators, now consisting of David Harris, Donald Dunn, Joe Green, Hillary Conedy, and Charles Dunford, got connected with Mr. Nance of Nanc Records. (Nanc was Nance's mother's name.) Nance did little to advance the careers of The Fascinators and was in the process of being sued for some reason by Hunter Hancock in connection with his song "One more chance" originally recorded by Little Johnnie Taylor on Hancock's Swingin label (Swingin 639.)

Nance's only known worthwhile vocal group release was "Give me your love" / "I need your love" by The Egyptian Kings (Nanc 1120, 1961.) Nance was cheap when it came to product. The second issue of "Give me your love" was pressed in inferior styrene, a plastic byproduct that virtually deadens the aural fidelity, making it almost worthless on the collectors' market.

The Fascinators cut a demo of "I'll walk through the darkness" (based on C. Austin Miles' 1962 gospel song "In the garden," rearranged by Hillary Conedy) for Nanc Records, but according to Conedy, Nance would not release it because of legal entanglements with Hancock. This was a major factor in the break-up of The Fascinators. Out of the remnants of The Creators and Fascinator came The Ebbs.

The Ebbs were composed of Gentry Bradley (bass/baritone) and Gerald Middleton (second tenor) of The Creators, and Royal Dillard (first tenor lead) and Hillary Conedy (first tenor lead) of The Fascinators. The Ebbs rehearsed five songs: "If you were my darling," "Strange love affair" (composed by songwriter Donald Smith), Royal Dillard's "The day you said goodbye," and "Sailor boy" plus Dillard's "Down the

road" (based on The Solitaires' 1957 Old Town hit "Walking along.") As Bradley had had a fair shake with Dootsie Williams in the recent past, The Ebbs went to Dootone to record.

Williams liked the group but not the name. It sounded too much like The Ebbtones, another L.A. group under contract with Leonora "Lee" Rupe's Ebb label. If Ebb had The Ebbtones, thought Williams, Dootone ought to have at least one working Dootones quartet. Williams launched the first original Dootones group back in 1955 when Ronald Barrett and Charles Gardner (tenors), H.B. Barnum (baritone), and Marvin Wilkins (bass) got together to record the unforgettable "Teller of fortune." The record sold fairly well for the guys on the West Coast, but they were unable to capitalize on their favorable success as H.B. Barnum went off to join The Robins and later to pursue a solo career in singing and songwriting as well as producing and running his own recording company, Bun-Rab. Barnum was the pivotal figure in the outfit.

Williams now saw the chance to create a second "signature" quartet. He took the unit to Sunset Studios on Sunset and Cahuenga Boulevard and enlisted the services of The Ernie Freeman Combo with Ernie on piano and an amusing cross-eyed looking bass fiddle player. Freeman was called to do all the arrangements. The four songs chosen for release were Donald Smith's "Strange love affair," a pretty, perky ballad with a catchy melody line, Dillard's "The day you said goodbye," a moody, smoky ballad reminiscent of The Spaniels' "Peace of mind" which should have made more noise than it did when it came out, "Sailor boy," a ballad similar to "The day you said goodbye" but with a more definite rhythm and sanctified feel ("Sailor boy" could possibly be a slightly different arrangement of "Goodbye"), and "Down the road," a jump similar to "Walking along" with its distinctly East Coast feel.

Bradley explains that "Strange love affair" must have gone through at least forty-two takes. "Every time we did the song over, we looked over at the cross-eyed bass player and cracked up laughing. Ernie Freeman must have felt there was something seriously wrong with their grasp of his arrangements." "If you were my darling" was held in the can and did not surface until 1997 when Ace Records in England issued it on their second volume of Doo-Wop from Dootone (Ace CHCD 588.) Bradley states that "The day you said goodbye" sold better than "I've had you" which is not surprising. The Dootones group sounded more together and had a much broader harmony than The Creators did. The problem with The Dootones, says Bradley, was that the guys would not rehearse. "They just wanted to mess around with girls."

The Dootones did live background work for Cleve Duncan when he went out as a solo, played record hops and gigged at the Dootone Entertainment Center on 135th and Central. Dootsie Williams held shows and record promotion parties to launch his artists down at his Center. The Dootones also played The El Monte Stadium. The era of close-quartet harmony was coming to a close. Popular music in general was changing away from a black-rooted base into a softer pop and popular folk idiom, one which favored soloists and a more complex instrumental arrangement.

Meanwhile, Charles Perry, who was fortunate enough to get himself patronization from a wealthy philanthropist by the name of Amanda Arthur, recorded "I'll walk through the darkness" (the same song as on The Fascinators' demo.) The Blossoms (Darlene Wright, Gloria Jones, and Fanita Barrett) were hired to chirp away on the B-side. The Blossoms started out as The Dreamers behind Richard Berry and

later on recorded anonymously as The Crystals behind Darlene Love, before ending up as The Blue Jeans behind Bobby Sheen.

Arthur had Perry signed to Melic Records but refused to use The Dootones on the "Darkness" session. The Dootones eventually split up when Royal Dillard left to join the Hi Tensions on Milestone Records.

The "stroll" rhythm arrangement of "I'll walk through the darkness" sold poorly, and the flip, "If there wasn't any you," (supported amiably by The Blossoms) did not help to turn things around. With Charles Perry back in quartet-land, a second Creators group came together. Perry sang first lead, Donald Neal, fresh out of clink, first tenor, Gerald Middleton, second tenor, Hillary Conedy, falsetto and third tenor, Thomas Harris, baritone, and Gentry Bradley bass.

The fellas were introduced to Lew Bedell of Dove Records who signed the group to a limited contract. It is interesting to note that an outfit called The Ebbs recorded for Dove in 1959. I very much doubt there would have been any connection between these Ebbs and the late Creators / Dootones groups.

Most of Bedell's vocal group talent tended to be white, although he did make exceptions with The Creators and later The Whispers. Some controversy surrounds the recording of "Too far to turn around," the B-side of The Creators' first and only release on Dove. "Too far to turn around" is a song that sounds amazingly similar to The Dootones' rendering of Royal Dillard's "The day you said goodbye." I very much suspect that Dillard ripped off the song which was supposedly written by Lummie Fowler of Lummtone Records who had his group The Upfronts record it for Lummtone in 1960 (Lummtone 106.)

Don Fileti asserts in his notes to The Best of Lummtone Records (Relic LP 5068) that The Upfronts' version garnered little mileage. Lew Bedell states that Floyd Bryant, who identified himself as being affiliated with The Creators, said he penned "Too far to turn around" and upon hearing and liking it, Bedell had The Creators record it. Bryant could have originated the song and Fowler might have pirated it. Bradley complicates things even more by saying that Fowler actually attended the session and worked on the arrangements to the tune with The Creators. "He kept stopping the music and indicating how it should go," says Bradley. Not owning a copy of the single, I cannot say for sure whether Fowler is ascribed song-writing credit or not.

Bedell went ahead and pressed 1,000 initial copies to test the market. He says he only found out after this that Bryant had not written "The day you said goodbye." Fowler threatened to sue, and Bedell withdrew the release. The topside was a musical comedy entitled "Hello there Mr. Gravedigger," about a man digging a hole and a dead hand reaching up from out of a grave. Bradley says he voice-overed the narrative part to "Gravedigger." "The day you said goodbye" was out on the market for two weeks, then withdrawn. "Hello there Mr. Gravedigger" was a musical sketch started from scratch in the studio by The Ernie Freeman Combo who played the music to it. The Creators were unable to find another label to record them and without a current release had a hard time finding work. As a consequence, the quartet split up by 1964. Bradley was a close friend of Johnny Wyatt who had been a featured soloist for awhile with Rochelle & The Candles of "Once upon a time" fame on Hunter Hancock's Swingin' label (Swingin' 623, 1960.)

Back in 1961, both Wyatt and Bradley dated the same girl, Glenda Hudson. Rochelle married Bradley's third cousin, Annette. When T.C. ("Top Cat") Henderson

left The Candles, Bradley with Wyatt's recommendation stepped into his shoes. Bradley went with The Candles for about a year. "We played at the Palladium, Basie's Ballroom at Vermont and Hollywood, and at Hair (formerly the Moulin Rouge,)" says Bradley. Gentry Bradley quit the music business for awhile, then in 1986 he joined West Coast and recorded "Christmas Time" for Joey Gallo's Dee Jay Records in Pacific Palisades. Hillary "Duke" Conedy went through a difficult period after quitting The Creators, found Christianity and became a minister and pastored a C.O.G.I.C. affiliation out in Lancaster.

The Creators came about during our attempted overthrow of Cuba's Fidel Castro and split up when the omnibus civil rights bill banning discrimination in voting, jobs, and public accommodations came into law. the guys at least had something positive to think about besides the uncertainties of the entertainment business.

-- Opal Louis Nations and Steve Propes, May 1998