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During the early 1960s Chicago had its own Dreamgirls.

The Opals were the in-house girl group at Carl Davis' Okeh Records. They sang behind late Chicago soul singers Walter Jackson and Major Lance. They did the sweet backup on the 1964 Betty Everett smash "The Shoop Shoop Song (It's in His Kiss)." With production by Davis, the Opals released four singles between 1963 and 1967, charting with the Curtis Mayfield compositions "You're Gonna Be Sorry" and "You Can't Hurt Me No More." Both songs were cut on May 26, 1964, at Columbia Recording Studios at McClurg Court in Chicago.

Their path is uncannily similar to that of Chicago native Jennifer Hudson, who stars in the film "Dreamgirls," which opens Christmas Day. Like Hudson, the Opals grew up in church. Like Hudson's ascent in "American Idol," Opals singer Rosie "Tootsie" Addison won a talent show. In 1962 Addison sang Ray Charles' "What I'd Say" at East Chicago Washington (Ind.) High School. The Opals formed later that year.

The Opals began as an all-girl quartet and later sang as a trio. Addison, 61, is the only member who still lives in Chicago. Myra Tillotson lives in Atlanta; Betty Blackmon is in Frankfort; lead singer Rose E. Kelly is in Union Springs, Ala. Latter-day Opal Juanita Tucker resides in Hammond, Ind.

An East Chicago record producer named them the Opals. "We wore opal stones around our necks," Addison said last week. "Until we found out they were supposed to be bad luck stones."

A candied-toned soprano, Addison sang lead on "Hop, Skip and Jump," the Opals first regional hit. "I knew I wouldn't always be lead singer," Addison said, drawing on another Hudson parallel. "That's not my gift. My gift was my ear. I could hear if we were flat or sharp, if we were rushing it."

The legendary Chicago doo-wop group the Dells discovered the Opals in 1962 when the women were singing at Steve's Chicken Shack on the outskirts of Gary, Ind. "Mickey [McGill of the Dells] said he heard there were some 'fresh-faced virgins down there,'" Addison recalled. "Mickey said, 'We got to get you out of this roadhouse.' He would come to our house and rehearse with us. We were so square. Once he took us to a Mexican restaurant in East Chicago. Mickey left some change on the table. I said, 'Mickey, you left your money!' He said, 'Tootsie, put that down. That's a tip'. I said, 'A tip? We don't tip out here, we don't even eat out here.' "

McGill introduced the Opals to Davis, who was riding high as producer of Gene Chandler's "The Duke of Earl" and Major Lance's "The Monkey Time."

Last week Addison reunited with Davis at his home in south suburban Homewood. They had not seen each other in more than a decade.

"I heard something totally fresh in the Opals," Davis said while sitting at his kitchen table with

Addison. "There were other girl groups, but the Opals had a cute sound. We got Curtis [Mayfield] to write songs for them. He was my assistant producer."

The girls were content with their role as backup singers. "We had no problem with things like 'The Shoop Shoop Song' [produced by Calvin Carter]," said Addison, who now sings in the choir of Lighthouse Church of All Nations in Alsip. "That's what we were coming to do, and we wanted to do a good job. And obviously we did."

After some prodding Addison started singing her parts, "*Is it in his eyes?* and *shoop-shoop ...*" She added, "I tried to get in touch with Simon Cowell to ask if he wanted to hear the original girl singers. They audition with that song so much on 'American Idol.' "

After the Opals split up, Addison became a backing singer with Chicago boxer Ernie Terrell and the Heavyweights. Another strange coincidence: Terrell's sister Jean was a Supreme who sang on hits like "Up the Ladder to the Roof" and "Stoned Love."

The Opals' own songs still pack punch because of the way Mayfield worked a paradox. With Johnny Pate's spritely arrangement the Opals could be completely uptempo in delivering a foreboding message like "You're Gonna' Be Sorry." Addison said Rose E. Kelly was about 16 years old when the Opals recorded "You're Gonna' Be Sorry." "They were fun sessions," she recalled. "I remember Carl bringing in lots of food for us."

Davis and the Opals were recording at the same time as Motown was churning out hits 300 miles away in Detroit. "I wanted a sound of our own," Davis said. "We took a bit from the South, a bit from the North. We took Curtis' unique guitar sound, and put chords in the strings and horns. We never thought about Motown."

Like a gentler version of Berry Gordy, Davis cultivated the Opals' image. Davis made sure the Opals wore beautiful human-hair wigs. He dispatched the girls to Chicago Hair Goods in the Loop. Addison's father, an East Chicago steelworker, would drive the girls to the wig shop. "We'd sweat like crazy while performing," Addison recalled. "Our [real] hair would get all messy."

Davis added, "They all had that pixie look where the hair came down and flipped up."

The "Dreamgirls" movie depicts an industry dominated by men who include label owners, managers and producers. In a separate interview Hudson said music is still a man's world. "Males dominate," she said. "Very seldom do you run into a female photographer, a female writer, a female producer. I have never worked with a female producer, which I'm dying to do."

Addison said, "In Chicago in the 1960s there was Carl Davis and Leonard Chess. We didn't know any better. Looking at it today, I wish there had been more female producers. They could have coached us."

But Davis said he was uncomfortable working around women. He had one top 40 hit with a female, Barbara Acklin's "Love Makes a Woman," recorded in 1968 for his Brunswick label. He recalled, "I'd turn the girls over to Curtis or Billy [Butler, younger brother of Jerry] until they got ready for the session."

Davis also worried about the Opals, especially when they went on the road. "He made sure we had chaperones," Addison said. "Not that he worried about what we were doing, but he wanted to protect

us. We were like 'Carl's girls.' And people were respectful of us."

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