

## Harris' show fills in kids' picture of the Old West

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BY JENNIFER BURKLOW

New York jazz singer Allan Harris grew up riding horses on his grandfather's Pennsylvania farm and watching Westerns at movie theaters. Those two pursuits spurred a lifelong interest in cowboys and the nation's westward movement.

His research revealed a little-known fact -- during the West's infancy, many cowboys were black men who worked alongside white men and earned equal pay until the railroad laid tracks and brought racism with it, Harris said. Between 1866 and 1896, roughly 8,000 black cowboys (about one-fourth of all cowboys) worked the cow trails.

"It was a wonderful time to be an African American after the [Civil] war or be a dirt-poor white boy," Harris said, because everyone had the same opportunities in the West. Anybody could buy property in the West, he continued, so blacks and whites found themselves living and working beside one another. That, he said, "changed the mind-set. ... We joined hands and reconstructed the country through the cattle industry."

Harris will bring that era to life in "Cross That River" at 1 p.m. Feb. 20 at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance. The Black History Month offering celebrates that brief period of racial harmony through a 70-minute song cycle.

Harris wrote the songs and music "to empower children of this young generation, who really don't have any wherewithal of us reconstructing this country together."

"Cross That River" is the first part of a trilogy that follows the journey of Blue, a slave yearning for freedom. Blue escapes from a plantation and joins the cattle drives of the West.

Though Blue is fictional, he's based on real people.

"I based him on a lot of historical figures we never hear about on movie screens," Harris said, like black cowboy Deadwood Dick, rodeo star Bill Pickett and black Seminole Indians.

"River" also introduces the audience to some of the unique characters who populated the early West: Buffalo Soldiers, mail-order brides and mule-skinners. The tunes meld country, bluegrass, folk, jazz, gospel, blues and Native-American music.

Harris said Chicago will be treated to a show that combines "River" with the second part of the trilogy, "Cry of the Thunderbird," which follows Blue on a cattle drive to Abilene, Texas. The third part, which he is writing now, covers the wane of the cattle drives and the arrival of the railroad in the West.

### **'CROSS THE RIVER'**

- 1 p.m. Feb. 20
- Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph
- Tickets, \$10
- (312) 334-7777; [www.harristheaterchicago.org](http://www.harristheaterchicago.org)