

“Blood, sweat, love and lots of tears”:

An interview with Shirley Hartley

Interview by Naomi Norquay

In the fall of 2011, I had the honour and privilege of sitting down with Collingwood resident Shirley Hartley and learning about her magnificent embroidered quilt that depicts, in amazing detail, the routes, destinations and symbols of the Underground Railroad. The photo that accompanies this interview shows Shirley doing what she often does, using her quilt at public gatherings to teach about the Underground Railroad. A group of educators who visited the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Cemetery last May¹ were delighted to meet with Shirley. As readers will see from the photo, the quilt is quite large, measuring 72 by 78 inches. It is meant to hang on a wall, not to cover a bed. It is a magnificent tapestry, overflowing with stories - stories about the Underground Railroad and stories about Shirley's journey from concept to completed quilt.



Shirley Hartley with her embroidered quilt which portrays the Underground Railroad

*Holding the quilt are:
York Region District School Board
Superintendent Cecil Roach (left) and
York Region District School Board Principal
Clayton La Touche (right)*

Photograph by Gini Dickie

Naomi Norquay: When my teacher group met you at the Old Durham Road cemetery last May, they were just blown away by your quilt.

Shirley Hartley: It was a lovely day. I wished we could have spent more time

¹ Also see review by Naomi Norquay in this volume.

N: It's a spectacular quilt! What inspired you to undertake this project?

S: I made it as a gift for Carolynn Wilson and her family. It was given to them before I ever went on the road show with it. Because that was never the intention - taking it on speaking tours. Black people have been in my heart and in my soul - I can honestly say this - since I was a child. I come from St. Catharines. My father was a broadcaster. During the Depression, there wasn't any work and things were desperate. He decided to go to a different church every Sunday and broadcast a different service. My sister and I were raised to believe that all churches and faiths must be respected. One day he said, "you can come with me today because I am going to broadcast from the Black church." This church was in St. Catharines. This was in about 1934 or 35. He took us there because he wanted us to hear the music. And neither one of us have ever forgotten.

N: So I gather that in St. Catharines, you went to school with descendants from the Underground Railroad?

S: Some were my best friends. When you go to school, your neighbours are your friends, and you're all the same, of course. The principals of both schools I attended in St. Catharines were interested in me because I was an athlete - even though I am very short. And they phoned my Dad one time and said "we want your daughter to be a part of the St. Catharines Olympic Club", which was what they used to call the little track and field club. Well, my parents were horrified! They had no concept of what that meant. But through this club I met some other people and I started to run at the Port Dalhousie Emancipation Picnic. Port Dalhousie is a little town on the southern shore where the boats docked, just before the Niagara River. It was always the week of my birthday - therefore was considered my birthday present! Thousands came from all over the southern United States. Many of them in big trailers, even then. They all parked there and stayed there for a week. And they had races. So I ran in the races, you see. And my Dad was the announcer. And he'd be up on top of the platform, announcing the races and the winners. And I always won the prize and he would be horrified. Then I'd have to take it back! But I learned running. My sister and I would be the only white kids in attendance.

N: How did you get interested in embroidery?

S: I am an embroiderer and also a nurse and a mother, but my great love is embroidery. I always have a needle in my hand. Everything I've learned, I've taught myself. I started seriously stitching when I was nine years old. When we (my husband John and I) started having children, I promised him I would never leave home, so that's where I pursued my embroidery career. I got more and more serious. We had just moved into a home in Don Mills when it first opened. There was a knock at the door and a lady said, "I've heard you can sew" and would I teach her something. And I said, "Well, yes!" I didn't know what I could teach her, but I started teaching in my basement. I thought this was fun! The next week there was another woman and the next week another. To make a long story short, there was a three-year waiting list to get into my classes. I had them from all over southern Ontario and I found my niche in life. I'm at home and I can teach! And so I basically did that, sewing and needle arts for thirty-five years. I became head of education for the Embroidery Association of Canada. But always behind me is telling stories in stitching. I'm not an artist, I can't draw, but I can do it with my needle and thread. I don't know why that is. It's a different kind of drawing, shall we say.

N: How did you connect with Carolynn Wilson?

S: We bought this wreck of a farm 38 years ago and we came up here and worked like dogs fixing it up. And then, we moved up to retire. I had formed a group up here. We called ourselves “The Potted Mums”. So we started inviting speakers to our meetings. It ran for seven years and it was incredibly successful. How these things happen! I’m reading the local paper where I learn that there are descendants here from the Underground Railroad. There was a phone number listed for the Heritage Church. And when I saw this Black history announcement in the paper I phoned the number in the paper, which turned out to be the wrong number! I wound up speaking to a gentleman from the Heritage Church in Barrie!

N: That’s hilarious! Did you find the right number eventually?

S: I did, but in the meantime I had promised my group that we would be having members of the Black community come and speak to us. This was on a Monday. The following Wednesday I had 25 people coming to my farm house to see and hear these Black people who were going to come. So I looked the Collingwood Heritage Church phone number up in the phone book and called and said “I am looking for someone called Carolynn Wilson.” And I said really quickly, “are you busy on Wednesday?” And she said “no” and I told her what was planned for Wednesday and said, “Can you come?” She said she would be delighted.

N: So what inspired you once you met Carolynn Wilson?

S: I got involved with Carolynn’s museum², volunteering there. Well, other than working at the museum, I thought to myself, what can I do? I had already accomplished four very large pieces of embroidery. And I thought, I know what I’ll do, I’ll stitch the Underground Railroad! And then I thought, how on earth am I going to do that? It’s in my head, but I can’t draw. So, I’ll just have to manage. I knew exactly what I was going to do and first, I would have to study. So I talked to various people about the Underground Railroad. I did a lot of talking with Carolynn as well. Mine was going to be a picture quilt. I got into “the book stage” and began reading a lot of different authors. I can’t tell you who they were, but I started doing a lot of reading. I read for two years.

N: I’m interested in learning about the making of the quilt and the stories you have about that. I am wondering if you can tell me about your decision, in terms of how much of the map you decided to include and what the focus was.

S: John and I were going through some of the books and when it discussed the Underground Railroad, they seemed to always refer to the eastern seaboard of the United States. So the map goes not quite as far west as the Mississippi, to just north of Manitoulin Island and south all the way to Florida. A lot of people also went to the east coast of Canada, meaning New Brunswick and Halifax and so on, but they weren’t actually spoken of as going on the Underground Railroad, so I did not include that area, although it very well could have been. What I included was mostly the area that was considered the route of the Underground Railroad.

² See “Interview with Carolynn Wilson” by Naomi Norquay, *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal*, Volume 8 / 2011, pp. 4-12.

N: When you look at this map, Florida is at the bottom and kind of in the middle and going straight up you come to Southern Ontario which in some ways is your focus.

S: Yes.

N: To me the map is almost half land and half water, and you had to have chosen background fabrics. Can you tell me a little about your choices?

S: When looking for the background fabrics, we chose a totally uninteresting and boring fabric for the main background of the quilt. So the whole quilt is added onto this boring beige fabric. And then we chose a wonderful red to emphasize the edges of the map and to also become the trails of the Underground Railroad. So that red is a very important feature.

N: It's in the border and it's also in the stitched trails.

S: Yes.

N: Can you tell me about the choice of fabric for the water?

S: That was a difficult one trying to find something. We did search and search, and finally went to a very small town and a very small shop and asked "do you have anything that represents water?" The lady picked up this bolt of fabric. Well, I was just absolutely thrilled to death because there was the water! And then that is quilted in a very special way, which is called "stipples". It's an old, old-fashioned way, a totally "undisciplined" way of quilting. It goes every way - this way - that way - and so on, making it a bit difficult to do. And so I took this wonderful fabric and puffed it up and made it look even more so like water.

N: And it does look very much like water! Is it put on top of the beige as well?

S: Yes it is. It was appliquéd on.

N: So basically the water was appliquéd on top and that thereby left the land shape in the beige fabric. Can you tell me about how you traced the map?

S: We took a small map, cut it in four pieces and with the magic of the computer, had it enlarged and enlarged until I felt it was a size that I could cope with. So then the process was to put these four pieces together - all done on the floor - trace it onto butcher paper and cut it out, with the sticky side of the butcher paper up - and you had to keep in mind all the time that everything was going to be reversed. And this paper then was ironed onto the various fabrics, cut in shapes for the Great Lakes and so on. It was cut out, leaving an eighth of an inch all around. This is how you get a smooth and even appearance of appliqué.

N: The map is just so wonderfully busy with buildings and trails and forest and fields and animals. And I guess I'd like to hear some of the stories. I'm wondering if you'd start by talking about the churches.

S: The churches were very important to me, as you know from my early history, being taken to a

Black church when I was four years old. This has been in my heart and mind ever since. And so I decided that the little white church with the two windows and the steeple was going to be my symbol of peace and love and freedom and everything that these people were searching for.

N: The church was very much a part of the Underground Railroad.

S: It really was their means of survival. They had the most incredible faith. The church was everything to them.

N: Can you tell me about the churches you've included throughout Southern Ontario?

S: The most northerly church there is the one in Collingwood. The one to the west of it is Owen Sound. They were the last two jumping-off places of the Underground Railroad. You'll notice how vivid the red trails are there because they don't have to be hidden. The trails in the United States are hidden half the time and that shows in the sparse stitching. South of Owen Sound there is a wonderful church that represents where Uncle Tom's Cabin is. It's just north of Chatham. It's a beautiful memorial. South of there is another church that is fully operational today, a wonderful place to visit, at Buxton. Their church is marvellous! It's fully restored, plus their original school is totally restored. And you can meet some descendants of the original people. There are houses with the white picket fences. It's a total miniature town! And to the south of that is Amherstburg and there should be several churches there, but I couldn't possibly do them all. So one church stands in for that area. Amherstburg is where they first came across the St. Clair River.

N: Can you tell me about the St. Catharines church?

S: That's the interesting one. You see, I approached all the work of this as you would an oil painting. In other words, I did the background first. When I got to St. Catharines to put the church on, I had already done Niagara Falls and I had done the rapids all in little stitches and there was no room for the church. I had an awful time. So I had to cut it out of a little wee piece of fabric - the other churches are embroidered right on the background fabric. For this one I had to cut out a wee, tiny piece and embroider the church, and then I had to appliqué it on to the St. Catharines area. By the time I got finished, it was crooked. So I was in a state of hysteria (which happened quite often!) and this is one of the cases where my husband said, "just put your needle down and have a cup of tea!" And then he said, "Don't worry about it! Because when you quilt it, it will correct it." But the quilting didn't correct it. So crooked it is! And crooked it shall always be.

N: I only notice that now, because you've just told me the story!

S: There is another church to the east of that. Now, there is only one white church in the United States. My feelings are garnered from all the books I read. But Harriet Tubman became my hero, throughout this whole quilt process, and so I gave her her own little white church which is just west of Rochester and it's still there today. And the house she lived in. I tried to copy the wee house as well. She married in the later years. So she has her own little white church and that is the only one. There is another church on the map in the United States.

N: Tell me about that one!

S: At one of the Black History Events held in Durham, Ontario, a little lady came up to me and asked me if I would stitch her church. I froze on the spot, not wanting to be offensive, so I said “Tell me about the church.” She was an Episcopalian minister - Norma Blacke Bourdeau - an incredible lady! And so she told me about her church and she said, “Underneath the church, still today, are two tunnels and when the bell in the belfry rang three times that was the signal for the slaves in the underground tunnels that they could leave safely.” And so, I said, “Yes, I will gladly stitch that church, but it won’t be in white.” And she was totally agreeable. If you look at the church, you will see the belfry and you will see the bell ringing, which I’ve shown by three little music notes stitched there.

N: Here and there throughout the United States portion of the quilt there are plantation houses. Tell me about your decision to put those in.

S: I had to tell the story of the plantations - the houses - what they represented. Where these folks kept these people - the enslaved Africans - and treated them so dreadfully. I wasn’t going to choose a definite plantation. I didn’t want anybody coming and saying “This is mine! Or that’s mine!” Because this quilt is my story. Right or wrong, it’s my story. So there’s a very large one on the eastern seaboard which is pretty recognizable to a lot of people. With its great pillars, it’s a splendid house, indeed. And that plantation had, at one point in time, 20,000 slaves. Twenty thousand! The names of the owners I don’t know. I don’t ever want to say. I don’t want to put any importance to who they were. In each of the large plantations you will see that there are slave houses. They were all dreadful places, usually with a thatched roof and a mud floor, which of course turned into water in the bad weather. They were dreadful buildings, usually with one door and very few of them even had windows. So you’ll notice there are one or two slave houses with each plantation house. There’s one over there in the west where you’ll notice it has flowers and that meant that that slave owner was a little bit kind and let them have some flowers. This was unusual.

N: Can you talk about the plantations in terms of all the agricultural fields you’ve put in with amazing detail?

S: There are many kinds of plantings around the buildings, for instance, wheat was always necessary. The wheat fields are stitched in a thread called DMC, which is embroidery floss that comes in six strands. The wheat fields are stitched with one strand only, in several slightly different colours. And each of those wheat fields would be a week’s work, because of the fine needle and the use of one strand of thread only. And when you stitch like this it puts a certain sheen to the thread and makes it shine, so that when the quilt is mounted on a wall with lights on it, you’ll notice certain things shine more than others and that’s because of the way they are stitched.

In the north you’ll see a wheat field where they’ve actually started to harvest. There are some sheaves there - the way they used to do the sheaves. Other than that one, there are just plain wheat fields. There are also large cotton fields. Of course, we are all familiar with the growing of cotton. I’ve stitched cotton in bloom and cotton ready to be picked. Were you allowed to touch the quilt, which you are not - you would feel that the stitching is very rough and unpleasant. The picking of cotton would take the skin off the hands of the pickers, who were mostly children and women. With their big burlap bags, they picked this cotton and it was almost like picking roses. It’s very thorny and cruel to the hands. And they would literally lose the skin on their hands. It was a horrible job to pick cotton and they had to jam it into

these great big bags - some of the bags being bigger than they were.

N: And you chose a different thread for the cotton?

S: No. It's all done in DMC, but it's the roughness of the stitch. Then you will see a lot of rice growing in the southern parts of the States. They grew an awful lot of rice, which was news to me! They also grew a lot of corn. And the corn is represented a little better by the stitches. The rice is little cross stitches. There are also orchards. Of course, up in Canada, between Owen Sound and Collingwood are the wonderful apples of Grey Bruce.

N: And you actually stitched in apples!

S: Yes and that took hours of work because they are done in one and two-thread little tiny French Knots. A French Knot has to be a perfect circle with a dot in the middle. There are also the original McIntosh apples which were perfected in the year of 1850, so I put those to represent the people from the Kingston area who took in a lot of escaped slaves. So every part of the quilt meant something to me - good or bad. There are also a lot of white birch trees which is wonderful because when I teach children, they all recognize the paper trees! And they've never failed to mention that to me, which is very interesting. At school they are taught that Native people used to write on the bark. The children would read about that in school and then notice the trees in the quilt!

N: Are the birch trees an acknowledgement of First Nations and their role in the Underground Railroad?

S: Yes! They were incredibly kind. They helped the escaping slaves. And you can see that there is a little fire burning to represent the Native people who were being very kind and helpful. And you'll notice there's a little house, just west of the Windsor area, across the river and west of Detroit. And that house is still in existence. It was a safe-house. You'll notice that they had huge vegetable gardens, which doesn't make sense at all for such a tiny house. But that would mean that they had a lot of people to feed.

N: Can you tell me about the black bears?

S: There were black bears throughout. You can see the little black bears there in northern Ontario and throughout the mountainous areas going all the way down almost to Florida. And so when it came time for the bounty hunters - there was a law passed in the United States - a dreadful law.

N: *The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.*

S: That slave owners could send out these bounty hunters and find the slaves. The slaves got to know mountainous or hilly areas. And the thought there was: Bounty hunters are out! Watch! Be careful! Better to be caught by a bear! If you are caught by a bounty hunter, you don't have a chance, but with a bear you do.

N: I guess the only other animals that I found were the whales' tails in the northern part of the Atlantic and the dolphins in the Gulf of Mexico.

S: These whales are for the summer that I went to Newfoundland, so I had to put the whales in.

N: And you put dolphins down in the Gulf.

S: Yes, and at the time I did not know if there were dolphins in the Gulf, but the children at the schools I have visited all have assured me that there are dolphins in the Gulf! And if you look closely you will notice a few birds as well.

N: Can you tell me about the horse-drawn carts that you have sprinkled here and there?

S: One of the signals associated with the Underground Railroad is the wagon wheel: a wagon is coming along and the wagon driver is a friendly person. There were a lot of them, thank God. And he would have two floors on the bottom of his wagon. His wagon might be very small, not very large. On the bottom floor of his cart he would pack perhaps a family - a mother, a baby - the baby would be drugged because if the baby made any noise whatsoever, they would be discovered and they would all be captured and possibly killed. So a family might be packed in the bottom. And then the farmer would put another floor on top. And they were squeezed in there. Then he would have all his product for the day. It might be grain or wheat. It might be cows or sheep - whatever he was taking to market. Pigs, chickens - and of course all the excrement and so on would filter through to the unfortunate people. But he would take them to the next destination. They were usually never found. It was amazing!

N: I understand that one of these horse and carts is for a Canadian. Can you tell me about the Kingston doctor?

S: He was a very important gentleman. He was very well off and he was an amateur ornithologist. He had great sympathy for the slaves. He had a very fine coach, a fancy cart, really and he would set out every winter to go to south, to be in the warm country.

N: Our very first Canadian Snowbird!

S: And he was splendid indeed! I think everything about him was quite wonderful. He would cross the border and he would go all the way down south to study the birds. And of course, what he really had packed in his coach was money, and he had disguises and clothes and all kinds of things that escaping slaves might be interested in. And he would know the routes. People got to know him and they would warn him: "There's a group coming!" "Expect somebody at such and such a trail." Because, of course, most slaves could not read; they were not allowed to read or write. But if they couldn't read and they came to a crossroad, they couldn't tell which way they were going because they couldn't read the signs. So he was very helpful at crossroads. If he saw somebody coming along, he would give them instructions. So all the way south he would distribute his largesse very quietly. Whether it was in the day or the night, he might just happen to pass by and he helped hundreds of people - as well as study the birds! Nobody caught him, either. These people were so clever!

N: And did he take slaves back to Canada in his cart?

S: Not that we know of. That wasn't his focus.

N: I want to know about the trails. I can see how when you get to Southern Ontario, they're heavy and they are bright red, but when I look down in the States, they disappear.

S: They constantly disappear! They were the last things to stitch. Because they were the last part of the story. In the gardens, in the mountains, in and out. I mean, they were hiding, so that's why they disappear. I had to stitch everything else first so I could put my needle underneath it all - in and out, in and out.

N: So you could bring the thread up where you wanted to show a little bit of trail and then put it underneath and hide it away where you did not.

S: If you look closely you can see at one slave house in Florida, a slave's trail coming out of his front door. He would have had to crawl through the swamp, and when he got to the seaside, someone kindly took him all the way up to Chesapeake Bay in Pennsylvania which cut his journey, considerably.

N: And that's the dark red stitching on the water, showing an Underground Railroad route by sea. There are other symbols on the water. Can you tell me about those?

S: Uncle Howie Sheffield, whose idea it was originally to start the Sheffield Museum, became one of my great friends. I dearly, dearly loved this gentleman. He died three years ago. However, I was telling him what I was doing and he had a hard time understanding, when I first started out, what I was talking about, as did everyone else, including myself! I mean I had no idea when I started stitching that first row of trees at the top. I didn't know where this adventure was going to take me, but he would listen to me. I'd say, "Oh, Uncle Howie, I'm doing such and such," and he said, "Shirley, you haven't put in Sierra Leone." And I looked at him and said, "I can't stitch the world!" Well, he had a little giggle over that. But I said, "If you get me a picture of a slave ship, I'll stitch it." And so, I did. You'll note that the ship has the initials "SL" on it, for Sierra Leone. I didn't know what to do about the masts and the sails. I had an ancient handkerchief that belonged to my great-grandmother that had many holes in it. And I thought, that's what I'll do with it because then it will be preserved forever. So I cut it up. It's fine, fine cotton and it seemed to billow out and show what the sails were like when they were filled with wind. And up here is the North Star, done in embroidery. And down near the bottom, there is a compass: north - south - east-west. That whole thing was appliquéd and done by hand. It was an awful job!

N: And I notice that for the directional arrows on the compass, you've used the red thread. So red is important. It kind of holds the whole thing together.

S: That's right! In every way.

N: It wasn't enough for you to stitch the map. You had to do something with your borders. Can you tell me about that?

S: I really just decided on what I was doing and started stitching and felt totally, many times, in left field and asking myself "what on earth am I doing?" That's when a wonderful lady, Ann Adams, who lives in Picton helped me out. She's been a mentor and a friend to me. She knew what I was trying to do and she phoned one day and she said, "Shirley! Run! Don't walk! - to your nearest library and get a book called *Hidden in Plain View*.³ And she said, "it's about the signals on the Underground Railroad." It's a

³ *Hidden in Plain View: The Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*, by Jacqueline L. Tobin and Raymond G. Dobard, PhD, Anchor Books, 2000. Read a review of this book by Karin Noble in *Northern Terminus*:

book about which I knew nothing. So John and I made yet another trip to Toronto and got this book. And it was just a joy to me! And reading that book opened up a whole new world for me because I could never figure out how I was going to end this thing. This map must end and how am I going to do that so it does not look like a “quilty quilt”? And so I did a border of traditional quilting just to let people know that I could do it! And then I started on the signals of Underground Railroad, my source being that book.

And so, in each corner of the outer border I have the North Star. The escaping slaves were instructed to follow the North Star. The North Star will always lead you to the north to Canada and freedom. Everything wonderful that is going to happen to you is north. For quilting squares, they are rather small. For people who are quilters they might look at them and think they’re strange. I had to end the quilt! I couldn’t go on forever. And so my husband very kindly redrew them for me so that they were 6 inches rather than 10 or 12, which is what they should be.

N: Why don’t we discuss the symbols down the left side border?

S: And so the next one is Monkey Wrench. That means: gather your tools. Because on every plantation there was an iron monger. Gather your tools, a wagon is coming along! The next one is the Wheel which I’ve already mentioned. And the next one is Bear Paw. That one means: follow the path of the bear through the mountains. Better to be caught by a bear than a bounty hunter. The next one is Four Corners. If a quilt was on a fence or hanging out a window, perhaps, and used as a signal, the Four Corners symbol would have an infinitesimal change in the embroidery showing the direction you should go. It would be in the stitching, or the colour or something like that. The next one is Log Cabin. Red in the centre means the hearth and home. To the slaves, this would probably mean that you are coming up to a log house and it’s a safe house. Not every house was safe. But this particular house would be a safe one.

N: What’s this next one?

S: That’s Shoo Fly. We don’t know what that means, but I remember as kids singing, “Shoo Fly! Don’t bother me!” It might mean: get out of the way! Or something like that. The next is the Flying Geese. And here again, in this symbol there would be a goose or a group of geese who were infinitesimally different from the rest, which would show the direction to go. The next one is Bow Tie. This would mean: Get dressed up in your best bib and tucker and go to church on Sunday. It would mean that the church you are coming to is a safe church. Not all churches were safe.

N: I see that the symbols repeat.

S: Yes, there are repetitions, but there’s one here called Drunkard’s Path. It means follow the path of the drunkard. You have been observed. Take evasive action. And then there’s one that’s especially interesting to me, which is Broken Dishes. The slaves saved all the broken dishes from the big house - and I like to think that they broke a few on purpose! They saved all the pieces and they took them out and made them into piles. And these piles were signals on the Underground Railroad. We don’t know exactly what they mean but to this day they are still finding piles of broken dishes in the southern mountains of the United States.

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N: I know there's quilting technique in your work and embroidery stitching. So I call this a tapestry. What do you call it?

S: Tapestry - it's perfectly legitimate because it tells a story. A quilt is meant to enclose you and keep you warm. That is not what this is meant for. I hope to warm your heart up! So calling it a tapestry is fine with me.

N: Can you tell me how long this project took you?

S: It took me four years. I finished it in 2004 - the date is on the bottom. I started in 2000. It was not done on a frame of any kind. It was done by hand at a table in our "gathering room" at the farm, which is my own private corner for reverie! And I just look back on it and I ask "how did I do this?" John was always at the other end of the room doing what he does, volunteer work. We were together in that room for four years. During those four years we only took one holiday. I couldn't leave it, for many reasons. I read all the time as well, but I stitched basically 8, 10, sometimes 12 hours a day. Every single stitch is done by hand.

N: So four years of constant, loving labour.

S: Yes! And a lot of blood, sweat, love and lots of tears.