

“Father’s Day: My Aunt, My Career and My Dad”

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By Larry Elder

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—Recently, I listened again to Al Green’s “Back Up Train.”

I bought it from a Los Angeles record store when I was about 14 and brought it along with a small record player when I visited an aunt in Chattanooga. She was busy around the house, as always, scurrying from one task to another, never pausing for a moment. Then I played the record.

- She stopped.
- She sat down.
- She closed her eyes.
- She nodded and listened to the whole song.

The moment it ended, she got up and went right back to work.

For over two minutes, the song caused Aunt Juanita to take a break and just sort of drift off. It was beautiful to watch.

I’ve seen Al Green several times in concert, yet he never performed “Back Up Train.” I never understood why. To me, it was one of the most gripping songs he ever recorded. Maybe he does not understand what his song did to my aunt.

For more than three decades, listeners—and now viewers—have approached me to tell me how something I said affected them. Often, they quote a line, a story or an observation that I often barely remember making.

Yet they remember it word for word.

At first, I found this surprising. Then I realized that the person speaking and the person listening and watching are having two very different experiences.

The broadcaster remembers thousands of hours behind the microphone.

The person on the other side remembers the one sentence that arrived at exactly the right moment, at the right time in his or her life. For me, it may have been just another Tuesday.

I once got a letter from someone who told me I talked him out of committing suicide. He was going through a divorce and having financial problems. He went to a park with a bunch of pills and a bottle of whiskey to end his darkness for good. He was listening on his headset to my show. I was doing a comedy bit about George Washington on the witness stand after being charged with illegally chopping down a cherry tree.

The man said this made him laugh so hard, he said to himself, “If I still have the ability to laugh, why am I taking all this so seriously? I’ll get through this.” He emptied the bottle on the grass and threw out the pills.

I barely remembered doing the bit. Once again, I was reminded that my listeners and I have different experiences. I vaguely remember writing and performing the comedy sketch. The listener remembers where he was and what he was doing when he heard it.

Some singers and songs have that effect. They make you lean in. They make you listen.

They are not merely hitting notes. They are bringing a sort of cushion to the listener at a certain time and place in his or her life. But all of us leave impressions on other people.

Sometimes we never know which words matter.

Sometimes the thing we barely remember becomes something another person never forgets.

- A song.
- A joke.
- A story.
- A sentence spoken at the right moment.

It’s not about how we remember it, but how others remember how it helped them get through something.

That is the real measure of success.

- Not ratings.
- Not record sales.
- Not applause.

What an accomplishment to sing something, to create something, to say something that causes someone to stop, listen, think, remember and smile.

But then, of course, there was my father. His taste in music was Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne and Frank Sinatra. The Motown stuff my brothers and I preferred? Not so much.

Back when cars had stick antennas, radio reception cut off when the car drove under an overpass.

As a kid, I loved rocking along to the radio while in the back seat as my father drove.

Everything sounded fine, at least to me, while singing along to a Four Tops song—until Dad drove under an overpass.

The music abruptly faded, leaving only my voice. A cappella.

My father looked back and said, “You know, I used to wish I could sing . . . Now I wish you could.”