

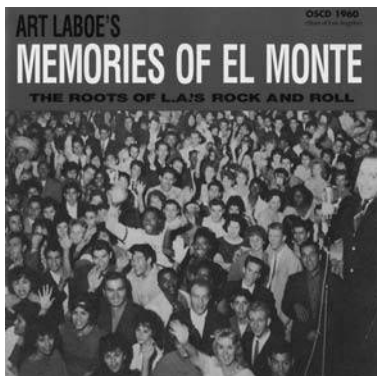


Susan Straight's north-facing kitchen window with lavender radio, June 1, 2010

SUSAN STRAIGHT

## Listening to Art Laboe

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For nearly all their lives, since they could first begin to understand the words to the songs playing on the kitchen radio that sits on the window ledge facing north, the deep wooden sill of a room that used to be a laundry porch in a classic California orange-grove bungalow, my three daughters have heard the veteran DJ Art Laboe in the evening, playing Killer Oldies while I cook dinner, clean the counter, do the dishes, pay the bills, and check the homework.

The very first song my middle daughter ever fully comprehended was “Just My Imagination,” by the Temptations. She was about five. In the kitchen, sitting on the floor, she looked up at me and said slowly, “So he never even talked to her? He just loves her?”

“Yeah,” I said. I think I told my child, “He loves the *idea* of her.”

That’s what Art Laboe’s Killer Oldies show has always been about—love, the idea of love, missing love, remembering love, hoping for love. For many of us who grew up in a certain time, in certain neighborhoods in California, his voice and those songs are as iconic as Route 66 winding through San Bernardino, Valencia orange groves in Riverside and Corona and Pomona, and crowded drive-ins in El Monte.

Now that daughter is eighteen, her sisters twenty and fourteen, and they roll their eyes when 7:00 PM rolls around, saying, “Oh, my God, Mom, do we have to listen to the same songs over and over? The same guy, saying the same things, every single night? Really? Seriously?”

I was born in Riverside, down the street from this house. After long days of working, being a single mother, living on a street where for twenty-two years my neighbors and I have struggled to keep it together, sharing eggs and oranges and babysitting and minor car repairs and major emotional repairs—after funerals and ambulances and foreclosures and new babies and trees that fall on roofs and graduation parties in a front yard with a cousin for DJ, we are all still here.

My street is one of eighty- and one-hundred-year-old houses. This week, two neighbors talked to me about their home additions—both are doubling the size of their

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Art Laboe hosts a dance, El Monte Legion Stadium, 1957

houses. It sounds grand, only these are small wood-frame buildings—one is 950 square feet and one 650 square feet—and my neighbors have for two years been building the new parts themselves.

So when darkness falls I am still in the kitchen, making a cake for a neighbor whose truck was wrecked when the flatbed towing it away for repairs flipped. My girls go to the living room and watch YouTube videos of strangers dancing at weddings, falling off coffee tables while singing, and doing whatever else their friends think they should see. I stay in the kitchen; as ever, welcoming me to what must be approaching his millionth show is that deep, reasonable, invariable voice: “This is Art Laboe with another night of Killer Oldies on the Art Laboe Connection.”

Some Californians can’t wait to open laptops and listen to their favorite Beethoven sonata; some Californians in

living rooms that I imagine with beige carpets and heavy drapes can’t wait for evening to put on an LP of Frank Sinatra or Tommy James and the Shondells or the Beach Boys.

But the people who live where I do, we wait for Etta James to sing “At Last,” as she does nearly every evening at this time. We wait for Ralfi Pagan “To Say I Love You” and Brenton Wood to declare that “Only the Strong Survive.”

I’m waiting for, yes, the same old songs, the ones that comfort me, remind me of other times. Just like millions of listeners all around California, close to radios in cars and kitchens and yards and factories and prisons and night fields where if things are desperate they pick grapes or oranges by the beams of headlights.

**H**e has to be nearly eighty years old, I thought this week, and so I looked him up. He is Armenian-American;

his given name Art Egnoian. The girls think he resembles an ancient gangster, with his dark hair, still-vivid eyebrows, and wide slash of mouth. But I'm amazed by his youthful face.

Art Laboe is eighty-four. He loves playing songs for people. That's what he does. It's all he really talks about.

On a 2009 television interview with the newscaster Tony Valdez, who looks thrilled to tell Laboe that he grew up listening to his show, Laboe looks at a photograph of himself taken around 1947 in Pomona, at radio station KPMO, and says with a note of wonder, even now: "I was on Cloud Nine—I was on the radio." In his voice, you can hear that this was his single-minded dream and obsession. He talks about being seven years old in Salt Lake City, sitting for hours in front of his mother's radio, "completely enthralled with this box that talked." When his parents divorced he decided to move to Los Angeles to live with his sister, so he bought a bus ticket: he was nine years old and rode there alone.

In 1951 Laboe built his own "roving radio" truck, a mobile DJ booth that had regular stops on street corners on Jefferson, Manchester, and Crenshaw in South LA, among other places. By 1956, he says, on the Los Angeles radio station KPOP he was the first DJ to play rock and roll on the West Coast. He was the inventor of the term "oldies but goodies," which he used when kids requested songs by Big Joe Turner and other older R&B stars; he says people wanted "an old song, but it had to be a good one."

He must reach more listeners, and more kinds of listeners, than anyone outside the mainstream media can imagine in this age of talk radio, satellite broadcasting, and high-definition TV. This morning, when I bought tamales from Angel, Sr., my tamale guy, who was born in

LA and lives in Riverside, he said, "Oh, man, I grew up listening to Art Laboe! I was a kid. I listened to Wolfman Jack, too, but Art Laboe was the one. We used to go to Legion Stadium in El Monte and hear him. All the oldies."

And a few hours later, when I was talking to a class of athletes at a college, one twenty-year-old basketball player grinned wide and said, "Art Laboe! Man, I grew up in Baldwin Park and the whole neighborhood listens to him! The women love him."

I said, "He's eighty-four," and his face fell. "Man, if he dies, there's gonna be thousands of people at his funeral. I'm not lyin', man. Thousands."

The thousands live all over California, Utah, Nevada, and even Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and, given the Internet, all over the world. Growing up, I knew people who called Art Laboe's show to send greetings and dedications to their families who moved around to harvest grapes in Dinuba and Mecca. And always there have been women who send dedications to family members in prison. It's a code many of us know: to send a song to someone in Chino, Delano, Calipatria and mention that you got a letter, or are urging your listener to "keep your head up," to send the Brenton Wood song, means you're talking to someone behind bars.

Most nights, when I'm listening, more women call than men, but guys call too, to send anniversary wishes, birthday wishes, and sometimes just wishes that a girl will call again.

He has two syndicated shows, the Art Laboe Connection, airing nightly, and the Art Laboe Sunday Special. The Sunday show started in 1991, the year my middle daughter was born, on 99.1 KKGQ in Riverside, but I had heard his voice for years before then. The shows have grown; they

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now play on radio stations around the southwest, wherever people listen to the songs that are part of Chicano and black culture from a certain time, the songs that remind them of high-school dances, of parties in the park or at the beach, of front seats and back seats of cars like my friend Penguin's Dodge Dart.

Nearly every night I hear what used to be Penguin's favorite song—it is requested every evening: "Don't Let No One Get You Down," by War, the classic California band with members of every color, cowbells, and sweet deep harmonies and even a white guy, Lee Oskar, on flute. War was famous for "Low Rider" but is loved by those of us who grew up on "Slippin' into Darkness" and "Me and Baby Brother." I haven't seen Penguin for years—he's slipped back into the darkness of drug addiction so many times that he won't come around now, and I miss him. Hearing this song takes me directly back to a night in 1981 when we sat around in the yard of his first house in the Eastside neighborhood of Riverside, a converted stucco garage. We sat on upended milk crates, eating his first barbecue, with a boombox beside us in the grass.

My children know this, accept this, shake their heads at my fatalism, and my calcified listening habits, and my inexorable sentiment. They think they will never listen to the same songs over and over, or have friends who disappear.

**L**aboe's website, KillerOldies.com, is one of the most heavily-trafficked sites on the Internet. On it he reads dedications for men and women in the military serving across oceans, and dedications for loved ones serving prison sentences in other states. Because California exports inmates now, I wonder sometimes if those dedications and goodnight kisses are heard by the intended recipients.

There is a comfort in listening to Laboe's voice. He's live six nights a week and he's always patient. Last week a little girl named Pearl calls in, and he says, "I don't think I've ever talked to you before," and she says, "Yes, you have," and Laboe says with a half-smile in his voice, "Really? When?"

"Two years ago!" she says, as if astonished that he doesn't remember. Laboe asks, "How old are you?" and she replies, "Eleven." Then she dedicates a song to her grandmother.

The commercials are embarrassingly cheesy: Smoker's Savior, a machine that allows people to quit smoking by imitating cigarettes somehow, with smoke rings of steam;

Hero Tabs, a new Viagra made of watermelon rinds. But one Sunday night this year, April 12, Antonio Villaraigosa called in—yes, the mayor of Los Angeles, who grew up in East Los Angeles and proudly says he listened to Art Laboe while driving his Camaro through the streets with his friends.

The mayor and Art Laboe talked about the 2010 Census, and how important it was for Killer Oldies listeners to send in their forms and not be afraid that the information would be used for anything but counting them. It was standard stuff. But the mayor's voice changed when he talked about how he used to cruise at night, listening to Laboe, and he seemed almost abashed—maybe he was remembering how he looked in that car, how he was seeking girls, how the boys beside him must have teased him sometimes.

That night there was a strange timelessness as I listened, looking out the kitchen window at the dark. Even the mayor of Los Angeles must still hope to hear specific songs from his past, evoking comfort and history and, yes, memories of love.

The good-night dedications begin at ten and last until midnight. "This is Pelon from East LA, man, Boyle Heights, and I wanna send out a song to all my boys. Sly Slick and Wicked."

Alejandra calls from Pomona to wish her boyfriend a happy anniversary—it's been three years and seven months.

Esperanza calls from LA to tell her grandmother Esperanza that she loves her. She asks for "At Last" by Etta James.

And every night, Betty Johnson calls from Madera, where she listens to KOKO 94, to chant in a breathless mantra variations on the same message: "This is for my husband Randy Johnson, Jr. Baby, I love you I adore you You Are My World and I'll always be here for you. Don't worry, baby, I'll send some money tomorrow. Thanks for your card. I hope you got my letter. I'll see you soon." She asks for a different song every night.

I think she is one of the women who used to kiss their loved one goodnight via Art Laboe, who actually made the smooching sound of a kiss right there, live, on the radio.

**W**hen my daughters roll their eyes at around seven, when the small lavender boom box we bought ten



Art Laboe in KRLA studio, 1977

years ago at Target has trouble tuning in the station, I feel old. I'm forty-nine. But I stand at the sink, looking out the window at the long, dark four-lane avenue that leads directly east, to Colton and San Bernardino and then the Cajon Pass and the Mojave Desert, while hearing "Memories of El Monte," a song you might only hear on Art Laboe's show, and I realize that his voice is as totemic and Californian as the missions, each built a day's journey from the next to unite the whole sprawling state. His voice does the same. I cannot explain that to my daughters, listening to this litany of love and heartbreak and memory in this immense

place that many Americans never see. They think we're all Beverly Hills with sedate, decorative palm trees; but we are the huge silver groves of date palms in Mecca and Indio. They picture the crashing waves and cliffside mansions of Malibu, but we are the strawberry fields of Oxnard and the Marine base of Camp Pendleton, where the ocean mist is full of salt. They see Hollywood and Sunset, but we are also on E Street and Whittier Boulevard; cruising, boxing groceries, welding mufflers, changing tires, sewing prom dresses, picking oranges, teaching kids—and calling after nightfall to request "Don't Let No One Get You Down." **B**