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Arch: Carried through life by football and music

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Posted: 12:15 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 24, 2015

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By Tom Archdeacon - columnist

In this case, when you add the thumping beat of a bass or big pancake block to a biblical passage like 1 Corinthians 13:11, it gets buffeted, if not totally flipped upside down.

The old verse goes something like this: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put away childish things."



Larry Lee and the Back In The Day Band

The new interpretation comes from Larry Lee:

"Back when I was in the sixth grade at Westwood Elementary, I started doing two things: I played football and I learned the bass guitar. Now, I'm 55 years old and those two things still carry me.

They've done it my whole life."

And they have carried him well.



From his grade school football team, Lee went on to All-City honors at

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Larry Lee

both Roosevelt and Roth high schools, became an All-American offensive lineman at UCLA, played nine years in the NFL with Detroit, Miami and Denver, and spent another nine years as a Lions executive. Today his

younger daughter, Danielle, works in the NFL office, and older daughter Dayna works at ESPN.

As for his music, the boy who was inspired by Dayton's funk scene in the early 1970s and joined other kids from his West Dayton neighborhood to form his first band now has one of the most popular and busiest old-school funk and R&B bands in Detroit.

Larry Lee and the Back in the Day Band have opened for the likes of Isaac Hayes, the O'Jays, Smokey Robinson, George Clinton, the Four Tops, Temptations, Spinners, Boyz II Men, En Vogue and Morris Day and The Time.

Over the past several years his band has played numerous NFL events, from the Hall of Fame induction parties of guys like Barry Sanders and Richard Dent to various Super Bowl events from the hot-ticket commissioner's party and the Pittsburgh Steelers' victory celebration after Super Bowl XLIII in Tampa to a postgame gathering at Super Bowl XL in Detroit, where he shared the stage with Little Richard.

Although Lee now lives in Detroit, when you mention his hometown, it is music to his ears.

"Man, I am absolutely in love with my hometown," he said the other day. "I brag on Dayton, Ohio, wherever I go. I try to make sure people know the influence Dayton has had in all walks of life: inventors, music, athletics, just all kinds of folks. We've got people like Rob Lowe and Jonathan Winters, the Sheen and Estevez family.

"I found a page on Facebook with a 'You Know You're From Dayton' list and it talked about all the interesting people and I learned some things – like the girl whose voice was Bart Simpson is from Dayton.

"Our little city has provided a lot of talented folks."

And, as we begin the most hyped week of the football year with the countdown to next Sunday's Super Bowl XLIX in Arizona, Larry Lee offers an NFL story like no other from this hometown.

A legend begins

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Feedback

“When I was in sixth grade, the Ohio Players had just made it and the music scene in Dayton was really starting to evolve,” he said.

Dayton’s funk scene was exploding and over the next few years some 16 bands with ties to Dayton – groups like the Heatwave, Slave, Lakeside, Zapp and, most notably, the Ohio Players – had 110 chart singles, more than any other city.

“A bunch of us neighborhood kids, from Anna Street between Hoover and Kammer, we all wanted to be musicians and six or eight of us decided to start a little band,” said Lee, who already had had two years of piano lessons and had dabbled on the drums by then.

“Each one of us asked for an instrument for Christmas. Rufus Frazier got a set of drums and Michael Baker got a guitar. They designated me to get a bass and my dad got me one from the pawnshop.”

In high school he became part of a 10-piece group that included a horn section and was called Soul Explosion.

“We were actually pretty good,” Lee said. “We had our union cards and we played a lot of spots around town that we were actually too young to get into. There was the VFW on Summit, Wampler’s Red Barn for a couple of high-end adult things, and I remember doing a show at Suttmillers.

“We had a manager – Art Thomas was his name – and three of his five sons were in the band. Mr. Thomas was kind of like Joe Jackson (father/manager of the Jackson 5). He had us together.

“I remember him going to my dad and saying I needed a better guitar than that cheap, little pawnshop bass. He said, ‘Larry is a pretty good bass player and we got a good group going and it’s time for your boy to get something better.’

“My dad – he was self-employed – said, ‘Well, how much will one of them cost?’ When Mr. Thomas said a good one could be \$400 or \$500, my dad hit the roof. But Mr. Thomas calmed him down and you know what? My dad got me a new Fender bass.”

He laughed at the memory: “You couldn’t tell me nothing after that.”

But as good as he was on the guitar, Lee was even better in football and was sought by most of the nation’s top schools. Allowed to take six recruiting trips, he visited Ohio State, Michigan, Oklahoma, Nebraska, USC and UCLA.

Woody Hayes recruited him hard and promised him he’d be a star with the Buckeyes, but Lee was enamored of UCLA and signed with the Bruins. During his four years of college he said he never picked up his guitar.

But after his final college game, he signed with an agent and then made a trip to Hawaii to see the Pro Bowl.

“I heard musicians playing in the host hotel and when I checked, it was Walter Payton on drums, Bubba Baker on guitar and Todd Christensen, the Raiders tight end, on bass,” he said. “They sounded pretty good and I ended up sitting in with them and playing.”

Detroit took him in the fifth round of that 1981 draft and as soon as Baker – one of the Lions stars – saw Lee, he remembered that Hawaii jam session and made the rookie from Dayton get up on stage and join a band coach Monte Clark had brought in to entertain the team at training camp.

“I sat in and played and the legend began,” Lee said with a chuckle.

Although he said he kept his focus on football back then, he admits there were times when music suddenly caught his attention.

“There used to be a band that played near the end of the tunnel at our Lions games,” he said. “One time there was a TV timeout and I’m in the huddle and the band’s up there jamming and they gave the guitar player a solo.

“Oh, man, this guy just killed it and I’m in the huddle jamming. And at the end of the game I ran into him in the tunnel. I introduced myself. He had been with David Ruffin when he left the Temptations, and we formed a friendship. After that, whenever he played around town, six or seven of us used to always go see him play. And that really got my interest back into music.”

Football vs. music

After the Lions, Lee played two years in Miami and then in Denver, where he was part of the Broncos team that lost to Washington in Super Bowl XXII.

Following retirement and a foray into the auto business, he joined the Lions front office and rose up the ranks from player development to vice president of football operations. When Matt Millen took over as the team’s CEO and president for what became a disastrous eight-year reign, he immediately got rid of almost everybody in the front office, including Lee.

Although he initially tried to get back into NFL management, Lee eventually focused his business efforts elsewhere, running a demolition company for a while and now doing consultations for various firms.

His primary involvement today is with his band, which not only plays corporate engagements and festivals – the band is one of the headliners at Detroit’s Winter Blast Feb. 6-8 – but is getting more and more involved with NFL events.

Feedback

In addition, Lee is part of the NFL choir, which features current and former players.

He has also joined the push for player safety and is part of the thousands of former NFL players who have been involved in concussion-related litigation with the league.

“I do worry about the effects of football and there are times now when some of the easiest things I know I should know, I just can’t pull them up fresh in my mind,” he said.

“I remember a few strong concussions over the years. When I was a rookie, we were playing the Rams and I was part of the wedge on the kickoff return. I got knocked out and I came to on the plane. I go, ‘Hey, did we win?’ And they go, ‘Yeah, we won Larry and you played the whole second half!’

“I didn’t remember it. That was the worst, and there were a couple of other times, but mostly it was just getting dinged and seeing stars.”

In other ways, Lee said he sees a real parallel between his two passions:

“Football and music are so similar, it’s absolutely amazing. You’re an individual when it comes to your instrument or your position, but you’re part of a team, too. And the more cohesive that team is, the better you are – the better you play, the better you sound.

“In the years to come I hope the band and football are part of my life. I guess I’ll just leave it up to God and whatever he sees is good for me. But I’ll tell you this, I really do love this music thing.”

Some childhood things should never be put away.



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