Chris Haley on a Search of His Own

Jan 22, 2007 • Post A Comment

Christopher Embree Haley, nephew of "Roots" author Alex Haley, is director of the study of the legacy of slavery for the Maryland State Archives. An actor and filmmaker, he co-hosts the radio show "Heart of a Winner" in Annapolis, Md. He talked recently with *TelevisionWeek's* Valerie Swayne about his uncle and his memories of watching the "Roots" telecast as a teenager 30 years ago.

TelevisionWeek: *What are your memories of your uncle, Alex Haley?*

Chris Haley: I was a teenager in the '70s. My uncle Alex was my father's oldest brother. I was as close as I could possibly be to an uncle who was always busy. He was on the West Coast and we were on the East Coast. I remember he would be either working on research for "Roots" or [later] giving interviews.

TVWeek: *How did your family feel about "Roots" airing on television?*

Mr. Haley: We were thrilled; there was a feeling of disbelief. When it came out, it was a surprise to my family: Not only was it made into a two-hour movie, but a whole week-long miniseries. … "Roots 1" covered five generations back, but "Roots 2" focused on people I knew in my own life, up to my father, who was 5 years old. James Earl Jones played my Uncle George [Haley, former U.S. ambassador to Gambia and executor of Alex Haley's estate].

TVWeek: *What was your initial reaction to the show?*

Mr. Haley: It was really an out-of-body experience. I remember being nervous, sitting there squinting with my head in my hands, as I was watching scenes of Kunta Kinte running. My heart was beating so fast! I wanted to pinch myself. I never thought I'd be sitting there, watching this story about my life and my family. I almost wish I could relive that moment. It was just mind-blowing.

TVWeek: *What did you learn from the experience?*

Mr. Haley: Every slender thread is what makes you here today. I tell people you have to accept all the slender threads in life. I had to accept the fact that a slave master raped my great-grandmother [Kizzy].

TVWeek: *What was your community's reaction to "Roots"?*

Mr. Haley: People were really cool about it. I don't recall very many negative things. I went to a racially mixed high school in D.C. I did not feel, the next day, that the black and white kids would hate each other. I wondered, in the society in general, if some tensions would be amplified.

TVWeek: *What was it like to visit the set of "Roots"?*

Mr. Haley: We went to Savannah, Georgia, to see the African sets of villages, from the early scenes with Cicely Tyson and Maya Angelou. I remember one thing we had to be careful of were snakes in the underbrush. I saw LeVar Burton making eyes at the actress from "Hair" who played Fanta [Ren Woods]; I wondered if that was implying that I had cousins somewhere. Part of me didn't like that.

TVWeek: *What impact has "Roots" had on your own life?*

Mr. Haley: When "Roots" came out, I was already into black history. "Roots" made me think about genealogy-who was there before me. People kept saying after "Roots," you already know your family history. But I only knew one side. Uncle Alex traced my father's side, but I traced my mother's side. I certainly didn't understand the magnitude of what it could be. Afterward I remember thinking what it would be like to have a famous relative. Now, I'm recognized for who I'm related to. It's very challenging to negotiate at times. … The door opens because I'm Alex Haley's nephew, but the door stays open because I'm decent at what I do.

TVWeek: *How did you feel about LeVar Burton playing Kunta Kinte?*

Mr. Haley: LeVar Burton was an unknown actor then. He went to USC and played Curly in "Oklahoma." I was a young actor myself at the time, and part of me was thinking, I should be in there somewhere as an actor. Putting vanity and ego aside, it would be hard to accept someone playing my family, someone I've never seen. When I really got into accepting him was in the second episode when he's resisting the master [and he is whipped until he answers to the name Toby]. The natural impulse to root for someone is modified by your reality of what is being portrayed. I was hoping [Kunta Kinte] would escape, but if he had then I wouldn't be here.

Copyright © 2018 Dexter Canfield Media Inc.