ARTS ATL

Lonnie Holley working in his studio in 2018 (Photos/stills courtesy of George King)

Holley documentary is a 'Thumbs Up' to an artist whose muse is mystery

CANDICE DYER × APRIL 5, 2024

Filmmaker George King's Recent Documentary About Lonnie Holley Depicts The Artist's Tragic Upbringing, Whimsical Approach To Craft And Reverence For The Mysterious Force Of The Universe.

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When artist Lonnie Holley started to gain some hard-earned notoriety, Lloyd's of London insured one of his exhibits. His mother happened to intercept the mail informing him of this development, and she misread the note, thinking it said "Lords of London."

“She misunderstood and thought it was an actual message from the Lord, as in, the Lord God,” Holley recalls now with a chuckle.

And why not? It was an honest mistake, given Holley’s daily communion with the divine, which informs his self-taught visual art and his otherworldly music. These cosmic allusions and funny stories swirling around the legendary artist are what Atlanta-based filmmaker George King worked to showcase in *Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley*, a 95-minute feature that has racked up awards around the world, including “best documentary” at the Harlem International Film Festival. The documentary, which takes its title from Holley’s mantra, held its Atlanta premiere at the Tara Theater last month.

“Everything I do is an offering to the spirits,” says the artist. “I tithe and give my 10% to the Great Spirit. That’s what George was trying to capture. And he did.”

Although he is touted as an avatar of the Black experience, local Holley events tend to be dominated by White fans — for every head with dreads or braids, there are 20 graying ponytails. Holley, bedecked in chunky jewelry and looking the part of a shaman, holds court and speaks in riddles. He comes across as both guileless and cagey. “It’s been a long journey to get to this point,” he reflects.

Holley with “The Hand of my Grandfather” in 1988.

It was obvious King had his work cut out for him in making this film. Holley — who is now 75 and still churning out up to 25 projects a day at his studio in Atlanta — is a handful. The filmmaker followed his

energetic subject around for 22 years through highs and lows, and the obsessiveness pays off in this soulful and comprehensive document about the improbable art-world superstar.

“I was researching a film on self-taught Southern artists in the 1990s and shot interviews with curators and collectors,” King says. “Lonnie was known to folklorists and artists in Atlanta. I arranged a visit. On meeting Lonnie, I realized he *was* the story, and we embarked on this journey that continues to this day. I haven’t since even looked at the other footage I shot before we met.”

Matt Arnett, who assists in booking Holley, says, “I think George King did an admirable job trying to capture the essence of Lonnie Holley on film. And I say that not as a knock, but the problem with any film about Lonnie Holley is it’s impossible to capture the spirit and do it justice in film. His life, his art and music-making are constant, and, often, the moment you say ‘cut’ is when the magic happens. It’s impossible to be everywhere when and where something amazing is happening with Lonnie. Still, it’s a beautiful film — hopefully the first of many.”

If he has any antecedents, they are Sun Ra and Mr. Imagination, but Holley really is the ultimate *sui generis* success story. His picaresque biography starts, with great pain, in Birmingham, Alabama. Born the seventh of 27 children, he was swapped for a pint of whiskey, only to be raised in a juke joint as “Tunky MacIlroy,” unaware of his true identity. By age 5, Holley was put to work and wound up in the notorious Mount Meigs Industrial School for Negro Children, where he was sentenced to pick cotton. “I had my ass whupped every day at that place,” he says. “I didn’t know nothing about picking cotton, but I was expected to get 100 pounds a day. They about beat me to death.”

Despite these privations, Holley was a pensive young man with big ideas and a restless, almost compulsive, need to create.

“After the world gave up on Lonnie Holley, the universe sent him the gift of art,” King comments.

In his 20s, with no formal training, Holley began carving “core sand” — an industrial by-product of Birmingham’s blast furnaces — into visually arresting figures that caught the attention of a local television crew. The market for so-called “outsider art” was starting to boom, and, soon enough, Holley’s phantasmagoric work found its way to the Smithsonian. He became the toast of the art world.

But Mother Universe still had some tricks up her gossamer sleeve.

“He always sang while he worked . . . and he is always working,” King says. “I never thought his music would have any popular appeal. He would record at night as he lay in bed on a cassette recorder and keep them all. He had

Holley in more recent years. (Photo by George King)

boxes of cassettes, but I doubt any survived an Alabama summer."

Holley's music, played largely and hauntingly on the black keys of his keyboard, defies easy categorization. Think of it as a free jazz fever dream — the sonic form of his indefatigable self-expression. "I realized he was telling his life story through music," King says.

In 2012, Holley was dragged into a recording studio and, soon enough, found himself on a European tour. He recently played the Sydney Opera House in Australia, and he is gearing up for another trip to the continent.

Despite this success, Holley still regards himself as a knockabout bohemian on the ragged margins of society. "I don't do any of this for the money," he says at the Tara premiere before he takes the theater crowd to church, talking in the cadences of the Black pulpit about the importance of saving the environment and seeing beauty in that which is cast off.

Holley on tour in 2017, captivating his audience with a message about art.

"My mamaw wanted me to be a preacher," he says. "My art is my message. My art is my healing, and I want to help others heal through it."

In fact, even without the imprimatur of the art establishment — and even without the earnest, aging hipsters who hang on his every cryptic word — as the documentary makes clear, Holley would still be

making art. He simply cannot help himself.

“He will make something that he hangs in the woods, where few people would stumble on it,” King says. “Or he’ll create something and toss it into a lake, presumably so archaeologists will find it in the future.”

Holley is taking his cues from a higher muse. “It’s like “churning butter,” he says, pronouncing it “chewning.” “Churning butter for Mother Universe. I will do it no matter what. It makes me want to cry to think about it.”

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Candice Dyer’s work has appeared in magazines such as Atlanta*,* Garden and Gun*,* Men’s Journal and Country Living*. She is the author of* Street Singers, Soul Shakers, Rebels with a Cause: Music from Macon.

Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley

THUMBS UP: “THUMBS UP FOR MOTHER UNIVERSE,” ATLANTA-BASED FILMMAKER GEORGE KING’S FASCINATING DOCUMENTARY ABOUT ARTIST/MUSICIAN LONNIE HOLLEY, PLAYS AT THE TARA THU., MAR., 21 THROUGH SUN., MAR 24. HOLLEY AND KING WILL HOST A Q&A AT THURSDAY’S SCREENING.

CRITIC'S PICK: Filmed over a 25-year period, *Thumbs Up for Mother Universe* chronicles the extraordinary life and career of Lonnie Holley. Born in 1950 in Birmingham, AL, the seventh of 27 children, Holley endured an incredibly brutal and disadvantaged upbringing, from which he nevertheless drew inspiration to produce deeply poignant art and, later, imaginatively improvised music, for which he is known the world over. Atlantan George King's feature-length documentary delves into Holley's creative process including his insights into conservation, ecology and the environment, and visionary sources, which are rooted in southern life and African American history and culture. For the Thu., Mar. 24, screening of *Thumbs Up for Mother Universe*, Holley and King will be on hand for a live Q&A session. — Doug DeLoach

The Sydney Morning Herald

Traded for a bottle of whiskey as a child, somehow he survived

Barry Divola

FEBRUARY 21, 2024

You could be forgiven for thinking Lonnie Holley is a fictional character, perhaps one dreamed up by Colson Whitehead, the author of *The Nickel Boys* and *The Underground Railroad*.

His backstory is jaw-dropping. Born in Alabama in 1950, the seventh of 27 children, he says he was traded for a bottle of whiskey at the age of four; at nine he was hit by a car, dragged for a couple of blocks and spent almost three months in a coma; at 11 he was incarcerated in the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children, a juvenile correctional facility that was nothing more than a slave camp, where the children were sent to do back-breaking work in the cotton fields all day and routinely beaten and abused.

Lonnie Holley: his manner of speaking is somewhere between a preacher and a poet

The fact Holley is still alive at the age of 73 is astounding. The fact he became a renowned artist whose sculptures and paintings have been shown at the Smithsonian Institution, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the White House, is even more remarkable.

On top of this, last year he released his seventh album, *Oh Me Oh My*, a visceral and revealing collection of songs about his nightmarish past and his optimism and hope for the future, produced by Jacknife Lee (U2, The Killers, R.E.M.) and featuring guest appearances from high-profile fans including Justin Vernon (Bon Iver), Michael Stipe and Sharon Van Etten.

“Thumbs up to the universe!” Holley exclaims in his trademark greeting, speaking from his manager’s home in Atlanta, Georgia.

His left hand is a mass of bangles and rings, which he says protect him when using the tools of his trade while making sculptures from found objects and detritus. He has greying dreadlocks, a hangdog face and large, soulful eyes. His manner of speaking is somewhere between a preacher and a poet, and his answers can wander into discursive asides about the human condition as he talks about planting seeds, seeking water and becoming like the branches of a tree.

Of one thing he’s sure – his art saved him. And it started from a deeply personal and tragic place in his 20s, when he carved gravestones for a niece and nephew who died in a house fire.

He went on to obsessively create sculptures from found objects, and in the mid-1980s his work eventually caught the attention of Bill Arnett, a keen collector and outspoken promoter of the work of African-American artists from the US south.

Visual artist and experimental musician Lonnie Holley: “The way I make music is I simplify”. DAVID RACCUGLIA

“Other people saw what I was doing as picking up a bunch of junk and putting it together,” Holley says. “Bill came along and saw the stories behind it and what I was trying to do. He understood.”

Arnett died in 2020.

“My dad was fighting for the world to understand and appreciate black art from the region we come from,” says Arnett’s son Matt, who manages Holley. “He was trying to change museum systems to force this art into those places that had never welcomed it before, or had stereotyped it as a second-class thing. I watched my dad be a champion for those artists my whole life, and Lonnie was one of them.”

For years Matt had been astounded by the music Holley made for himself on home-made cassettes, “but I was a child of Tower Records, where there were all these categories like rock and folk and soul and jazz, and although I loved Lonnie’s music I didn’t know exactly what it was or where it would fit in a record store”.

Seven albums later, it seems the answer is that Holley doesn’t fit in anywhere, and that’s exactly the appeal of what he does. Critics have drawn comparisons with the spoken word/proto-rap of Gil Scott-Heron, the experimental jazz of Sun Ra, or the work of so-called outsider artists like Daniel Johnston. But ask Holley about his music and he’s direct.

“The way I make music is I simplify,” he says. “I don’t want to dress it up in a suit and tie and shiny shoes like a dignitary. I want to celebrate my grandmammy and grandpappy and those who lived before, and tell our stories. I want to tell people what I’ve learned and what I know. I try to tell it how it is.”

On his latest album Holley really tells it like it is on the central track *Mount Meigs*, a frenetic and powerful song about his time at the Alabama Industrial

School for Negro Children. Over whirring strings, rattling drums and frazzled shards of electric guitar that suggest the early work of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, he builds his story to a climax with the words: “Nobody taught us anything. Got no education. Nobody let us have no wisdom. They beat the curiosity out of me! They beat it out of me! They whooped it! They knocked it! They banged it! Slammed it! Damned it!”

At the end he softly repeats the words “Picture me being there”. And you can’t help but do so.

Despite the bad memories, Holley remains surprisingly positive about his life. “I went through trials and tribulations as a child but I grew through it,” he says. “I was like a big ball of air thrown out onto the water, and the water pushed and rolled and tumbled me. Everything is a test, but you have to realise that you’ve been blessed with life and you have to heal yourself. And then, boom! You’re blossoming, you’re branching out, like a tree.”

Matt Arnett knows Holley better than anyone. How does he think he has not only survived but thrived? “The short answer is I have no f---ing idea,” he says. “He’s out there trying to give joy and hope to a world that never gave him any of those things. That blows my mind. It hurts me to think of all these people who have done all these horrible things to Lonnie, and to so many other people, too.”

Arnett has shared many a hotel room with Holley while on tour, “and almost nightly I can hear him having nightmares and calling out the names of ‘Glover’ or ‘Holloway’ and other people who mistreated him 60 years ago”.

“The word ‘authentic’ is so overused. But the things Lonnie sings about and the things he makes art about are true to his life. And it’s through his art and his music that he’s been able to find peace. They’re his salvation.”

Lonnie Holley will appear with Moor Mother and Irreversible Entanglements at the Rechabite Hall, Perth, on February 22; Mona Lawns, Hobart (24); Utzon Room, Sydney Opera House (26); and Melbourne Recital Centre (28).

Chronogram

January 01, 2024

Lonnie Holley and Friends Play The Local January 21

By Peter Aaron

Photos by Matt Arnett

Lonnie Holley with his art in 2019.

Alabama-born artist Lonnie Holley responded to the atrocious social conditions of the Jim Crow South of his childhood by elevating himself via the creation of his own beautiful world, turning trash into whimsical, surreal sculptures that were championed by esteemed art collector Bill Arnett. His works have since been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Art Museum, the American Folk Art Museum, Ikon Gallery, and the National Gallery of Art.

Holley was abandoned by his mother when he was four—traded for a bottle of whiskey, he says—and started working when he was five, going on to do time at the infamous Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children. While still a child he was hit and dragged by a car, spending several weeks in a coma. His art career started in 1979 when he carved headstones out of sandstone for his sister's two children, who had died in a housefire. Soon after that first foray, Holley, a USA Artist Fellow who himself has 15 children, began creating his signature assemblages as well as quilts, paintings, and films.

Photos by Matt Arnett

Lonnie Holley with Dave Nelson and Marlon Patton performing at Pickathon in Happy Valley, Oregon, in 2018.

Music is another medium for the septuagenarian, who has released seven albums: 2023's *Oh Me Oh My* features guests Bon Iver, Michael Stipe, and Sharon Van Etten. Lonnie Holley and Friends will perform at The Local in Saugerties on January 21 at 6pm. Tickets to the perfromance are $29.87.

—Peter Aaron

You started your artistic career by carving sandstone sculptures and then moved more into painting and the assemblages that you've become so well known for. What led you into working in these other mediums?

I have always made things. Ever since I was young, traveling in the creeks and ditches. The sandstone carvings were the first thing I'd made that anyone paid any attention to, but I'd always created other things. Even when people knew about me, they'd walk right past sculptures to look at sandstones. Bill Arnett was the first person who ever took any interest in my found-object sculptures. Most people before him were just blind to them. I remember the first day I met Bill, he was so excited looking at and hearing me tell him about the sculptures. He was the first person who even asked me what they were about. Even now, I make work out of whatever materials speak to me.

Your artworks are often imbued with symbolic meaning, sometimes several layers of it. When you create a piece, does it usually reveal its meaning to you after you've finished it, or do you tend to be conscious of the meaning during the process of making it? Do you ever begin making a piece with the aim of wanting it to say something specific?

It can happen all different kinds of ways. I would say usually I have an idea before I start making something. That's almost always true with a sculpture. It's usually the material that inspires the piece. If I see or pick up something that had a previous use, that often inspires the work. If I'm putting things together, I'm taking the lives of all the materials and giving them a new life and new meaning. If I'm painting, usually an idea comes to me and the painting is a response to that idea. But sometimes I just start painting and it soon starts to make sense to me. All of my art, either visual art or music, is about something. There is so much always going on in the world that it wouldn't make sense not to art about it.

How does your approach to making music compare to the approach you have to making your other art?

I've always said that my art and my music come from the same brain and are like twins. I don't see much difference between a keyboard and a paint brush or my voice and piece of material. My art pieces are like a song, but you have to use your eyes to hear them. And my music is like a sculpture that you have to use your ears to see. I made my first real recordings in 2006, but never really did anything with that stuff. I think my first record came out in 2012, but I didn't think of myself as a professional. The things I sing about and the things I make art about are really the same. I always tell audiences that I'm not there to rock them or make them dance, I'm there hopefully to make them think.

Your music is improvised but it also seems like it has a strong feeling of gospel music, and you made your first recordings in a church in 2006. Did you play or sing gospel music when you were a child? What music and which musicians have moved and inspired you during your life?

Matt Arnett [son of Bill Arnett] was recording the Gee's Bend quilters and he rented out one of the churches in Gee's Bend to do that. He invited me to come down and record some of my music after the gospel music recording was finished for the day, so it wasn't intentional that my first recordings happened in a church. When I was little I lived right behind the drive-in theater and right next to the state fairgrounds. I listened to so much music in those two places. I also learned so many field songs at the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children. When my grandmother got me out of there, I spent time in church with her and heard a lot of gospel and spiritual music. And she used to wake up in the morning and I'd hear her moaning and singing. I wanted to sing in church and give testimony, but I never really had much chance. My testimony was too long. I always listened to a lot of different kinds of music. Everything from Johnnie Taylor and James Brown to Loretta Lynn and Bob Dylan, who is one of my favorites. All music inspires me.

What do you most hope people feel when they see your art or hear your music? In these especially turbulent times, how does art help people and help the world?

I've said it before, because it's true, that art saved my life. I don't think I'd be alive today if I hadn't found art as a way out. I don't think I want people to feel any particular way when they see my work or hear my music. I just want them to listen and look. How it moves them or doesn't is up to them. For so long people like me didn't have outlets for our work. Museums and galleries didn't show it and venues didn't invite us to perform. So I'm just honored that I can travel and share my music and people can go in museums and see my art and read about me. I hope they are moved, but it's up to them to decide how. If you are looking for fiction, my art and music are probably not for you. I try to bring the truth every time.

About The Author

Peter Aaron

Peter Aaron is the arts editor for Chronogram.

ARTnews Est. 1902

The Year in Black Art: A Wealth of Blockbuster Exhibitions

BY SHANTAY ROBINSON December 22, 2023 9:15am

Multiple artworks created by painter Henry Taylor are visible December 1, 2023 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

ROBERT NICKELSBERG/GETTY IMAGES.

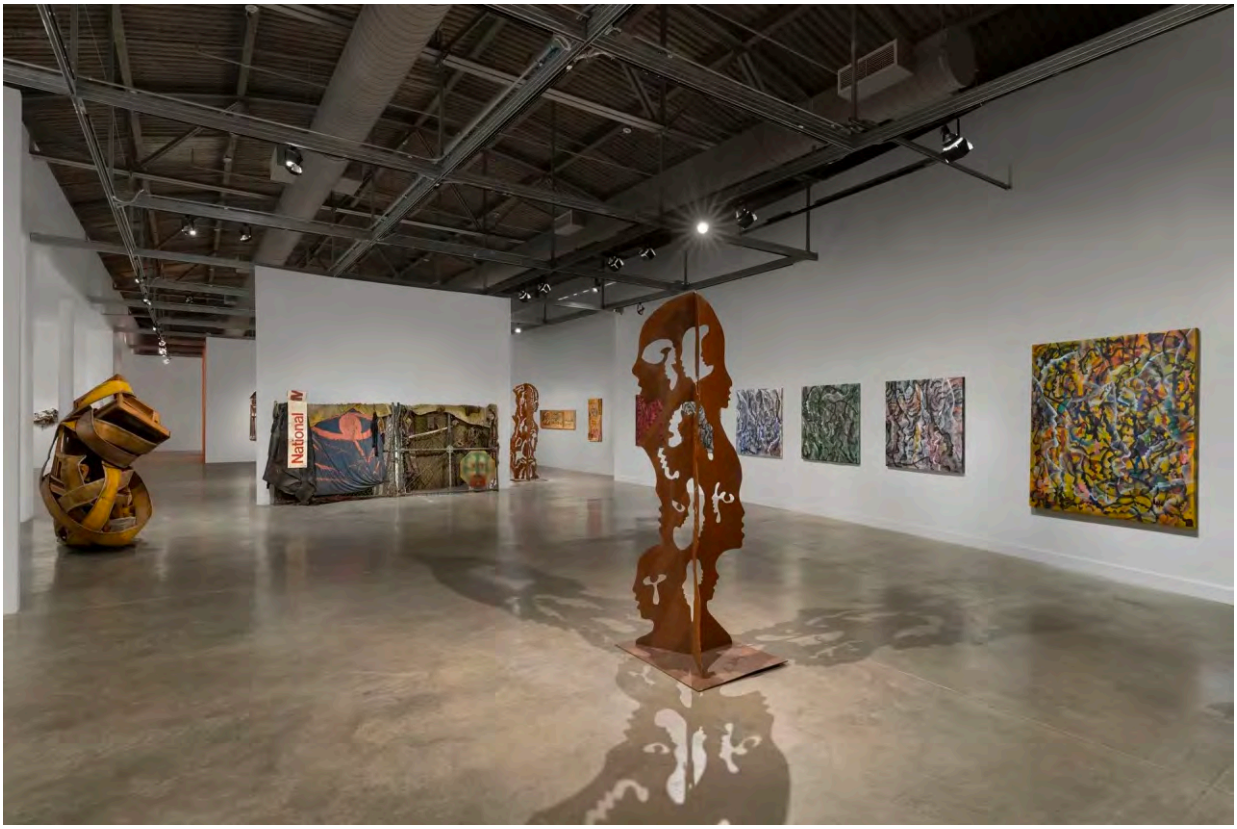
It was a great year in Black art from New York to the San Francisco Bay. In 2023 it was featured throughout the country in a wealth of blockbuster exhibitions that garnered considerable attention, establishing Black artists as some of the most esteemed in the world.

Black art speaks to diverse audiences about the lived experiences of Black artists and Black people. It is an ideal way to connect to and understand the conditions under which they exist through unadulterated dialogue between artists and audiences.

Fresh off her epic pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022, Simone Leigh was given a retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston; it traveled to the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and will continue to move audiences as it travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2024. “Wangechi Mutu: Intertwined,” the astounding mid-career retrospective showing the dynamism of Mutu’s skills in artistic mediums including painting, sculpture, and video art, debuted at the New Museum in New York City and will move to the New Orleans Museum of Art early next year. At the Baltimore Museum of Art, “The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century” celebrated hip-hop’s 50th anniversary with almost 90 artists exhibited, including Mark Bradford, Carrie Mae Weems, and Arthur Jafa. There were also noteworthy exhibitions of Faith Ringgold, Kehinde Wiley, Charles Gaines, Amoako Boafo, Charles White, and Betye Saar.

Unfortunately, not all the exhibitions featuring work by Black artists can be covered in a single article. Unlike Leigh and Mutu’s retrospectives, which were surrounded by much hype, the artists below had major exhibitions—equally expressive of the Black experience—that deserve more notice.

“Lonnie Holley: If You Really Knew”



Installation view of “Lonnie Holley: If You Really Knew,” Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, May 10–October 1, 2023

Photo : Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami.

Self-taught artist Lonnie Holley is known for using discarded objects to create meaningful art. “Lonnie Holley: If You Really Knew,” exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami, focused on the artist’s improvisational turning of personal hardships into drawings, paintings, sculpture, photography, performance, and sound.

As one of 27 children, the 73-year-old artist spent time in foster care and in a juvenile detention facility. Holley focuses not on hardship, but on art, showing that anyone or anything can be greater than the sum of its parts. “Holley’s work is not just aesthetically compelling, but it also challenges viewers to rethink their relationships to objects, discarded items, and the environment,” MOCA curator Adeze Wilford explained to ***See Great Art***.

The exhibition of sculpture, painting, and music included 70 works, including sculpture, drawings, and large-scale quilt paintings. Holley’s passion for inspiring social change through art has resulted in a body of work that explores US history, the environment, and his own memories. For the North Miami exhibition, Holley also curated a section dedicated to outsider artists Purvis Young, Thornton Dial, Mary T. Smith, and Hawkins Bowling. Although he is an Alabama native, it was Holley’s first retrospective in the South.

MIAMI New Times

VISUAL ART

10 Best Miami Art Exhibitions of 2023

From the Pérez Art Museum to the Historic Hampton House, the Miami art scene showcased high-quality work throughout 2023.

By Douglas Markowitz **December 22, 2023**

Alejandro Piñeiro Bello's *Claro de Luna* is on display at the Rubell Museum's central gallery. **Photo by Chi Lam/Courtesy of Rubell Museum**

Earlier this month, as Art Basel and Miami Art Week once again assaulted the city with traffic, **a headline in the *New York Times* declared**, "Miami has matured into a cultural capital." Took 'em long enough, but even the Grey Lady has to admit: Two decades on from the fair's debut, the city has evolved beyond cliché jokes about cocaine cowboys, café Cubano, and Brazilian butt lifts, at least when it comes to the fine arts.

However, I don't really see it as a maturing. "Mature" implies one is over the hill, unable to change or innovate. Rather, in 2023, Miami's art scene has come of age. The city's gallery scene has become robust, museums and curators are generating challenging and thoughtful exhibitions, and local artists are gaining international stature. Miami didn't need a *Mona Lisa* or *Starry Night* to become a major art world destination — it did it by embracing the new and encouraging artistic freedom. The *Mona Lisa* of tomorrow is being created here, today.

You'll see evidence of that below, as *New Times* looks back at the ten best art exhibitions that adorned museum and gallery walls in Miami in 2023.

Installation view of "If You Really Knew" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami

"Lonnie Holley: If You Really Knew" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami

Even if Lonnie Holley hadn't bared his soul to me **in an extraordinary interview** earlier this year, this solo show at MOCA would still be one of my

favorites of the year. "If You Really New" spans the self-taught artist's entire career, from his early sandstone carvings made from salvaged industrial slag and assemblages of found materials to recent paintings featuring faces in silhouette, **all commenting on the oft-destructive impacts humankind has had on our home planet**. Holley also found space to include some of his fellow Southern artists, such as Purvis Young and Thornton Dial. The show also ran aside the annual **South Florida Cultural Consortium** exhibition, which featured interesting new work from local artists like Francesco Lo Castro and Ema Ri.

Lonnie Holley's Earthen Monuments Sing in a Survey Including Fellow Black Artists from the South

By *Monica Uszerowicz* July 31, 2023 9:00am

Lonnie Holley: *If you Really Knew (I)*, ca. 1980s.
COURTESY BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES, NEW YORK, AND TOKYO

In his sculptures, **Lonnie Holley** utilizes terraneous materials—sand, stone, iron, the detritus buried beneath them—but remains steadily inspired by water. In "I Am a Part of the Wonder," a song on his recent album *Oh Me Oh My*, Holley sings about "the wonders of / a drip of water / falling from the sky." During a conversation before the opening of his Miami survey show "If You Really Knew," Holley described to me visible dew on flowers, the palpable Florida humidity. "Every one of these plants is breathing," he said. "Their roots are acquiring the dampness. A drop of water is a living thing."

It matters that "If You Really Knew" opened in Miami, a city Holley called "one of the most *moisty* places in America." One of the artist's chief concerns—pollution of the planet's waters—is tangible in the dampness of the place, a point he reiterated in a public conversation with exhibition curator Adeze Wilford: "I'm concerned about the pollution and waste—what's in the rain once the precipitation draws it up, how that rain mixes with other waters," Holley said. Where does waste go when the earth can no longer, as Holley describes, "bite and chew it"?

For Holley, the earth is a woman—he calls her Mother Universe—and he has spent the better part of his lifetime collecting and transforming into artworks that which she cannot digest. His sculptures of found materials are the heart of this 70-work exhibition, which traces the trajectory of Holley's 40-plus-year career and aims to capture the breadth of his boundless multidisciplinary practice. Spray-painted canvases, quilt paintings, steel sculptures, and an ongoing screening of *I Snuck Off the Slave Ship* (a 2018 musical film codirected with Cyrus Moussavi) together encapsulate at least part of it. The show also includes an extensive selection of pieces by other Black artists from the South that Holley curated himself: Thornton Dial, Mary T. Smith, Hawkins Bolden, Joe Minter, and Miami native Purvis Young—all of whose works, like Holley's, were part of the collection of William Arnett, the late collector and founder of Souls Grown Deep Foundation who launched Holley's career in earnest. (The show serendipitously opened on what would have been Arnett's 84th birthday).

Minter's *Queen* (1998), an anthropomorphic figure with chains where her crown would be, takes on new life standing across from Holley's *In the Cocoon* (2021), a wire sculpture shaped like a face in profile, a motif repeated throughout his oeuvre. Holley's figure, like Minter's, is draped in flotsam—nylon, rope, string, pieces of trees—and the assemblage appears to billow behind them. It might be hair, or a veil to be cast off. Reflecting on the rubble and household objects alchemized in his work and that of the artists shown alongside him, Holley said, "this is material revival: we all revived these materials, as if they were Christ himself. We were the humans who were concerned about them, who took them out of their deathly place."

Lonnie Holley: *Without Skin,* 2020.
COURTESY BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES, NEW YORK, AND TOKYO

The exhibition begins with Holley's sandstone sculptures, made in the 1980s (with "stone that the builder rejected," he said, alluding to Psalm 118:22). Holley's discovery of sandstone marked a turning point in his formative days in Jim Crow–era Birmingham, Alabama. After two of his sister's children died in a fire, Holley used sandstone—found among the byproducts of a steel foundry he'd explored—to build tombstones for them. These monuments of love were his first artworks, and he made more, experimenting with shapes and materials to establish different kinds of consistency.

Arranged on shelves that allow for a close look, Holley's early sculptures range in size from around 8 to 24 inches and, with his recurring facial profile motifs or shell-like whorls, resemble the stone sculptures of traditions including Mesoamerican statues, royal Egyptian reliquaries, and Mesopotamian reliefs. One diptych comprises sandstone slabs, displayed together like plaques (*Untitled*, 1980s). On the right, two figures lovingly embrace and look upon a child, under a bright sun with carved swirls that indicate its shine. On the left, a face emerges from a strata of small rectangles, a topography of Holley's imagination.

Lonnie Holley: *Drifting Souls (diptych),* 2021.
COURTESY BLUM & POE, LOS ANGELES, NEW YORK, AND TOKYO

The sandstones' contours rhyme with those of Holley's tall steel sculptures (all *Untitled*, 2019), which are stacked, like totems, with faces again in profile. They are softly curved and seem to breathe, and they appear again in his spray paint works and quilt paintings (made with acrylic,

oil, spray paint, and gesso on quilt over wood). In *The Communicators (Honoring Joe Minter*), from 2021, the visages are rendered in black and gray, and seem to move, as if Holley has animated Minter's face, abstractly, over time. In *Drifting Souls* (2021), a diptych of a mirrored image, the faces float obliquely toward a pink-blue cosmos, like butterflies. In *Back to the Spirit* (2021), they are overlaid upon each other, swirling like clouds.

These faces might be oneiric representations of the soul, visible shadows of the otherwise incorporeal human spirit. Holley speaks often about the violence inflicted upon the planet—specifically, the way it mirrors the racialized terror of hegemonic powers wreaked on vulnerable people, with cruelty born from the same place. But he speaks just as much about his hope for its future. Though titles like *Which Tear Drop Will End the Violence?* (2022) might serve as warnings, Holley's images depict states of transcendence and harmony. They look like heaven, but their scenes are set right here, on earth.

Read More About:

Lonnie Holley

"THUMBS UP FOR MOTHER UNIVERSE"

by
ALISON M. GINGERAS

Archaeologist of the African American vernacular, LONNIE HOLLEY reflects on his travels through the South, his discovery of peers like Thornton Dial—and the moment he consciously became an artist

ALISON M. GINGERAS: Lonnie, you have worn so many hats in your life, it's almost impossible to enumerate all you've done. The path you took to becoming such an accomplished visual artist, poet, and musician is truly exceptional terrain. When did you begin to make art?

—LONNIE HOLLEY: I've always made art. I was always curious about things. I'd pick up things and arrange them and study them and move on. It's always been something I've done.

When I was as young as five, I spent a lot of time in the creek behind my house looking for crawdaddies, and up on the banks digging for worms so fishermen could use them. I wired up speakers on top of my house so I could watch and hear the drive-in theater nearby. I'd sneak into the state fairgrounds that was next door to the drive-in and watch and listen to what people were doing and playing and singing. I studied the fruits and vegetables and the livestock they'd bring to show off. But I didn't know about art. I don't know that I'd ever really heard that word, but I've come to understand it as such now.

Was there a specific moment when you began to call your work "art"?

—When my niece and nephew died in a house fire, my sister Bonnie was devastated. The whole family was. Maurice was only eight and Freda was a year and a half old. Bonnie couldn't afford to buy tombstones and I wanted to do something to help her, so I took a cast of the material that the steel mills used to make the molds, and I carved tombstones for my niece and nephew, and gave them to my sister.

I just kept carving the stones and making other tombstones and things. Then about a year later there was another fire in the house where I was living. The fire chief came and saw some of the stuff I'd been making. He asked, "Who made this art?" I looked around because I didn't know what he was talking about. He said: "This is not the work of an amateur. This is art."

I'm pretty sure that was the first time I ever really heard someone call something art. I was 29 years old. He asked if he could call Channel 6 and tell them about me.

"My aunt Sarah gently slapped me on the cheek, and said: 'Stop waiting on town to come to you. Take your work to town'"

LONNIE HOLLEY, *The Natures of Man*, 1982
Sandstone, 31 × 19 × 27 cm

Right: SUE WILLIE SELTZER, quilt, 1990s
Cotton and cottonblends, 231 × 175 cm

Opening spread: LONNIE HOLLEY photographed in his studio in Atlanta by PEYTON FULFORD for BLAU International

Who were the people who were essen-
al to your path to being an artist?

—Walter Mitchell, who lived down
ıe street, was a Tuskegee Airman.
[e would pass by my house a lot on his
ay home from the store, and one
ıy he stopped and asked me if I knew
hat I was doing. I told him I didn't.
e said: "This is art. I've been all around
ıe world, and what you are making
ere is art."

I had been making things for
eeks and weeks. One day I was crying
cause I didn't know what to do with
this stuff I was making. My aunt
ırah said to me, "Come here," gently
ıpped me on the cheek, and said:
top waiting on town to come to you.
ıke your work to town."

I decided to load my stuff up in my
d car—the trunk was loaded; the
ck seat was loaded—and I drove to
e Birmingham Museum of Art and
ocked on the backdoor. The registrar went and got Dr Richard Murray, the director, and he came out and looked in the car, and asked if I made it all, and I said, "Yes."

He also said, "You are not an amateur." At that time, I didn't even know what an amateur was. He then said, "You are an artist," and he took me to his office with some of the pieces. He ended up picking two of them, *Baby Being Born* and *Time* (both c. 1979–80), for an exhibition at the Smithsonian called *More than Land and Sky: Art from Appalachia* (1980). That was the first time anyone called me an artist.

This story is so moving, and that epiphany you describe—of being recognized as an artist claiming this nomination of "art" for what you've been making your whole life—is something that you have also bestowed upon so many of the friends and colleagues that you have met on your travels around the country. In fact, you've become a catalyst for so many artists who have been recognized, and whose work has been seen by a wider public, because of your eye.

Can you tell me about this aspect of your life? Specifically, I'm thinking of the stories you told me about meeting Thornton Dial and bringing his work into the wider world.

—Let's start with first recognizing that the artists were humans with brains. That seems like a silly thing to say, but you have to recognize that being Black and coming from the South—we have to be recognized as thinking humans first, before anyone will even think that maybe we've made something that is worthy to be looked at. We were seen as beasts of burden, field hands, and out here to take orders from our masters. We couldn't forget where we were and who people thought we were. Any artist

THORNTON DIAL, *Blue Jungle*, 2000
Mixed media, 124 × 157 × 8 cm

to first help them realize
ey were doing was
› the culture. Not just our
culture.
y friend Bill Arnett being
his belief in us. I remember
that he wasn't doing
Black people but for all
he was criticized for saying
it's true. I taught myself
x wasn't just for me and my
is for the whole universal
ans. That's why I always say,
› for Mother Universe."
ıad a better understanding
s making and working
then go out and try to be
for others. And get them

to join me. We had to be united. We had to become a team.

Bill Arnett was a collector and scholar with whom you traveled around the South for many years. You shared a deeply humanist perspective about the artists you met, without making any hierarchical distinctions about their work, because the majority were self-taught. How was this chapter of your life, and how did you find these artists across the South?

—Along the way of being "self-taught," I had a lot of help and teachers. My grandparents were exemplars for me. Grandpap taught me so much about materials and how to use them. Momo, my daddy's mama, took me to the city landfill and taught me how to recycle and reuse things. She also taught me how to live to help others. Uncle Jesse taught me all about taking things apart. Daddy James, my mother's husband, taught me how to become a brick-mason and how to handle concrete and mortar. Mr and Mrs Smith taught me that you didn't always have to learn to use a ruler. It was okay to trust your own judgment and to believe in yourself. Aunt Sarah also taught me to believe in myself. William Arnett taught me how to slow down and pay attention to what it was that I was doing, and that led me on the journey of respect for other humans' works. There are so many

other examples of people who helped me become who I am today.

I'd like to hear more about this community of artists that you fostered across your travels.

—I met a lot of the artists, like Thornton Dial, and many of them were closed off to me at first. Mr Dial didn't really understand what I was talking about. He didn't understand art or what art was. I could relate to that. He was in his late 50s before he even knew what art was. I couldn't really get him to open up to me at first, so I brought Bill to meet him. Together, we were able to persuade him to understand that what he was doing went beyond just his labor. It was his mind that made him different. I just wanted to help Bill shine a light on these people, but it was really helpful for me to realize that I was not alone as a Black person on this journey.

Meeting Dial and Joe Minter and Ronald Lockett and Joe Light and Purvis Young and Mary T. Smith and Hawkins Bolden and Son Thomas and Dinah Young and Emmer Sewell and Mary Proctor and the quiltmakers from Gee's Bend, Alabama, and elsewhere, and so many others—it all helped me understand my own work and life so much better.

"I taught myself that my work wasn't just for me and my people; it was for the whole universal order of humans"

Lonnie Holley

I am honored and happy to still be an artist, now with a voice, speaking about our art on an international level, but to me, the art speaks for itself. An artist like Joe Minter didn't need me to tell him he was doing something important. He was going to do what he did even if I never met him. But once we met, and he saw my interest and respect, it encouraged him. He saw that we shared something and that bonded us. And we are still bonded to this day.

It seems like you were an agent of awakening for many of the artists you met.

—Our life is a test. On my new record, *Oh Me Oh My*, the first song is called "Testing." How will we respond to that test? When Bill met me, he was being tested. How would he respond? What would he do? When I met Thornton Dial, I was being tested. How would I respond? Would I reach out my hand to help another man? Dr King said, *If I did not get off this horse, what would happen to this man?* So I got off my horse. When you met me, you were being tested. How would you respond? You curated the South Etna Montauk show. That helped change my life. Again, we are all being tested.

Your music, much like your art, unfolded in a rather unconventional way. For those who don't know, your accomplishments as a musician are as manifold as they are for you as an artist.

There seem to be many shared threads between these two entwined areas of creative production: your virtuosity of improvisations, your poetic cadences in lyrics and in titles, musical and formal structures that repeat in fugue-like patterns, and the humanist

Thornton Dial and Bill Arnett in Bessemer, Alabama, photographed by Mark Peckmezian

at weave in and out of both

always said that my art and come from the same brain s of thoughts. They are like twins. I don't ever try to em from each other. I use thoughtsmithing" because rom my grandfather who th metal, and they called tsmith. I thought about what le have called me over s an artist, and I never liked ose titles: folk artist; visionary; primitive or out- ays wanted to know what I e of. Those terms have g to me like an ill-fitted suit. ed to be an American artist. fully, I can just be an artist of

ou become a musician? ught a keyboard in the early I already had an old speaker like a karaoke machine. I playing and singing every day. recorder on top of the would buy tapes and tapes. 30-minute tapes to tapes. Sometimes I would d play all day. I was just my personal enjoyment. I ght it would end up being yone beyond my neighbors. y, I was riding in the car with Matt Arnett, and I asked uld listen to them. We were ive. From then on, when- ld ride together, we'd listen I'd recorded. ears later, Matt was a music recording project in recording the old gospel sked me if I wanted to come cord some of my music. I ing down to Gee's Bend for Matt and his father. to most of the *Quilts of Gee's* t openings with that group d had spent a lot of time es. Whenever they would

"Any artist I met, I had to first help them realize that what they were doing was important to the culture. Not just our culture, *the* culture"

Right: JOE MINTER, *Old Rugged Cross*, 1998
Found wood, nails, 196 × 117 × 48 cm

travel to museum openings, they would sing and usually they'd invite me up to sing with them. But those were the older gospel songs. Some of them I knew from going to church with my mother and my grandmother.

Listening to your music, the DNA of gospel and of Black American spirituals is so evident.

—I went to Gee's Bend and helped with the recordings, and at night the studio was available for me to try my hand at it. We recorded some there but never really did anything with that.

In 2010, I was visiting Matt in Atlanta. He had moved into an old grocery store, and his friend Ben Sollee had recently played some music at that store. Matt asked me if I wanted to play in front of people, and if so, he would invite some friends over to listen. I had never really played music or sung in front of anybody who wasn't at my house, but I said, "Sure." He invited some friends over and we borrowed a keyboard, and I sang and played.

After that, he suggested we go to a studio and record some more, and that's how my career started. Matt's friend Lance owned a record label, and they wanted to put out my music. And I've been recording music ever since.

Your new record—with a fantastic cover by Joe Minter—just came out, right?

—My sixth record, *Oh Me Oh My*, came out on March 10 of this year, and I've started getting invited to play music all over the world. I guess the one difference between music and art is that music can reach people more quickly than art. For me, when I make a piece of art and it goes out into the world, I'm not necessarily going to be there when someone sees it. If I'm playing in front of people, I can see and hear their reaction.

A wider public has only lately been able to learn about the unimaginable struggles of your early life in Alabama as part of the investigative podcast series, *Unreformed: the Story of the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children*. Listening to your testimonies of your early childhood, and specifically your horrific experiences at Mount Meigs—a "school" to which you were abducted at age 11, in 1961, that was in fact a modern-day slave plantation that tortured and abused generations of Black children—it obviously deepens the remarkable nature of your trajectory. At a moment when the factual histories of Black Americans are being actively repressed and censored—such as with the racism motivating the culture wars on critical race theory—what do you hope might come out of this history of Mount Meigs? And how has participating in this podcast impacted you?

—The most important thing for me about the podcast was being able to meet and spend time with Mary Stephens and Jennie Knox, two women who experienced the horrors of that place just as I had. It helped to know that I wasn't alone, because for so many years I thought I was. To hear that so many of us are now dead or in prisons, most serving life and others on death row, made me realize that, in a sense, I was chosen. That I'm still here to help tell these stories means I'm blessed.

On *Oh Me Oh My*, there is a song called "I Can't Hush," and that's what this is about. Denny Abbott, who wrote *They Had No Voice*, about Mt. Meigs, said it right. We didn't have a voice. But I've lived the life I've lived, a life not unlike so many other Black people from the South, and I do *now* have a voice—and you won't hear me hush.

You use art and music to exorcise some of these demons, but also to generate a profoundly positive force in the world.

—My art has been my salvation from the pain and the memories of all of that. Art saved my life. So many of the other survivors don't have an outlet for that pain, and so many others—we won't know their truth unless they come forward.

I think that the state of Alabama should accept full responsibility for our pain and suffering. As far as I know, they've never even apologized or admitted what they did. I hope the podcast helps change that. I want to thank Josie Duffy Rice and everyone at School of Humans and iHeart Podcasts for helping expose this story. But most especially, the once boys and girls, now men and women, who were not afraid to help shed some light on the darkness that was Mount Meigs. *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

Lonnie Holley's solo show at MOCA, North Miami, is open from May 2023. *By Any Means Necessary*, at Blum and Poe, LA, is open from April 29 to June, 2023.

LONNIE HOLLEY:
THE EYES WERE ALWAYS ON US

March 23 - April 29, 2023

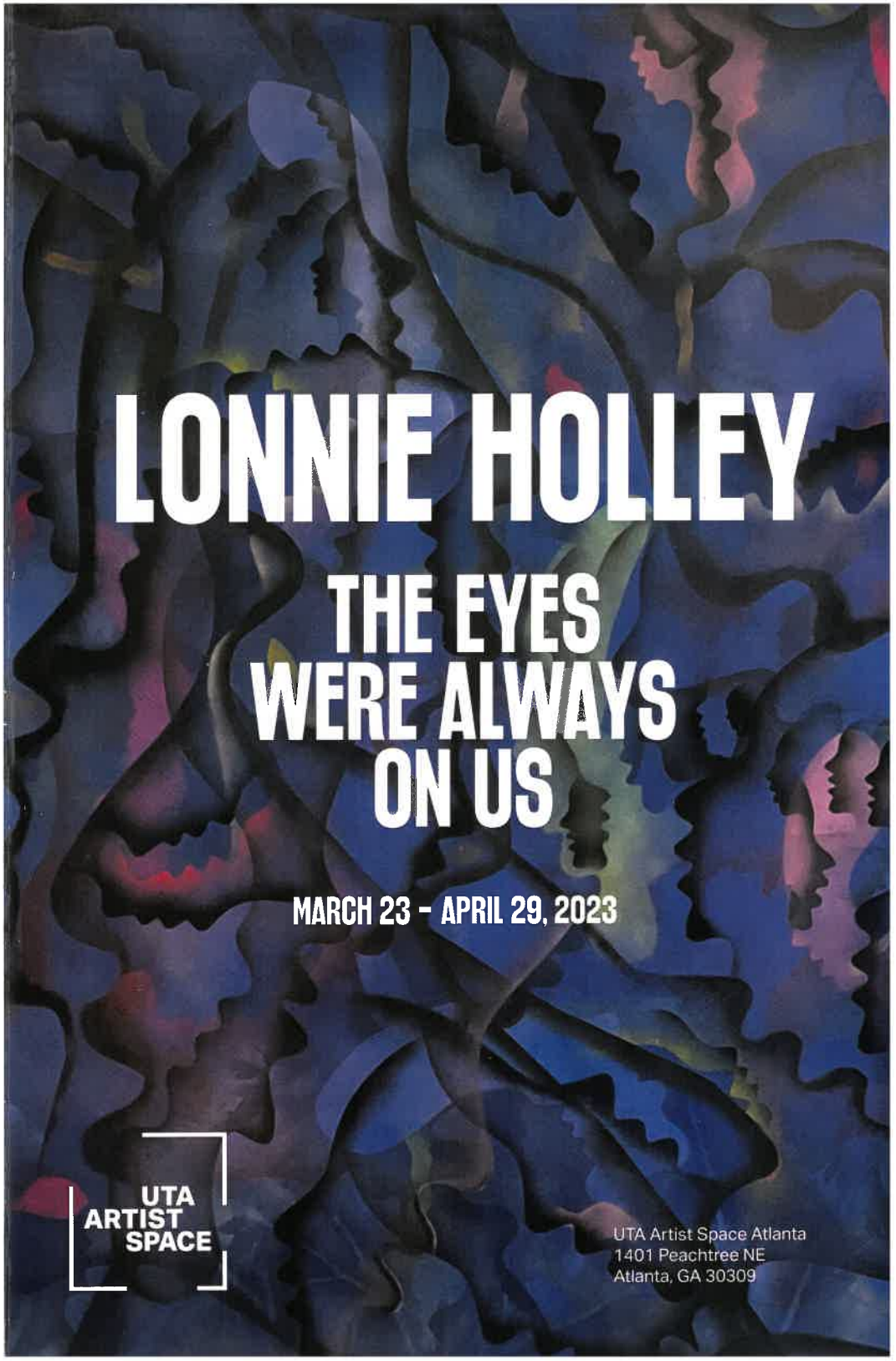
Born in Alabama, Lonnie Holley has devoted his life to the practice of improvisational creativity. His art and music, born out of struggle, hardship, but perhaps more importantly, out of furious curiosity and biological necessity, have manifested themselves in drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, performance and sound. Holley's sculptures are constructed from found materials in the oldest tradition of African American sculpture. Objects, already imbued with cultural and artistic metaphor, are combined into narrative sculptures that commemorate places, people, and events.

Although painting has been integral to his forty-year career as a visual artist, *The Eyes Were Always On Us* consists of works exclusively made with spray paint, oil sticks, gesso and acrylic on canvas, paper and quilt. Holley credits the solitude and reflection offered during two recent fellowships–The Hambidge Center in North Georgia and the Elaine de Kooning House in East Hampton–as the impetus to return to painting at a large scale. The new works on view at UTA Artist Space are simultaneously improvised and charged with layers of meaning, unmistakable from the assemblage works Holley has created since the 1980s. Changing with the Seasons, a new work painted on stretched quilt, similarly gives new life to a previously discarded material. Paying homage to his mother, who was a quiltmaker, and ancestors who labored to pick cotton and were forgotten, Holley uses quilts as both a commemorative and healing medium.

Holley, who has a long history as a musician with UTA, released his sixth album on March 10, 2023. Produced by Jacknife Lee, *Oh Me Oh My* includes collaborations with Bon Iver, Michael Stipe (REM), Moor Mother, Sharon Van Etten and Rokia Koné. Holley is the subject of *Thumbs Up for Mother Universe*, a feature-length documentary over 22 years in the making produced and directed by George King. He is also featured in *Unreformed: The Story of the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children*, a new podcast from iHeart Media.

ABOUT LONNIE HOLLEY

Lonnie Holley (b. 1950, Birmingham, Alabama) lives and works in Atlanta, Georgia. Born in the Jim Crow era of the American South, Holley began his career digging graves and picking cotton. Having been pronounced dead after being hit by a car, Holley claims divine intervention led him to the materials that inspired his art practice, which he began at the age of 29 with sandstone carvings. Nicknamed "The Sand Man," Holley has received no formal training as an artist yet has tirelessly and prolifically devoted his life to improvisational creativity, working across drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, performance and sound. His work is held in the collections of major museums throughout the United States, including the Birmingham of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the American Folk Art Museum and the High Museum of Art, amongst others; is on permanent display at the United Nations; and was recently on view in the White House rose garden. In January of 2014, Holley completed a one month artist-in-residence with the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in Captiva Island, Florida, site of the acclaimed artist's studio. More recently, Holley undertook a year-long residency at the Elaine DeKooning House in East Hampton (2021), with exhibitions held at the Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, New York and the South Etna Montauk Foundation (both 2021). Lonnie Holley is represented by Blum & Poe.



LONNIE HOLLEY

THE EYES WERE ALWAYS ON US

March 23 - April 29, 2023

We Were Like the Rivers, 2023
Acrylic, gesso, and spray paint on canvas
72 1/8 x 120 1/8 x 2 1/8"

Changing with the Seasons, 2023
Acrylic, gesso, and spray paint on quilt over wood
48 1/8 x 48 1/4 x 1 7/8"

The Eyes Were Always on Us, 2023
Acrylic, gesso, and spray paint on canvas
60 1/4 x 48 1/8 x 2 1/8"

Blue Borders, 2023
Acrylic and spray paint on paper
29 3/4 x 22 3/8"

The Speakers, 2023
Spray paint on paper
29 7/8 x 22 1/8"

The 9th Hour After Slavery, 2023
Spray paint on handmade paper
31 1/8 x 21 1/2"

Unknown Captivity, 2023
Spray paint on paper
30 x 22 3/8"

The Crossroads of My Mind, 2023
Spray paint on paper
29 3/4 x 22 1/2"

Searching for Another World, 2023
Spray paint on paper
29 3/4 x 22 1/2"

Many Were One, 2023
Acrylic, gesso, and spray paint on canvas
71 7/8 x 96 1/8 x 2 1/8"

Calling Mama, 2023
Spray paint on paper
30 x 22 1/2"

Understanding the Rules, 2023
Spray paint on paper
29 3/4 x 22 1/2"

The Ocean of Tears, 2023
Acrylic, gesso, and spray paint on canvas
73 5/8 x 72 x 2 1/8"

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People

Wet Paint in the Wild: Artist Lonnie Holley Hunts for Source Material in a Trash-Ridden Creek and Hangs Out With Stacey Abrams

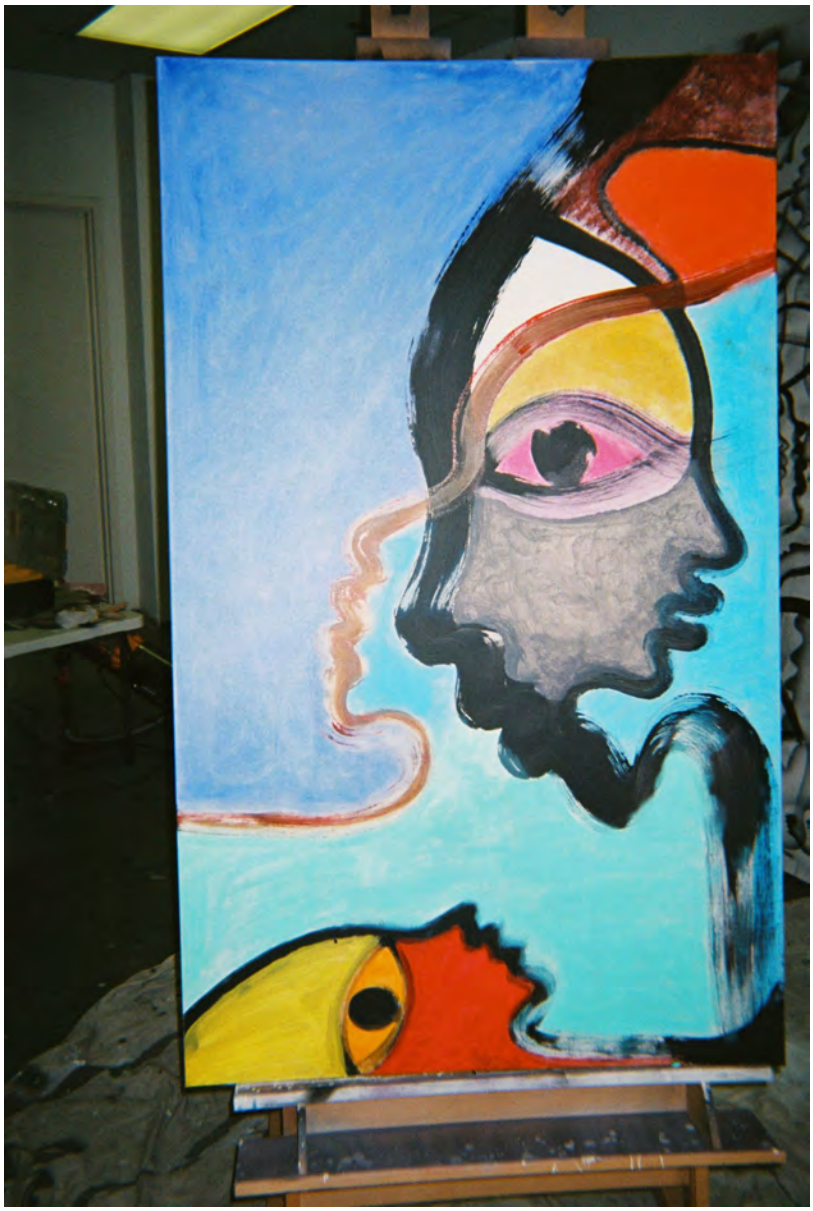
Join the artist as he jets around the Deep South.

Annie Armstrong, April 20, 2023

The first brush strokes of a new painting. Studio, Atlanta.

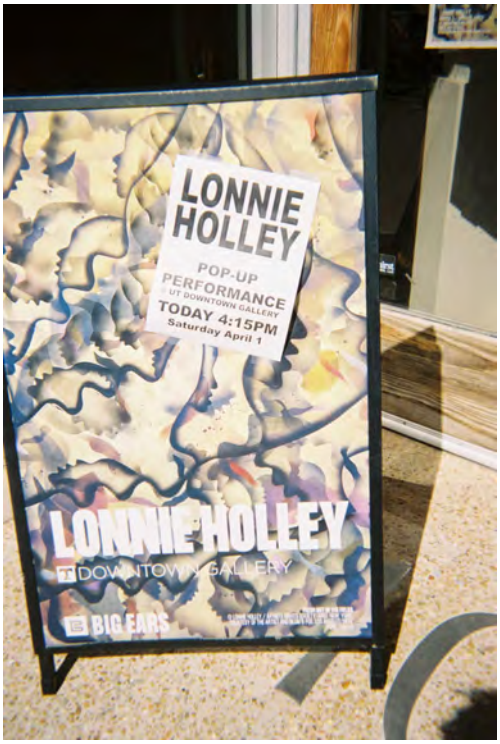
Welcome to Wet Paint in the Wild, the freewheeling—and free!—spinoff of Artnet News Pro's beloved Wet Paint gossip column, where we give art-world insiders a disposable camera to chronicle their lives on the circuit. To read the latest Wet Paint column, click here (members only).

Among the local legends of Atlanta I continue to worship, there's a special place in my heart for Lonnie Holley. My first encounter with the artist was actually of him as a musician when he opened for the band Deerhunter in 2013. Since then, I've delighted in finding his evocative and often haunting sculptures of found objects at museums around the country. Most recently, he opened up UTA Artist Space's new permanent location in Atlanta with a suite of paintings, and I handed him a camera to show me the week from his perspective…



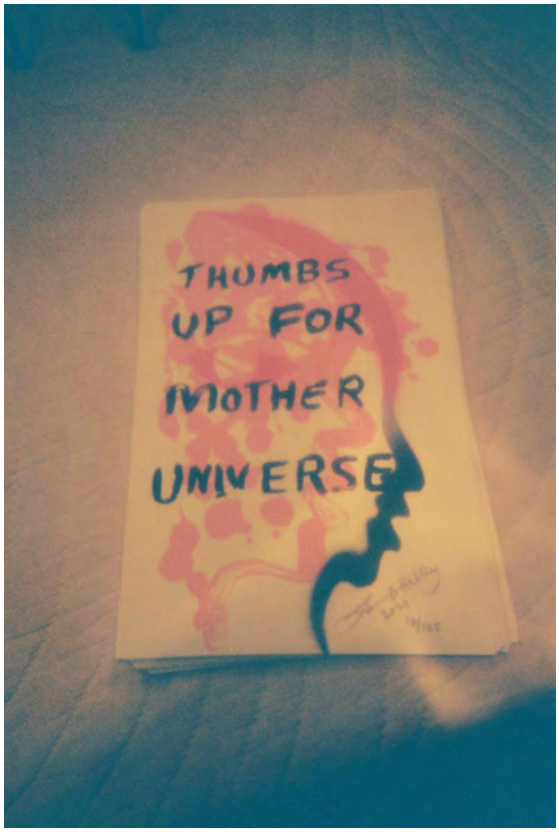
The very early stages of a new painting. In my temporary studio. Atlanta.

At the Big Ears Festival, where I was the artist in residence. I worked with young artists to make a music video. We went to the banks of a creek to film, and I noticed how polluted the creek was, so I started pulling materials out. Knoxville, TN.



I had two scheduled performances at Big Ears, one with Mourning [A] BLKstar and one with an all-star band. I had an exhibit of my art up during the festival at the University of Tennessee's downtown gallery, so I did a few pop-up shows during the festival, surrounded by my art. Knoxville, TN.

A photo from the second pop-up in the gallery. With Kevin Morby, Lee Bains, and Chris Stelling on guitars, Shahzad Ismaily on bass, Dave Eggar on cello, Cochemea on sax, Erin Rae singing back up, and Jim White on drums.
Knoxville, TN.



Thumbs Up for Mother Universe serigraph I made for a fundraiser with my friend Scott Peek at Standard, Deluxe.
Waverly, Alabama.

Paintings in my studio. Atlanta.

One of my work tables in the studio. Atlanta.

An old quilt that I am about to paint with newer paintings in the background. Atlanta.

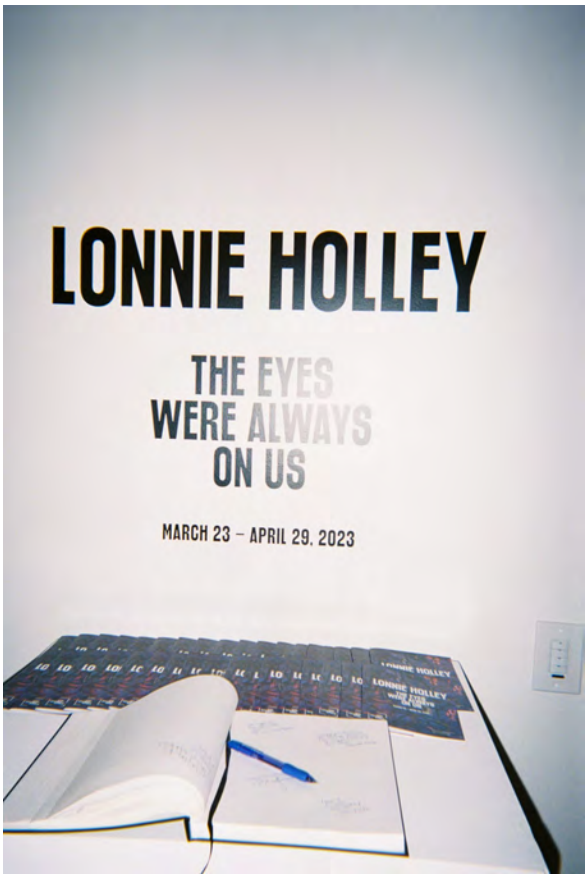
My neck pouch that goes everywhere with me. Whatever I need is in there, especially if I'm at the airport. Cleveland, Ohio.

Somewhere between London and Cleveland, I got Covid. Had to miss a show in Cleveland and drive to Knoxville because I didn't want to get on a plane. I was stuck in a hotel in Knoxville for several days before Big Ears started. This is the view from my hotel. Knoxville, TN.

At the opening of "The Eyes Were Always on Us" at UTA Artist Space Atlanta, standing in front of my work with Stacey Abrams. Atlanta.

At the opening of the exhibition at UTA Artist Space Atlanta talking about my art with Stacey Abrams. Atlanta.

In conversation with Josie Duffy Rice, host of the podcast, “Unreformed: The Story of the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children,” at UTA Artist Space. Atlanta.



The entrance wall and guest book to the show at UTA Artist Space. Atlanta.

With Josie Duffy Rice at UTA Artist Space. Atlanta.

My friend Joe Minter built an incredible art environment in Alabama that he called “The African Village in America.” Here is his version of the Birmingham Jail where Dr. King wrote his letter. Birmingham, Alabama.

Joe Minter holding a found plaque of Dr. King. Birmingham, Alabama.

One of the screens for a serigraph print I made with Scott Peek at Standard Deluxe. Waverly, Alabama.

My new album, *Oh Me Oh My*, signed for a few music fans. Atlanta.

Joe Minter in front of part of his “African Village in America.” Birmingham, Alabama.

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Studio Visit

Step Into the Jam-Packed Studio of Lonnie Holley, Whose Latest Works Include Ceramics and Musical Compositions

The artist and musician, who has current solo shows at Dallas Contemporary and Edel Assanti in London, takes us inside his work space.

Sarah Cascone, June 15, 2022

Lonnie Holley in the studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Since the beginning of 2022, Lonnie Holley has been preparing for three solo shows: two currently on view at Dallas Contemporary and Edel Assanti in London, and one opening next month at Blum and Poe in Los Angeles.

Holley also spent several weeks in February in rural England composing a new song cycle, "The Edge of What," for Artangel. Timed to the Edel Assanti opening, Holley staged a one-night performance of the music at London's Stone Nest last month. (Artangel also made a 25-minute film of the artist at work at the Orford Ness nature reserve, a former military testing site on the Suffolk coast.)

It's been a busy spring by any measure, but that suits the 72-year-old artist and musician just fine. Born in Birmingham, Alabama, as the seventh of 27 children, Holley is self-taught, and started out building sculptures in his front yard. He rose to prominence after appearing in a 1996 show organized by Atlanta's Souls Grown Deep Foundation, which is dedicated to promoting African American artists from the southern United States.

Success in the music world came later; since beginning his professional recording career in 2006, Holley has played and recorded with the likes of Bon Iver, Deerhunter, the Dirty Projectors, Animal Collective, and Alexis Taylor of Hot Chip. To this day, he continues to expand his practice, making his first works in ceramics for the Dallas Contemporary show.

In a rare free moment, Holley was kind enough to open up to Artnet News about his Atlanta studio and his creative process.

Lonnie Holley performing on Orford Ness in southern England, March 2022 in a still from *The Edge of What* (2022). Photo courtesy of Artangel.

Can you send us a snap of the most indispensable item in your studio and tell us why you can't live without it?

I don't sit down much when I'm in the studio. But I have a rocking camp chair that I have to have with me when I'm working. Because when I sit, I like to sit and think and rock back and forth.

What is a studio task on your agenda this week that you are most looking forward to?

I just moved a lot of canvases I'd been painting out of my studio. So, the space is open and I can't wait to get back in there and put up some more canvas and stretched quilts to paint. I like walking in when there is room to spread out stuff and be inspired.

Lonnie Holley's favorite chair in his the studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?

I work wherever I am. I listen to music sometimes and other times I work in the natural sounds around me. I like all kinds of music. Oftentimes I'll listen to oldies or maybe Bob Dylan's gospel records, or Stevie Wonder. Sometimes I'll listen to my own music and let it transport me back to the feeling I had when I made it. I have a studio, I've recently moved to a new one, but I mostly work out in the world.

Who are your favorite artists, curators or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?

I tend to post a lot of pictures and art on social media, but I'm not great at following people. Mostly I follow artists I know or artists I've played with.

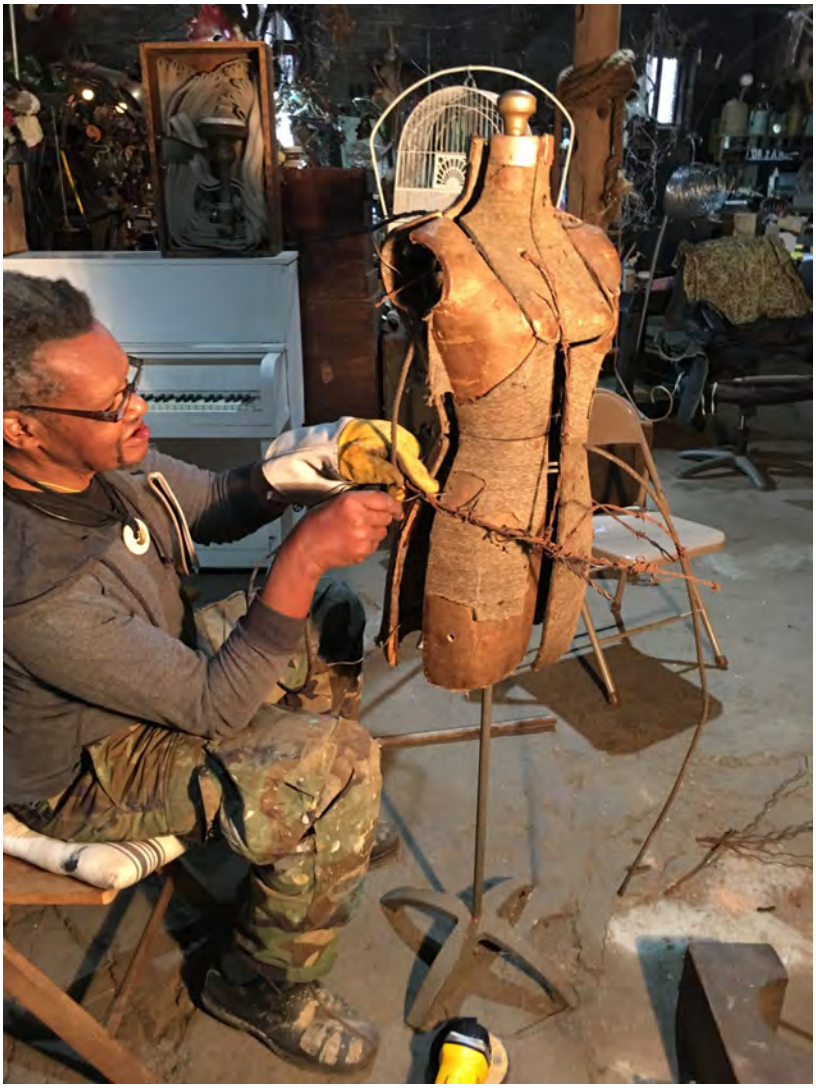
Lonnie Holley's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Is there a picture you can send of your current work in progress at the studio?

Here are images of me at work in a studio in Guadalajara, Mexico. I started working with clay for the first time in preparation for my exhibition at Dallas Contemporary, which includes framed ceramic tiles as well as ceramic objects.

When you feel stuck while preparing for a show, what do you do to get "unstuck"?

I've never really made art for a show, exactly. I'm always busy making something. I don't think I've ever found myself stuck. Between drawing and painting and putting things together and carving stone and making music and taking pictures, there's usually something to keep me occupied if I get stuck in one of those areas.



Lonnie Holley in the studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?

Honestly, if someone took the time and energy to make something, I admire it. Too many times people don't do something, and I suppose that's what I despise. When someone says they didn't have the time or an idea, I can't understand that. There's always time and ideas.

Lonnie Holley's studio. Photo courtesy of the artist.

What images or objects do you look at while you work? Share your view from behind the canvas or your desktop, wherever you spend the most time.

I tend to be too focused on the things I'm making to spend time looking at other stuff. At my old studio, I had material all around me that I'd pick up and use in my work, but once I start working, I'm pretty focused on the work at hand. The same is true for my music. If I'm in the studio making music, I don't need to hear anything else that might distract me from being creative.

VARIABLE WEST

CLIFF NOTES

A weekly newsletter highlighting art events and exhibitions in California, Oregon, and Washington

Editor's Picks

Variable West Founder Amelia Rina picks the most exciting events and exhibitions on the West Coast.

We're trying something new: each pick includes a question meant to act as a prompt for thinking about the art, artist, or exhibition.

Lonnie Holley – The Influence of Images
Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Portland, OR
August 5 - October 2
It's easier to answer what Lonnie Holley *hasn't* done in his extraordinary life, or what he *can't* turn into art, poetry, or music, than what he has and can. Forever enchanted with the world around him, Holley has dedicated his life to improvisational creativity, he works in found objects, sculpture, painting, mixed media, and everything in between. Born in 1950 in Birmingham, AL, Holley has had a prolific career as a musician and artist, and shows no sign of stopping. This exhibition brings together recent works on paper made during Holley's artist-in-residency at the Elaine de Kooning House in East Hampton, NY in 2020. **Reflection: How can you transform something in your house into art?**

PNW READERS: join VW founder Amelia Rina next Wednesday, September 22 at 5:30pm for an intimate tour of two shows at Elizabeth Leach Gallery: Lonnie Holley and Din Q Lê. RSVP with Young Collectors League and use the discount code **VWYCL** for 15% off!

The New York Times

Lonnie Holley's Life of Perseverance, and Art of Transformation

The Alabama artist and musician has arrived at a career milestone, with two exhibitions in the Hamptons and a gallery to map his future.

The self-taught artist Lonnie Holley at the South Etna Montauk Foundation with his "Untitled Wall Painting," 2021, and a growing collection of scavenged finds worn on his wrists.
Credit...Kendall Bessent for The New York Times

By Yinka Elujoba

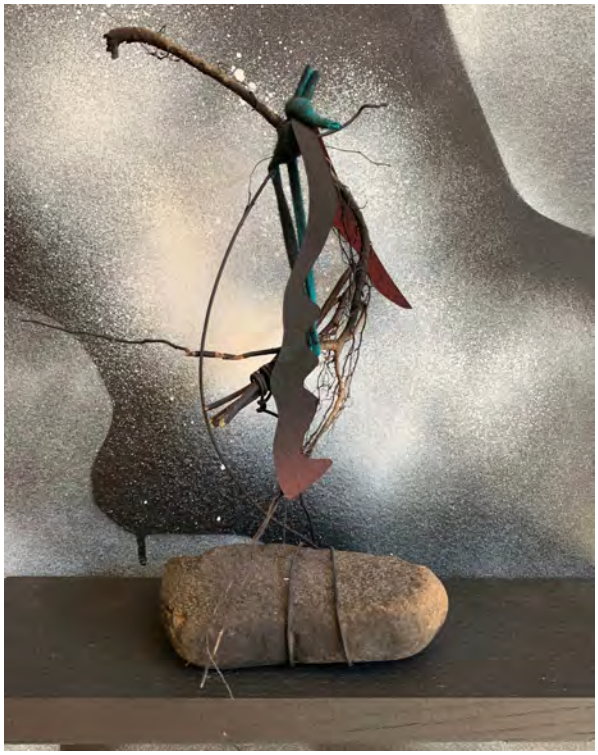
May 6, 2021 Updated 1:44 p.m. ET

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y. — Lonnie Holley's life began at an impossible place: 1950, seventh among his mother's 27 children, in Jim Crow-era Birmingham, Ala., the air thick with violent racism toward him and everyone he loved. Things got even worse as he grew up. At four years old, he said, he was traded for a bottle of whiskey by a nurse who had stolen him away from his mother. Later, as the story goes, he was in coma for several months and pronounced brain-dead after being hit by a car that dragged him along several blocks. Then he spent time in the infamous Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children until his paternal grandmother — he refers to her simply as "Momo" — was able to take him away at the age of 14.

He forged his way out of the miry roads of his origins, becoming a musician and filmmaker, and teaching himself to make visual art. Since then, he has come far, far enough to have just completed a residency as an artist at the Elaine de Kooning House in this celebrity-filled town where he spent two months last winter creating about 100 artworks, many of which have ended up in two Hamptons exhibitions. They are being shown simultaneously: “Tangled Up in de Kooning’s Fence,” at the newly formed nonprofit South Etna Montauk Foundation in Montauk, N.Y. (through Aug. 29), and “Everything That Wasn’t White: Lonnie Holley at the Elaine de Kooning House,” at the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, N.Y. (through Sept. 6).

“Gratitude,” he says when he looks back at it all. “I am grateful for the ability to be productive at all.”

Holley’s “She Wore Our Chains” (2020), a framed found photograph with spray paint, mixed media.
Credit...Lonnie Holley and South Etna Montauk Foundation



“Making a Sail” (2020), wire, rock, fabric and paint, from “Lonnie Holley: Tangled Up in de Kooning’s Fence.”
Credit...Lonnie Holley and South Etna Montauk Foundation

But “productive” is a modest way of describing an artist, who, since 1979, has reimagined what is possible with castaway or seemingly useless materials and, particularly, garbage. He follows in the tradition of artists using salvaged materials to depict the life of Black people in the U.S., like the Alabama-born Noah Purifoy (1917-2004), known for his sculptural pieces made from charred wreckage after the Watts Riots of 1965.

Holley’s artistic career was triggered by having to carve out tombstones for his sister’s two children after a fire killed them and she couldn’t afford to buy proper markers. He found piles of discarded sandstone-like byproducts of metal castings from a foundry near her house. “It was like a spiritual awakening,” he said during an interview at the de Kooning House. “I had been thrown away as a child, and here I was building something out of unwanted things in memorial of my little nephew and niece. I discovered art as service.”

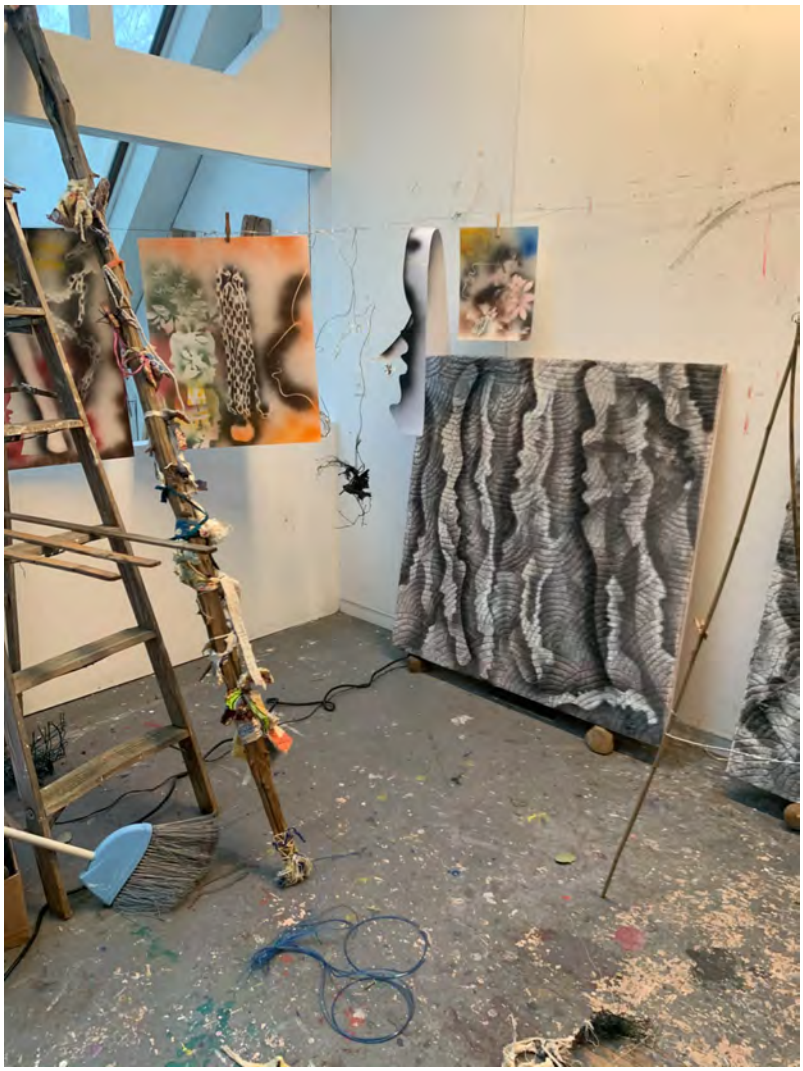
His relationship with the sandstone grew, and with his earliest sculptures people began to refer to him as the Sandman. Eventually he outgrew this mode of working and began to include other things, especially tiny bits of fabric, metal springs, shoes, boxes, wood and antique objects, some of which he adds to a growing collection worn and carried about on his wrists and around his neck.

"Untitled Wall Painting" (2021), acrylic and spray paint on the wall at South Etna Montauk Foundation.
Credit...Lonnie Holley and South Etna Montauk Foundation

He's perfected mingling these items into unforgettable assemblages, like "She Wore Our Chains," a new work created out of a framed, astonishing photograph from the 19th century of an African-American woman that he found in an antique shop in North Carolina and onto which he spray painted faces of women in profile. It is included at the South Etna show, alongside a rotten stump he found during one of his winter morning walks in the woods behind the de Kooning House; the stump became the backbone of some of the striking sculptural works in both shows.

The turning point in Holley's career came when he met Bill Arnett, a longtime collector and art dealer who had been traveling across the South in 1986. He bought one of Holley's works during the meeting in Birmingham — a mesmerizing assemblage alluding to the struggles of Black people, made from a mannequin and chains. "Lonnie was so far ahead of the white artists in the world you can't even believe it," Arnett, who died last year, told The Washington Post in 2017, describing his first encounter with Holley's work. "I've been all over the world, and I've never seen anything like this."

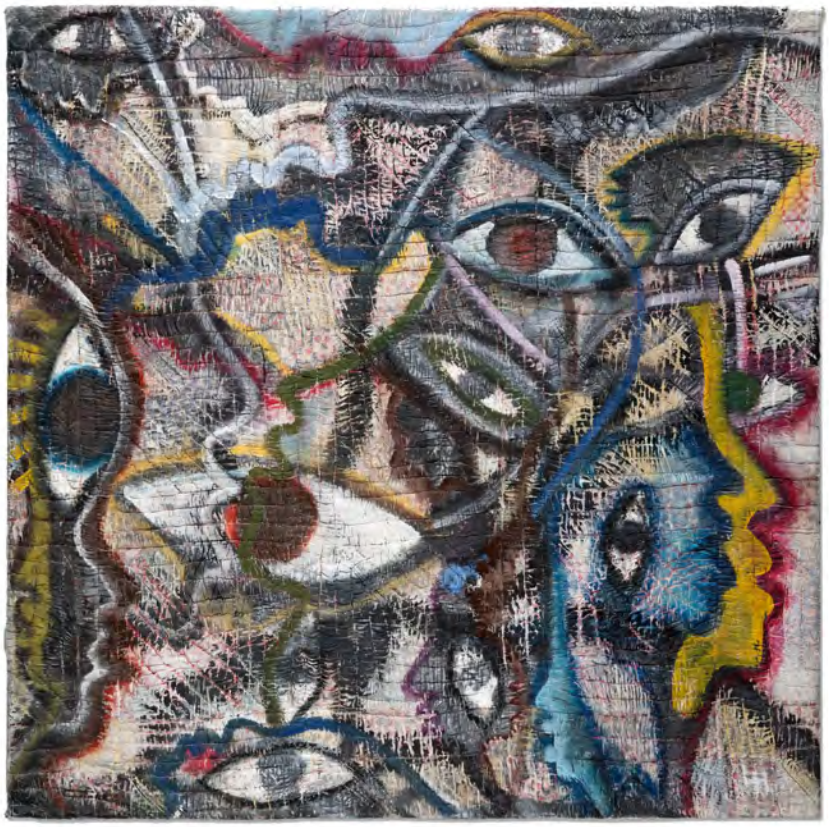
Arnett promoted Holley alongside other self-taught Black artists from Alabama, like Joe Minter, who created the African Village in America (a continuously evolving art garden he started in the '80s containing sculptures from scrap materials); Betty Avery, who used broken items like mirrors and glass and tree stumps in her yard as the root for her assemblages; and the great Thornton Dial, who used scavenged materials to create art that told the story of Black struggles in the South.



Inside the Elaine de Kooning house in East Hampton, N.Y., is a staff, left, made from found wood, fabric and canvas scraps. Leaning on the wall, right, is a painted quilt, Holley's own way of recycling and honoring tradition.
Credit...Lonnie Holley and South Etna Montauk Foundation

"He really helped me elevate my work," Holley said, "and things became a lot more comfortable. Sometimes I wonder how things would have turned out if Bill didn't show up." But Holley himself is a collector of sorts and over the years his work has gradually become a conglomeration of Black culture, experiences, and histories.

Holley's relationship to objects or culture from Black communities is nuanced. In his new paintings, silhouetted faces are magnificently layered upon quilts, then daubed in dark shiny colors. The faces crash into one another to create optical illusions, paying homage to the Black quilters of Gee's Bend in Alabama, whose hand-stitching traditions date back to the mid-19th century. He doesn't relate to the quilts purely as works of modern art (as critics have done, comparing them to works by Matisse and other great modernists); rather, Holley sees them as originating from a history of need, pain, and necessity.



"Without Skin" (2020), acrylic and spray paint, quilted fabric stretched over wood panel. His work has gradually become a conglomeration of Black culture, experiences and histories.
Credit...Lonnie Holley and South Etna Montauk Foundation

With his transformative touch, he moves them from solid geometric shapes into figurations embodying the experiences that produced them. "Lonnie's work shares a common innate artistic sensibility and brilliance" with the quilts of Gee's Bend, said Alicia Longwell, who curated the show at the Parrish. "His drawing and painting on the quilt become a homage to the maker and his own way of recycling and honoring the tradition."

This is also how he sees the spray paint he uses that recalls graffiti in his luminous paintings: "I want that when all of these — all of my work — are presented, people can say, oh that Lonnie, he took it all, his hands took the spirit, the things they don't want us to have, and, boom, brought it together."

He speaks dreamily of the ocean at Montauk where he spent a lot of time by the beach. "That big blue," he said displaying random bits and pieces of shells, wood, and fabric he'd picked up by the water because he thought he could use them. "Makes me think of being all by myself, like an ancestor that was left behind."

Collecting scraps and salvage on the beach at Montauk. “I had been thrown away as a child,” he said explaining how he began his art building with unwanted things. “I discovered art as service.” Credit...Kendall Bessent for The New York Times

And although he continues to think of himself like this, as an outsider, his visual art work has been collected by some of the most important institutions in the U.S., including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and has been shown at the White House Rose Garden. “I Snuck Off the Slave Ship,” an 18-minute musical film about the artist’s relationship to freedom in America, which he co-directed with Cyrus Moussavi, was shown at Sundance in 2019.

“Lonnie has held a cult status among the art cognoscenti for a long time as a performer and as a visual artist, but over the past years he has been crossing over, gaining more recognition in so-called quote mainstream corridors of the art world,” said Alison Gingeras, an art historian who curated the show at South Etna.

James Fuentes, the Manhattan gallerist who has shown Holley’s work and placed it in museum collections since 2013, called him a “modern day shaman.” “You cannot ignore the power of his narrative and his connection as a descendant of slavery,” he said, pointing to the recurring motifs of slave ships in his sculptures. Fuentes said Holley’s prices have ranged from $5,000 to $50,000 — “thus far.” Now, in a sign of the growing receptiveness by the art world, Blum & Poe, a gallery in New York, Los Angeles and Tokyo, will represent the artist.

Installation view of “Everything That Wasn’t White: Lonnie Holley at the Elaine de Kooning House,” Parrish Art Museum, Water Mill, N.Y.
Credit...Jenny Gorman

“Lonnie had expressed a sincere desire to have a larger platform and more visibility for his work,” said Tim Blum, the gallery co-founder. “We clearly realized that Lonnie has been producing, making, exhibiting and contributing to art for four decades and it fits quite beautifully into the gallery’s program.”

After moving to Atlanta in 2010, Holley began to compose and perform music. His voice, in the five albums he has released, is deep and mellow and soothing, making it easy to forget that his songwriting — like his art — is extemporaneous.

“It’s about the brain — same brain that produces the music, produces the visual art. I call it ‘brainsmithing’,” he said, before going onstage at the Parrish to perform a few songs on the night his art exhibition opened.

“His voice stays in your head,” said Gingeras, who was in the small audience.

At 71, Holley abounds with energy and ambition. He was flying around the world, performing at concerts, before the Covid-19 pandemic put an end to his itinerary. A major show, organized by Blum & Poe is slated for next year in Los Angeles. He is restless, relentless; he just keeps going. It even seems, sometimes, that he forgets how old he actually is. He said during the interview, “I can’t see an old person trying to cross the road and not offer to help.”
Indeed, in the last scene of “I Snuck Off the Slave Ship,” after visuals of Black people from different generations playing, dancing and praying, Holley is shown holding the hand of a much older man and helping him out of church.

Although Holley has had run-ins with the city of Birmingham (its airport authority destroyed his art garden in 1997 while expanding its territory, and he received $165,000 as compensation after a long legal battle), he shies away from overt political conversations. “I don’t want to talk about skin,” he said, when he was asked how he felt being a Black man in the de Kooning house, in an area that could be seen to hold a history much different from his.

"In the Church," 2020, spray paint on paper. "This is memory," Holley said of shimmering silhouettes. "Every face in these paintings. They're all the people —especially women —that have supported me." Credit...Lonnie Holley and South Etna Montauk Foundation

Instead, he got up to observe shadows cast by the immense light pouring in from the glass skylights and windows, falling on an assemblage of worn-out shoes and metallic springs. It was midday, and his own shadow joined in the mix when he stood up.

"This is memory," he said, pointing at canvasses with shimmering silhouettes made from spray paint. "Everything is memory. Every face in these paintings. They're all the people — especially women — that have supported me. Look at that big beautiful eye. My grandmother Momo. My mother, Mama. Queens."

And these faces, lives that have held up his life, despite how it all began, preserved in his work on quilts and shining in his canvases, pervade everything, rolling into one another like waves of the sea.

CULTURED

ART

LONNIE HOLLEY IS STILL EXPLOSIVELY EXPERIMENTAL

WITH TWO SHOWS ON IN THE HAMPTONS THIS SUMMER, THE SO-CALLED OUTSIDER ARTIST IS FINALLY GETTING THE ATTENTION HE HAS LONG DESERVED.

CULTURED MAGAZINE

05.05.2021

LONNIE HOLLEY, UNTITLED WALL PAINTING, 2021. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SOUTH ETNA MONTAUK FOUNDATION.

This summer, visitors to the Hamptons and Montauk will be presented with a rare opportunity to view not one but two exhibitions by a 70-year-old American master artist. Lonnie Holley's work, which spills out from painting and sculpture into performance, music and poetry, is often called outsider art, a mostly meaningless designation reserved for a group of untrained creative polymaths whose profound contributions to visual culture have just begun to be fully understood in recent years. Outsider artists are usually mythologized as eccentric anomalous figures living and working on the margins of society. Holley's new exhibition at the new nonprofit South Etna Montauk Foundation, from the curatorial mind of Alison M. Gingeras, presents just a portion of the hundreds of new pieces Holley completed during a year-long residency at the Elaine De Kooning house in East Hampton.

INSTALLATION VIEW OF LONNIE HOLLEY SOLO SHOW AT SOUTH ETNA MONTAUK FOUNDATION.

Entitled "Tangled up in De Kooning's Fence," the show explicitly sutures the two radical artists as if to parody the bizarre oxymoronic epithet, outsider artist, that Holley has yet to entirely escape by asking: is there any great artist who wasn't always and already an outsider? There is an unmistakable ecstatic expressiveness that defines Holley's output across mediums, a wildness, perhaps best seen in the constantly evolving sculptural installation made in his own Birmingham backyard. A small work on paper in the South Etna show titled *She was as Wild as Her Garden (Elaine)* similarly suggests that the artist believes that much like himself, Mrs. De Kooning's spirit embodied the spurtive growth of the land where she lived.

PORTRAIT OF LONNIE HOLLEY IN EAST HAMPTON. PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATHERINE MCMAHON. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SOUTH ETNA MONTAUK FOUNDATION.

Another forty or so of his explosively experimental artworks are hanging in “Everything that Wasn’t White,” up at the Parrish Museum until September. As if these two extraordinary shows weren’t evidence enough of his monumental productivity, Holley will also be releasing a new musical album alongside the South Etna exhibition, in collaboration with Matthew E White. Known first for his found-object assemblages and sandstone carvings, which he famously only began making at age twenty-nine, Holley came to music late, too, but despite starting just shy of a decade ago in 2012, he has been enviously prolific ever since, as if to make up for lost time. The new album, *A Broken Mirror: A Selfie Reflection*, is unusually retrospective for an artist who unlike many of his contemporaries seems to almost never be looking back, and yet it also introduces fresh currents to his practice, subtly reframing his decades-long career just as critical attention around his work has started to flourish. Both shows will be open through the summer.

CUC ALO RUS FILM

Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley

Director: George King
Documentary Features

Visionary artist Lonney Holley's remarkable story of survival, endurance and triumph spans decades. His unlikey success uncovers ugly truths about race and class in the American South. Through a mix of archival formats spanning his long and wild career, King's epic doc paints a deeply inspiring story about a troubled and resilient Alabama artist. Casual camerawork provides a raw authenticity to the moments where we witness the performative improvisation of Holley's work. What emerges is a deep sense of the singular and traumatic impulses that drive Holley's passionate crusade and his life as an uncontainable creative force.

Running Time:
95:00 minutes
Event Date(s)
12:00 AM EST
Thursday, November 19, 2020
Streaming On-demand

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

LONNIE HOLLEY

June 18, 2019 • Lonnie Holley on the importance of oneness

Lonnie Holley (right) performing at the Dallas Museum of Art on April 19, 2019. Photo: Dickie Hill.

Lonnie Holley emerged as part of the American art world of the 1980s as a sculptor of evocative sandstone carvings and elaborate found object assemblage. More recently, Holley has expanded into sound with his albums Just Before Music *(2012),* Keeping a Record of

It *(2013), and* Mith *(2018). Below, on the occasion of a performance at the Dallas Museum of Art, as part of Soluna 2019, Holley explains the process of research and meditation that informs all of his creative work. Holley's art is currently on view as part of "America Will Be" at the DMA through September 15, 2019, and he continues to tour across the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand this summer and fall.*

MY MAMA HAD TWENTY-SEVEN CHILDREN. She couldn't afford to send me to college. My grandmama had thirty-seven grandchildren to worry about. I had to self-educate myself, get all kinds of *National Geographic*s, encyclopedias, or whatever else I could see in a pictorial manner, because I couldn't read and write that well. I had to study hard, otherwise I would get my ass whooped, whether I was in school or not. I had to figure out, when I get home to my grandmama, what am I going to tell her I learned? But she was a strong enough woman to understand. She took me in and embraced me: "Baby, I know you've been through hell."

At first, my work—then sculpture—was experienced either in museums or through what people wrote about it in the media. Now, especially with my music, it's at a point where I can put my work online instead of on the radio. That's great because I can project my message to the innermost and outermost depths. All my work, in any form, comes down to oneness. The oneness is important: the oneness goes all the way down to this one universe that we believe in; this one mothership, our planet Earth, that we live in; this one mother that gave birth to us and that we should respect; and then that one gray spot that we're going to after we are dead and gone. That jar all of ashes, the oneness we can't break out of, that one. A cup, for example, could be called trash. But I could do something in that cup, like mold something, or put a lot of objects in there, and turn them upside down, and seal it. I try to study something before I toss it, before I throw it away. I've done that for years and years and years.

Dr. King said, "Be the best at what you do." I was worried a lot when I was younger and first got into art. I worried a lot about criticism, about who actually appreciated my work, whether churches or industries would even want to take my thinking into consideration. But now, as Dr. King says, that doesn't matter, because I have seen my higher purpose. I know that my work's been in the Smithsonian, is in the United Nations. I had works in the UN by 1982 that later went to the thirteen original colonies, sixty-four cities of the United States of America. But I don't go around patting myself on the back. If I went around trying to pat myself on the back all the time for my achievements, I wouldn't have time to study, to achieve a greater level. As I climbed for higher power, jealousy, animosity, and hatred would always cut my ladder off at the bottom.

A whole lot of stuff is going on in my brain, trying to bring us to that message, like the angel Gabriel, me blowing the horn, me saying, “Beware” or “Extra! Extra! Look out all about it!” or “Listen out all about it!” Remember to read all about it: our ozone layer depletion; climate change; death affecting, to me, all of life. Have we looked at the storm water, the water hurricanes have left, what damage was created? When the water flushed in, what was in there that flushed out? We don’t know what some of the roots of the grass have been soaked with. Something was growing and breeding in them, but we don’t know exactly. For the persons interested in what I’m talking about, it’s what that one drop of water can do to these little cracks. Once it falls in these little cracks, that one drop of water is going to sink on and sink on, deeper and deeper. Now think about a zillion drops of water, dropping in these cracks and sinking somewhere, over the period of a hurricane, and the hurricane, also, blowing in other water. I’m concerned about that, because that water has got to go somewhere.

— As told to Grant Johnson

ALL IMAGES

Muses: Lonnie Holley on Thornton Dial, African Village in America, and Gee's Bend Quilts

ARTnews.com/2018/09/24/muses-lonnie-holley-thornton-dial-african-village-america-gees-bend-quilts

The Editors of ARTnews

September 23, 2018

Lonnie Holley.

TIMOTHY DUFFY

"Muses" is a column for which creators from different disciplines reveal sources of artistic inspiration and instigation.

Lonnie Holley is an artist and musician who was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1950. His work as a visual artist found support from the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation and appeared in the recent exhibition "History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Musically, Holley garnered praise for a 2013 album, *Keeping a Record of It*, issued by the label Dust-to-Digital and subsequent releases—including *MITH*, a moving new album with Holley playing keyboard and singing spiritually searching songs—on Jajaguwar. For the latest "Muses," Holley wrote to *ARTnews* with artists who mean a lot to him. —*The Editors*

Thornton Dial.
MATTHEW ARNETT/COURTESY SOULS GROWN DEEP FOUNDATION

Thornton Dial

He's the master. There wasn't and won't be anyone else like him. Just knowing Thornton Dial was an opportunity for me to learn so much. From his experiences to his deep well of thoughts about life, he had no equal. And the way he was able to work all those things into his art just always blew my mind. Our mutual friend Amiri Baraka used to talk about Mr. Dial's art and say that it spoke to people on all different levels—it didn't matter who you were and what you knew, you could learn and understand something about the world from his art. That's just truth, and Mr. Dial's work was only about the truth. I'm often credited with helping to "discover" him. Maybe so, but he was going to be found one way or another. All

the credit for that really goes to William Arnett, the great champion of artists like me and Thornton Dial. Mr. Dial could paint or draw or make sculpture out of any material like it was the only thing he ever did in his life. I try not to envy other people, but it was hard not to envy his brain power and skill. I'm so glad he lived long enough to see his art and his life celebrated.

Purvis Young

Having an opportunity to experience Purvis Young's care for humanity was a powerful thing. Purvis had a rough life and he didn't seem to trust too many people. He just wanted to paint. He wanted to do what he wanted to do. And when you make art as beautiful as Purvis made, you are going to attract people. Purvis and art-world people fit together about like oil and water. Purvis didn't care too much about them. I was in New York on several occasions with Purvis, Thornton Dial, Ronald Lockett, and Joe Light, and seeing Purvis be so free was refreshing. We had some really wonderful talks and his brain was always in action. You could see that in his paintings. He could pick up a paintbrush and touch it down on a piece of wood or cardboard or fabric or any other material, and beauty would just magically appear. Or pain and anguish. I don't know how he could take those old brushes that looked like the struggle of humanity themselves, not even clean them off sometimes, and make something so beautiful. Sometimes I make art and look at it and have to take it back apart because I don't like it. I'll keep working it until I get it right. Purvis could just touch paint to canvas and it was always right.

The cover of Lonnie Holley's album *MITH*.

COURTESY JAJAGUWAR

Joe Minter

Years ago I was in a fight with powers in the city of Birmingham, Alabama, who wanted to condemn my art environment and tear it down. They claimed they needed the land for airport expansion. A man like me can't really fight the powers that be in a Southern city like Birmingham. I lost my battle and my place was bulldozed to the ground and buried, and in the process thousands of works of art were destroyed. It's so sad. I was just at my old property recently and it just sits there, a cleared and open field. Nothing was ever done. I don't think it was about expansion so much as it was about silencing a voice. Around the same time that was happening, my daughter was at a funeral at Grace Hill Cemetery and came to me and told me she'd seen something up on the hill that I should check out. I went there and met Joe Minter. He'd created the African Village in America in response to the city building a museum as part of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Joe wanted to see the foot soldiers and ancestors recognized, and thought that the official museums overlook them. His place was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I wanted to make sure people knew about it and make sure it wasn't destroyed like my place. I told my friend Bill Arnett about it and we've continued to go back hundreds of times. Joe's work was recently included in the show "History Refused to Die"at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which highlights gifts to the museum from Arnett's Souls Grown Deep Foundation. But because Joe is black and still lives in the South, his environment is always at risk. Maybe the attention from the Met and other shows will help lead to his environment being saved and preserved. When we filmed the video for the first single from my new record *MITH*, I wanted Joe's place to be in it. Joe and his wife Hilda were kind enough to appear in the video with me. Joe's art is a treasure to Mother Universe.

Annie Bendolph, *"Thousand Pyramids" Variation*, ca. 1930.
COURTESY SOULS GROWN DEEP FOUNDATION

Mary Lee Bendolph, Louisiana Bendolph & the Gee's Bend Quilters

My mama and aunt Viola both worked on quilts. When I met the Gee's Bend quilters, I was reminded so much of the women in my life, and they welcomed me right away into their community. When the exhibit "The Quilts of Gee's Bend" opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2002, I was there to share in their glory with them. To see the world finally appreciate the ability of a group of black women from Alabama was a powerful realization for me. It was as if all the black women who'd toiled in vain were finally validated. To see women who'd marched with Martin Luther King and who made beautiful art but never called it "art" start to be in museums around the country and on U.S. postage stamps was like—I don't know . . . something I never thought I'd see. I ended up traveling with the women to almost all of their openings as part of their group. I'd often get to sing and pray on the bus with them as we departed Gee's Bend. Man, was that powerful. It's funny now that I'm traveling the world sharing my music: some of my earliest performances were in museums singing their gospel songs in their shadows. Who knew I'd be sharing my own music a decade later?

Mary T. Smith

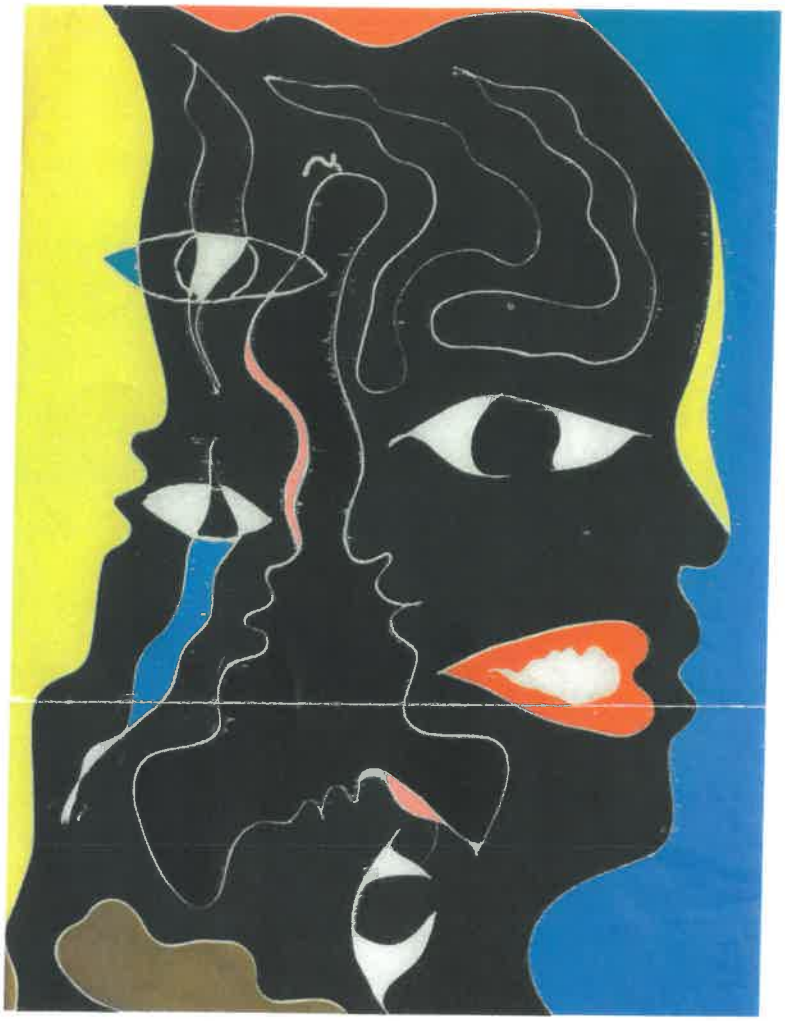
In the South there were many women who labored as farm hands. Meeting Ms. Smith, witnessing her handiwork and sensitivity and her praising the Lord in her everyday actions, touched me. I could feel all that power she put into her work. She had a hard life. She told me that when she saw her husband being short-changed on the farm, she did the math and calculated how much they'd been shorted. She and her husband complained to the man whose farm they were working on, and he told the husband he could stay and farm—but only if his wife left. So she left so that her husband would be able to continue farming. Lives just torn apart like that. She painted so boldly and on any material she had. She surrounded herself and her yard with her work. She couldn't hear very well, but she could say whatever she needed to say with a paintbrush and she had a smile that would melt your heart.

OKTP

OKAY TO PRINT

FEBRUARY 2018

LONNIE HOLLEY



Born Into Colors, 2017
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 48" x 32"; Edition of 25

Black In The Midst of Red, White and Blue, 2017
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 39 ⅞" x 29 ¾"; Edition of 20

Lonnie Holley's biography—African American; Alabamian; trailblazing visual artist and musician—seems to bring out the contradictions within all attempts to pigeonhole him and his work. On the one hand, as a self-taught artist he slots into that slim minority of "untrained" painters and sculptors who find any foothold in the American art world. As a musician and singer, however, his self-taught chops render him absolutely normative: virtually the entirety of his culture's musical canon (blues, jazz, gospel, rap, etc.), and therefore, the musics of the American mainstream, was invented by vernacular performers. What gives? How can what seems an impediment to acceptance in one field of creative endeavor be a credential in another?

What Lonnie Holley has taught himself, as a visual artist, turns out to be just as historically rich and multiform as the "education" of those seminal blues singers who built their idiom from a host of sounds they found in "black" and "white" culture alike. One of Holley's earliest and most enduring influences has been the art of Ancient Egypt. He picked up its conventions for depicting faces in profile, with front-facing eyes, and transformed them further, finding metaphors for family, genealogy, and human networks of all kinds. Figures that face each other but also look out at the viewer establish a complex relationship between an artwork's subject and its audience, implicating us in the human ecologies of the painting. In these prints, overtly Egyptian iconography is eliminated, leaving only Holley's predilection for nested and overlapping human

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Elizabeth Leach
Elizabeth Leach Gallery
417 NW 9th Street
Portland, OR 97209

It Starts With The Blood and Ends With The Water, 2017
Color Woodblock with Glitter. Paper Size: 39 ¾" x 29 ¾"; Edition of 20

From The Lines Of The Brain, 2017
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 39 ⅞" x 29 ¾"; Edition of 20

My Three Mothers (Mama, Mother Earth, and Mother Universe), 2017
Color Woodblock. Paper Size: 29" x 28"; Edition of 20

presences, chambered nautiluses of ancestry, community, and the promises of a future within the past.

In terms of process, the artist has also looked back to his art-making roots: the prints were made from jigsawed plywood forms pieced together into a single wood "plate." (Holley's original outdoor art environment, constructed in the 1980s and '90s in Birmingham, was ringed by cutout wooden forms much like these.) With these understatedly autobiographical prints, he has reimagined a staple of yard art—the plywood cutout—as the basis for a distinctly fine-art medium—the print—while referencing an ancient civilization that existed (like American music) at the boundary of Europe and Africa.

-Paul Arnett

ART GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Lonnie Holley

The terms "self-taught" and "outsider" have a patronizing ring; the sixty-year-old Alabaman, who left school in the seventh grade, deserves better. Holley's startling sculptures reveal a keen sense for the expressive properties of found materials, from insouciantly figurative (wires twisted into airy silhouettes of women with elaborate hairdos could attend Calder's "Circus") to evocatively abstract (a froth of melted iron emerging from a concrete slab has a stark and unexpected beauty). A wry sense of humor emerges in such punning titles as "You Keep Me Under Your Feet," a Cleopatra-like cutout of carpet pad. Through Aug. 6.

B6: THE ROBERT W. WILSON BUILDING GRAND OPENING

More art, more music, and a bike path through the building.

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Exhibition

Sunday, May 28, 10am-7pm

Gallery admission is free for members
$20 Adults
$18 Seniors/Veterans
$12 Students
$8 Kids (6-16)
Free for kids under 6

MASS MoCA

Add to Calendar

We're doubling in size beginning May 28, with an all-day celebration to mark the monumental expansion, featuring a members' preview, a *Soundsuit* performance, and a concert with veteran rockers CAKE.

MASS MoCA launches into the summer season with the opening of B6: The Robert W. Wilson Building, the third phase of campus development that encompasses 130,000 square feet of interior renovations to the museum's 19th-century mill buildings, and features work from artists Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Bourgeois, James Turrell, Jenny Holzer, Laurie Anderson, and Gunnar Schonbeck (Bang on a Can). Additional artists to be shown in B6: The Robert W. Wilson Building include Spencer Finch, Dawn DeDeaux, Lonnie Holley, Mary Lum, Barbara Ernst Prey, Janice Kerbel, Joe Wardwell, Sarah Crowner, Richard Nonas, and the Optics Division of the Metabolic Studio.

Opening Day schedule

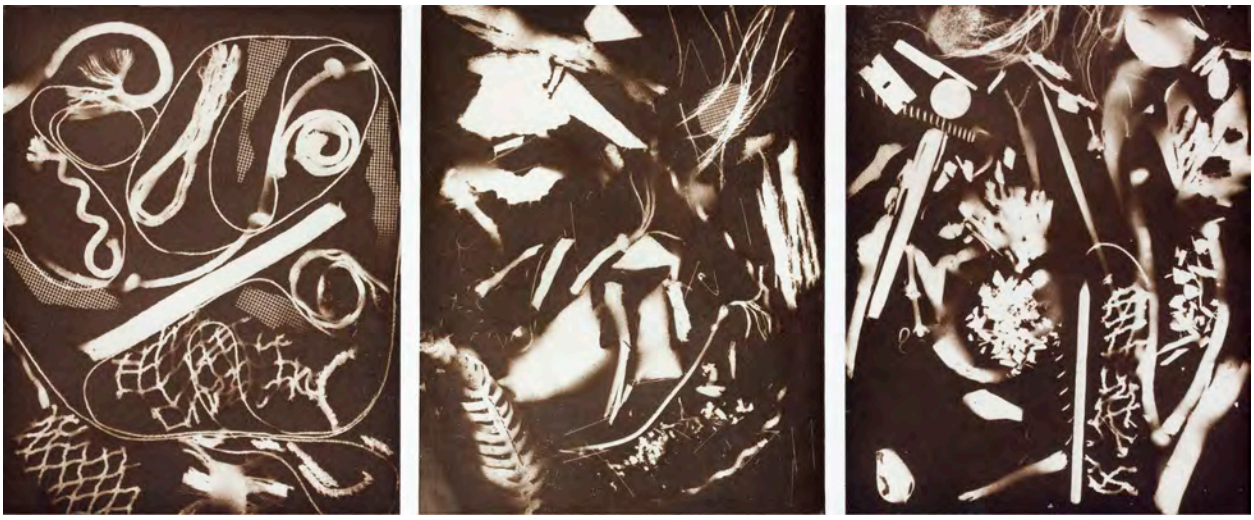
9:30am Members' check-in opens

10am Members' preview: Become a member to see it first

11am Main galleries open (except the Wilson Building)

The Oregonian

'Outsider' artist Lonnie Holley brings his one-of-a-kind vision to Elizabeth Leach Gallery and Portland Museum of Modern Art



Lonnie Holley, "The Things of Life (To See or Not To See)," 2013, aquatint, 14 x 34" image, 19.5 x 39" paper. Edition of 30 (Image courtesy of the Artist and Elizabeth Leach Gallery)

August 20, 2014

The celebrated "outsider" artist Lonnie Holley, who came of age in Jim Crow-era Alabama and currently lives in Atlanta, is an indomitable creative force. Since the late 1970s, he has made from scavenged materials at a feverish clip, at one point transforming his property in Birmingham into a kind of living sculpture park, where his non-stop production soon took over his home and yard.

Once this immersive art environment was discovered by the art world, Holley's work was quickly acquired by institutions such as the Smithsonian and the Birmingham Museum of Art, abetting the artist's expansion into other media, including painting, drawing, printmaking, and, in the last few years, music. But even that most recent exploration into songwriting and performance, which has been rapturously supported by the indie rock world, evinces the same

spirit that's marked his work all along: an intense, un-ironic need to improvise and experiment and a genuine thrill from the discovery of making.

This month, Holley's work is on view at the Elizabeth Leach Gallery and the Portland Museum of Modern Art, a promising collaboration between one of the city's most established galleries and one of its newest that offers two sides to this fascinating figure.

At the Portland Museum of Modern Art, Holley created a group of new, site-specific sculptures for the basement gallery in Mississippi Records, made from discarded materials he gathered in the neighborhood as well as a cache of washed-up audio equipment provided by the record store's Aaron Heuberger.

While the pieces range from the sensitively composed to the slapdash, this selection of work nonetheless highlights the way Holley can incorporate almost any object within his inclusive vision of art-making. Most of the pieces favor a maximal aesthetic, such as "Exposing the Ways," in which a range of gutted audio gear is affixed to a shipping pallet sitting atop an unlikely plinth, a green plastic crate that reads "Recycle America." His sparer compositions fare better, such as a wire hanger that juxtaposes a yellowing leaf and a leaf-shaped air-freshener or, in another piece, a knotty braid of headphones and their spiraling cords.

Across town, Elizabeth Leach Gallery has mounted a small exhibition of Holley's most recent print work, which is considerably tamer than his assemblage work. Still, it's marked by similar kinds of jarring combinations. In the most abstract prints, jagged, shard-like shapes sit atop subtly textured backgrounds, creating marked tension between the two planes in terms of depth, texture, and color.

Even in the more representational work, familiar items — such as a soccer ball trapped in netting — become estranged in their new contexts, in this case mingling ideas of goals and victory with ambush and capture. That this print, called "Obstacles Before the Goal II," could contain two contradictory meanings is testament to Holley's expansive vision, which recognizes and celebrates the potential of everything to be transfigured through art.

-- John Motley, Special to The Oregonian

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Lonnie Holley

Where and when: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 N.W. Ninth Ave., 503-224-0521, 10:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Tuesdays through Saturdays, through Aug. 30; Portland Museum of Modern Art, 5202 N. Albina Ave., noon to 7 p.m., daily, through Sept. 26
Admission: Free

The New York Times | http://nyti.ms/1jAjUuI

MAGAZINE

Lonnie Holley, the Insider's Outsider

By MARK BINELLI JAN. 23, 2014

One night in October, just a couple blocks from Harvard Square, a young crowd gathered at a music space called the Sinclair to catch a performance by Bill Callahan, the meticulous indie-rock lyricist who has been playing to bookish collegiate types since the early '90s. Callahan's opening act, Lonnie Holley, had been playing to similar audiences for two years. A number of details about Holley made this fact surprising: He was decades older than just about everyone in the club and one of the few African-Americans. He says he grew up the seventh of 27 children in Jim Crow-era Alabama, where his schooling stopped around seventh grade. In his own, possibly unreliable telling, he says the woman who informally adopted him as an infant eventually traded him to another family for a pint of whiskey when he was 4. Holley also says he dug graves, picked trash at a drive-in, drank too much gin, was run over by a car and pronounced brain-dead, picked cotton, became a father at 15 (Holley now has 15 children), worked as a short-order cook at Disney World and did time at a notoriously brutal juvenile facility, the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children in Mount Meigs.

Then he celebrated his 29th birthday. And shortly after that, for the first time in his life, Holley began making art: sandstone carvings, initially — Birmingham remained something of a steel town back then, and its foundries regularly discarded the stone linings used for industrial molds. Later, he began work on a wild, metastasizing yard-art environment sprawling over two acres of family property, with sculptures constructed nearly entirely from salvaged junkyard detritus like orphaned shoes, plastic flowers, tattered quilts, tires, animal bones, VCR remotes, wooden ladders, an old tailor's dummy, a busted Minolta EP 510 copy machine, a pink scooter, oil drums rusted to a leafy autumnal delicateness, metal pipes, broken headstone fragments, a half-melted television set destroyed in

a house fire that also took the life of one of Holley's nieces, a syringe, a white cross.

His work was soon acquired by curators at the Birmingham Museum of Art and the Smithsonian. Bill Arnett, the foremost collector (and promoter) of self-taught African-American artists from the Deep South — the man who brought worldwide attention to Thornton Dial and the quilters of Gee's Bend, Ala. — cites his first visit to Holley's home in 1986 as a moment of epiphany. "He was actually the catalyst that started me on a much deeper search," Arnett says, adding bluntly that "if Lonnie had been living in the East Village 30 years ago and been white, he'd be famous by now."

Had Holley's story climaxed right there, with his discovery and celebration — however unfairly limited it has been, if you accept Arnett's view — you would still be left with an immensely satisfying dramatic arc. But in 2012, at age 62, Holley made his debut as a recording artist. He had been hoarding crude home recordings of himself since the mid-'80s, but never gave much thought to anything approaching a proper release. Then he met Lance Ledbetter, the 37-year-old founder of Dust-to-Digital, a boutique record label based in Atlanta. Ledbetter, who started Dust-to-Digital as a way of bringing rare gospel records — pressed between 1902 and 1960, most them never available before on compact disc — to a broader audience, had never attempted to record a living artist before he heard Holley. "I was hearing Krautrock, R.& B., all of these genres hitting each other and pouring out of this 60-year-old person who had never made a record before," Ledbetter recalls. "I couldn't digest it, it was so intense."

In terms of genre, Holley's music is largely unclassifiable: haunting vocals accompanied by rudimentary keyboard effects, progressing without any traditional song structure — no choruses, chord changes or consistent melody whatsoever. In many ways, Holley is the perfect embodiment of Dust-to-Digital's overriding aesthetic: a raw voice plucked from a lost world, evoking the visceral authenticity of a crackling acetate disc. The title of his Dust-to-Digital debut, released in 2012, could double as its own category description: "Just Before Music." That album and its follow-up, "Keeping a Record of It," released in September and, for my money, one of the best records of 2013, introduced Holley to a new audience, including members of hip indie-rock bands like Dirty Projectors and Animal Collective, who have all played with him.

At the Sinclair, Holley sat in front of a Nord Electro 2 keyboard. The stand

was lowered close to the stage floor, along with Holley's stool, forcing him to splay his knees. In photographs from his younger days, Holley is rangy and handsome, with an intense, faraway gaze that, in certain shots, possesses a dangerous, slightly mad edge. ("I think it's more serious than angry," Holley says of the look.) Age has softened his face and added streaks of white to his unkempt goatee. He was wearing a black beret, glasses and a Harvard T-shirt, his fingers and left forearm laden with jewelry (upward of six rings per finger, more than a dozen bracelets armoring his left wrist, the bracelets doubling as protection for when Holley sculpts with barbed wire and other jagged materials).

"Oh, goodness," Holley said. "It's wonderful to be here." Then he began to play the keyboard — only the black keys — and spacey, ethereal music filled the room. The young crowd fell silent and watched, rapt. His voice was hoarse and occasionally tuneless, and Holley held his palms flat while he played, his long fingers extended. It looked as if he were fanning a flame or trying to calm a small dog or a child.

Backstage, only a few minutes before showtime, I learned that each of his pieces is actually a one-time performance; his words and music, whether in the studio or on a stage, are entirely improvised. "It's like a mental flight, as Dr. King said — I'm taking a mental flight each time I'm up onstage," Holley told me. I had to look it up, but he was referring to the speech that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered to striking sanitation workers in Memphis the day before he was assassinated, in which King fantasized about taking a "mental flight" to ancient Egypt, across the Red Sea, "through the wilderness, on toward the promised land."

I was dubious about Holley's ability — anyone's, really — to pull off something like this in a satisfying manner. But then, as if to directly rebuke my unvoiced doubts, Holley began the second number by singing, "I was telling a friend of mine, a few minutes ago, we was talking about centuries and centuries," and I realized I was the friend he was singing about. (We had actually just met.) Holley then proceeded to create, on the spot, a song that distilled everything that's so excellent about his music: both its fragile, anachronistic beauty and its unhinged weirdness. This particular song, which, like all of Holley's songs (and many of his conversations, for that matter) is not easy to summarize, included several riffs on the cruelty of the government shutdown (which we had been discussing backstage), a joke without a punch line about a pair of cave men named Ugg and

Lee, whistling, scatting, a couple of Satchmo growls and, ultimately, a devastating and sincere profession of patriotism, during which Holley sang bits of the Pledge of Allegiance and then offhandedly improved "America the Beautiful" with a riff on a verse from the Gospel of Matthew, "So much to be harvested, and the harvesters are so few."

After the show, I emailed Bill Callahan, who labors in a lapidary fashion over his own lyrics, to hear what he thought about Holley's approach. "All music is improvised," Callahan wrote back, "just at different speeds."

In 1997, Holley's original art environment was destroyed after the Birmingham Airport Authority condemned his property as part of a planned expansion. There had been a protracted legal battle. By that point, Holley's yard consisted of thousands of pieces and had taken over roads and wooded areas abandoned by neighbors forced out by the airport. He received a settlement of $165,700 and bought new land in Harpersville, a more rural Alabama community about 35 miles away.

"I was living in hell in Harpersville," Holley told me. He was raising his five youngest children on his own, after their mother went to prison on an armed-robbery charge. Holley was arrested after property stolen by one of his sons from a local golf course was discovered at his house. A few months earlier, Holley says, he was shot in the wrist when a neighbor opened fire on his home. He told me that the feud stemmed from the fact that his property had been seized in a drug raid; the neighbors were related to the previous owner.

In 2010, he finally moved to the south side of Atlanta, where he now lives in a walk-up one-bedroom apartment near the federal penitentiary. (The building is owned by a fan of Holley's work who is also friends with the Arnett family.) When I visited Holley, I was initially startled by how thoroughly he seemed to have recreated his art environment within the confines of his modest new living quarters, which is to say, his place looked as if it had been taken over by squatters or maybe a home-decorating show in which the makeover artists are restricted to using materials scavenged from trash bins. Found objects (DVD cases, egg cartons, torn bedsheets, yellow police "Do Not Cross" tape) were draped from wires crisscrossing the room, along with Calderesque wire sculptures of faces made by Holley. Nestlike piles of junk he picked up on walks along the nearby train tracks were partly covered by tarps; his workbench was a rough-hewed wooden plank

balanced on a window sill and a garbage can.

"What I'm doing here, I think Malcolm said it best: by any means necessary," Holley said. "We can make art where we have to. Dr. King, if you remember, wrote a sermon on a piece of toilet paper." He said he was in the process of securing studio space, so he could make his apartment more of a conventional home. He was wearing a long-sleeved Carhartt shirt and paint-spattered cargo pants. All of his rings and bracelets — copper, silver, black rubber, garishly beaded — were either homemade or found objects. They added to the shamanistic aura Holley projects, although the backpack he always carries, in case he comes across any potential art materials, exuded more of a hobo practicality, as a bag stuffed with more bags inevitably does. There were also multiple pieces of rope hanging from the straps of the backpack, "in case I need to tie something off," Holley explained.

As we left his apartment, he said his friend in the soul-food restaurant downstairs warned him about crime in the neighborhood. We drove past check-cashing joints, boarded homes, 1-888-JUNK-CARS signs, a wine-distribution warehouse surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Eventually we stopped for coffee, and Holley described how he learned to repurpose other people's trash from his grandmother, who used to sell scrap metal to junkyards. "In the '50s and early '40s, there wasn't no garbage trucks, especially out in the country," he said. "Everyone took their stuff and dug holes and buried it. That's where I got pretty much all of my material. All you had to do was go around the edge of the property lines, and you mostly found everything that they'd thrown away."

We were sitting at an outdoor table with a partly filled ashtray. Holley stopped talking to reach over and pluck out a cigarette butt, examining it as if he had discovered a rare penny in a handful of change. He asked me for a sheet of paper from my notebook, then tore apart the butt and affixed its cottony filter to a wooden coffee stirrer, also liberated from the ashtray. "This is called white oak," he said. "It's what they use to weave baskets and things, because it's flexible." He fashioned a miniature paintbrush and then painted a heart and the word LOVE using ashes mixed with a few drops of his iced coffee, the solution creating an appealing speckled-eggshell patina.

Holley's need to create borders on the compulsive. He sketches faces on napkins in restaurants, pastes together collages in notebooks while riding from one show to the next. Photography, his latest medium, allows him to arrange

found objects wherever he might be and simply document this ephemeral act. "I'm getting toward a terabyte of material," he said of the project, his voice a mixture of pride and concern. "And I'm one man, not a company!"

After the coffee, we drove to an industrial part of town where Arnett, who has long been Holley's loudest advocate, stores his collection. The place reminded me of a cross between the American Folk Art Museum and the warehouse at the end of "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Boxes filled with Gee's Bend quilts were stacked five high. A central place of honor was set aside for Holley's sculptures: a gnarled tree root laid across a pair of beat-up rocking chairs; a plaster column topped with picture frames, Coke bottles and a hairbrush; golf clubs and baseball bats protruding from a drain pipe used in a work titled "Protecting Myself the Best I Can (Weapons by the Door)."

James Fuentes, the Lower East Side gallerist (and former director at Deitch Projects) who represents Holley, says one of the things that drew him to Holley's work was that it was "assemblage sculpture made from a nonironic standpoint." Holley's first attempt at working with sandstone came after two of his sister's young children died in a house fire. "We didn't have no money to get no memorial stones," Holley said, "so I decided I was going to cut the sandstone and make them tombstones." It was the late 1970s, and Holley had recently moved back to Alabama after working at Disney World and found his mother living in desperate poverty. "I got depressed, very depressed," Holley said. "There were some burnings on my brain I can't explain. I didn't wanna see Mama have to go to neighbors to ask if they had anything. She had all those children, and no matter how I was working, whatever I tried to go do, really, I couldn't make no changes in her life. The art were the thing that pulled me out from that, the baby tombstones. I didn't know what art were." (To clarify the 27-children count: Holley says that includes some stillbirths and early deaths.)

Holley loves nothing better than to explain the meaning behind his pieces, all of which come densely packed with outside references, and in the warehouse, he began a declamatory phase, his robust Southern accent giving his words a slightly sung quality. Holley can be very charming and funny — after the tombstone story, he recalled the time he misunderstood an early curator's suggestion to try his hand at busts and wound up carving a bunch of miniature sandstone buses — but then he'll speak in long, elliptical blocks of text, shifting between favorite metaphors,

current events, historical allusions and detailed family history. A question about how his music and art relate to each other sparked an eight-minute lecture touching on Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, a trip to Kentucky, Mary Todd Lincoln, the types of shoes worn by civil rights marchers and a sculpture he made called "Above the Shoe."

"My thing as an artist, I am not doing anything but still ringing that Liberty Bell, ding, ding, ding, on the shorelines of independence," he said near the end of this particular riff, fixing me with an intense gaze. "Isn't that beautiful? Can you hear the bell I'm ringing? And will you come running?"

Like the "mental flights" his lyrics take, Holley's monologues can be fascinating, but also, without musical accompaniment, exhausting in a way that will make your head hurt if you try too hard to follow his line of thought. "He's totally abstract, and he's been that way forever," says Holley's 31-year-old son, Kubra. After a few days with Holley, I was reminded of a friend's story about a visit to the Georgia folk artist (and Baptist minister) Howard Finster back in the 1990s. "If you need to go inside and use the bathroom or anything, go ahead," Finster told my friend after pausing in the midst of a rambling, impromptu sermon. "I'll be doing this whether you're out here or not."

How to characterize artists like Holley and Finster has long been a source of controversy. Many bristle at qualifiers like "folk" or "outsider" — outside what, exactly? — and yet spending any time with Holley makes you realize there's a genuine eccentricity that sets him apart, separate from any differences in class or geography or general background that might place him "outside" the social sphere of, say, Art Basel attendees. But the better I got to know Holley, the more I realized that the reason none of the old categories felt satisfying was that I was ignoring the one that was most apropos: The kind of artist Lonnie Holley is, first and foremost, is a performance artist.

This seems especially clear now that he's releasing music. Holley began making home recordings after picking up a Casio keyboard in a pawnshop. Sometimes he sang, other times he just talked while making his work, explaining the significance of whatever salvaged objects he happened to be weaving into his vast tapestry. He multitracked the more musical numbers with a dual-cassette boombox and a karaoke machine. "Sometimes I'd have a video camera set up, recording my physical actions," Holley recalled. (It's a technique he still uses today

at times.) "I'd be dancing and painting. Sometimes I'd go to a flea market and buy all these different garments, and I'd change my clothes all day. So I was almost doing a presentation."

Holley would occasionally play the audiocassettes for Arnett's son Matt, who works with his father and also runs an underground music space in his Atlanta home. Matt became obsessed with Holley's recordings, and they impressed any musician friends he shared them with. But what to do with the music? "I didn't even know what to call it," he says.

He eventually had Holley play a set at his space and made sure Ledbetter was in the audience. He also took Holley into a recording studio, where they cut the song that would become what might be my favorite of Holley's recorded pieces, "Six Space Shuttles and 144,000 Elephants." In it, Holley imagines the building of a sextet of cosmic arks ("the size of the Hindenburg and the Titanic, both put together") in honor of Queen Elizabeth's birthday. The elephants eventually return to save the earth from environmental degradation. Summarized, this sounds silly, but the "nonironic standpoint" Fuentes appreciates in Holley's sculptures works its magic here too. By the end, when Holley begins softly singing "Happy birthday, dear queen," the sudden shift in tone and impossible earnestness of his delivery flattens me to the ground every time.

On the road, Matt acts as Holley's tour manager, driving him to gigs in a rental car, working the merchandise table and writing out nightly set lists to Holley's specifications. The "song titles" are merely phrases or ideas that have popped into Holley's head, which he'll improvise around during the performance. They read like fragments of poems: "I Can't Hate the Ocean for Bringing You"; "The Field's Too Wet — I Ain't Got No Water for Awhile, for Awhile"; "Where Did That Leaf Come From?"

Matt Arnett has known Holley since he was a teenager, thanks to the work of his father. Bill Arnett has played a larger role in the lives of his favored artists than a typical collector. For years, Arnett has helped support artists, including Holley, with stipends, in exchange for which he receives right of first refusal on anything they produce. Critics dismiss the idea of a privileged white collector making deals with black artists from isolated and often deeply impoverished worlds and possibly exercising unfair influence over them. It's an issue that has been explored at length elsewhere, most pointedly in a 1996 "60 Minutes" segment that featured Bill

Arnett. "60 Minutes" portrayed his business relationships with his artists as blatantly exploitative, but the artist in Arnett's stable who complained on camera, Bessie Harvey, later rescinded her comments. Holley himself has nothing bad to say about Arnett after working with him for 30 years. "I didn't really trust him at first," Holley says. "You have to remember, this is a white man, so I'm curious about who I'm being involved with. But the only thing Bill was doing was setting my expectations free."

Nevertheless, the state of Holley's living space, the obsessive and all-encompassing nature of his art-making, his scattered manner of speaking, all raised uncomfortable questions for me about the line between an eccentric creative person and a more genuinely troubled one. In the world of music, especially, there's a way in which the embrace of such artists can feel condescending. Daniel Johnston, an undeniably talented rock musician who has spent time in mental institutions and whose oddball, wildly uneven home recordings were celebrated as quirky fetish objects by the alternative rock scene in the '90s, comes to mind. In Holley's case, the sheer quantity of his output guarantees artistic highs and lows, which are unavoidable when a lack of editing is such an integral part of his creative method. But I would argue that those highs, particularly when it comes to the music, make the whole package worthwhile, so accepting the messiness of Holley's multifarious performance never feels like giving him a pass.

Holley had a girlfriend in Atlanta for a while, an aspiring musician he was living with, but that didn't work out. He spends time with his children, who are all grown, and will have social dinners with the Arnetts or with Lance Ledbetter and his wife. But mostly, Holley is a loner, the performative aspect of his personality creating a distancing effect that keeps him a man apart.

Kubra, the middle of Holley's five youngest children (or the "13th of the 15," as Kubra says), acknowledges that his upbringing was unorthodox. For years, the Holleys were the last family remaining as their neighborhood was swallowed up by the airport authority. (Holley was married to the mother of his five youngest children; she served her prison term in Ohio, where she still lives today. His other 10 children come from four different mothers and did not live with Holley and the younger children in Alabama.) Kubra and his four full siblings ended up sticking close together, turning abandoned homes into their own clubhouses. But, Kubra

says: "I have nothing bad to say about my dad. He always found ways to provide for us. Sometimes as an adult, you do have some regrets about missing out on the more typical stuff growing up. That structure. But a lot of our life lessons were more down to earth. I could teach you about making something out of nothing to put food on the table. If every computer in the world shut down, I could show you how to live."

On my last day in Atlanta, it was unseasonably warm for early November, and Holley decided to take me and Ledbetter for a walk along the BeltLine, an in-progress conversion of miles of unused Atlanta train tracks into bicycle and walking trails. Holley was in high spirits when we picked him up. Some of his children had just come to visit him from Alabama, and in a few weeks, he would be touring Europe. "I'm loving Atlanta," Holley told me. His long-term plans involve a re-creation of his outdoor studio. "What I want to do is get a few acres here and start over," he said.

The particular stretch of the BeltLine we were exploring remained trash-strewn and overgrown. Holley's eyes immediately dropped to the ground, in search of new art materials, and soon he had collected the cracked mouth of a whiskey bottle, shards of white pottery, the wire portion of a spent bottle rocket. A young woman, out walking her dog, stopped to take Holley's picture with her smartphone. I assumed it was because his voice had been steadily rising, taking on a preacher's cadence, and also because he was waving around several feet of thick cable he had just extracted from a patch of pokeweed, but when Holley began to tell her about his art, the woman smiled shyly and said, "I know who you are." She had seen his work at an exhibit and recently listened to one of his songs at her office. It made her cry.

Holley invited her to join us and continued to expound on topics of interest (slave ships, Moses and the burning bush, Boris Karloff's version of "The Mummy"). She seemed to soak it all in, saying yes to his best one-liners and occasionally clutching her hands to her chest, genuinely moved. I looked for hints of flirtation coming from Holley, but he mostly seemed pleased to have a fresh audience. Holley often had the air of someone not fully present, but only because he was picking up signals from elsewhere.

"This performative mode that you've spotted, that's just the way Lonnie is," Bill Arnett later told me, dismissing my performance-artist theory. "Performance

art, that word is from the mainstream. I've known Lonnie for 25 years, and he is emphatically not from the mainstream. So unless you want to call him, what — an outsider performance artist? — I don't think it works."

Maybe not. But there is something about watching him sing or make a sculpture or tell a story or do all of the above at once that's markedly different from looking at one of his pieces in a gallery or listening to his record at home. Sometimes it's the simplest gesture. Back on the tracks, Holley's eyes alit on a signal post. The metal box had mostly been stripped, and Holley quickly wove three thick wires through the latch. After bending one down himself, he had me and Ledbetter do the same. Then he took a step back and explained that what we had just done was called a collaboration, and that anytime we came back, we would remember what we did together. "Can't nobody really shut this door without tampering with it," he said, testing it himself. "What we did, we prevented something from ever being locked again."

As he reached inside the box and began plucking at its springs, I wondered, again, how much this was part of the performance: playing the box like a musical instrument, dropping casual-sounding bits of folk wisdom about locks and doors. But he appeared fixated on the task at hand. "Lance," he murmured to Ledbetter, "you got your recorder?"

George King, an Atlanta filmmaker who has spent the past 18 years shooting Holley for a planned documentary project, earlier described seeing "boxes and boxes of cassettes" of recorded music, back when Holley was still living in Alabama. "I don't think there was any purpose, necessarily," King told me. "It wasn't like he hoped it would be released or even that he'd listen to it a week later. He just wanted to document that it happened. A lot of the time, his interest appears to be in making an object rather than even displaying it. Lonnie is kind of like a shark that way: to survive he has to keep moving forward, to keep making things. It's almost an existential thing. That's how he experiences the world."

Ledbetter fired up the voice-memo application on his smartphone and set it inside the switch box. Holley flicked the springs, which created a throbbing echo. Then he started to sing along, softly, stretching out the words. "Do you remember me? Down by the rail rail rail rail rail road?" Nodding his head, pleased, he whispered to Ledbetter: "O.K. You got that? Good." And then we kept on walking.

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A version of this article appears in print on January 26, 2014, on page MM32 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: The Insider's Outsider.

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the record

MUSIC NEWS FROM NPR

Lonnie Holley: Self-Made Man

by RJ Smith

October 31, 2013

Somebody does something a little different — they briefly step off the curb — and plenty of folks are ready to dub them a "self-made man" or "self-made woman." But what Lonnie Holley does, and what he has made of himself, demands a whole new term. He truly is his own invention.

On a Friday night in October, Holley is sitting at a formica table in a cozy little museum café in Columbus, Ohio. It's him, me and his friend and road manager, talking before Holley plays a concert at the Wexner Center for the Arts. Some local indie rockers come by to meet him, and all the while Holley keeps talking. Talking about his art. He is explaining why, although the 63-year-old sculptor and musician has been making music for himself for many years now, he only recently started releasing it to strangers as commercially-available albums.

"I think it was like in preparation to be shared. Practice to make perfect," he says animatedly. Until recently, the attention Holley has received has been due to the sculpture and environments he builds. They are made of objects natural and manmade that Holley finds on walks; they are thick with references to current events and African-American history. But the visual art is only part of his story. His sculpture and his music are inseparable, he explains, "are Siamese twins." The best way to experience them, he says, would be to have him follow behind you in an art gallery, singing as you viewed the work.

Holley's eyeglasses are decorated with beads, and one wrist is thick with a tangle of bracelets. Hanging from his fingers are anti-bling; handmade rings and gold skulls that look like they weigh several pounds. He speaks with an original, casual poetry, and his ideas jump from small things to global in a single checker move.

The music he makes, too, sounds like it comes from some other place. It's so elemental, so stark and ripped from the ground, there should be no mystery how his first record, last year's *Just Before Music*, got its title: it sounds old and draws on principles that have been long forgotten. Holley wants those who hear his new album, *Keeping A Record of It*, to connect with it on a level beyond the surface sounds.

Keeping A Record of It has a droney, nocturnal waft, and his electric keyboard playing can sound like avant-garde music made by somebody obsessed with repetition and simplicity. It was recorded at various points between 2006 and 2011, and features gentle electronic blips and confetti, buttressed by guest work from musicians in and . His singing suggests backwoods gospel testifying from some unnamed church of the swamps; one fragment has him talking about life and death with the quilters of Gee's Bend, Ala., fellow artists who have gone their own brilliant way. Everywhere Holley's lyrics refer to slavery, the church and universal ecology. They are mystical and emphatic.

"To hear or not hear, or to see the art or not to see the art — those are not the facts because we hear and see things but we don't get to the *facts* of things," he says. Pointing to the brick wall in front of our table he explains that we both *see* it, but we don't know anything about it, really, whether this or that brick came from a brickyard or was recycled, or was "a pretend brick made of an image of a brick." He wants to get his mind inside the brick, he says, and communicate that inner knowledge.

Lonnie Holley was born in Birmingham, Ala., in 1950, at the height of the Jim Crow era. "Since I were a baby I had been around music," he says. "I was the seventh of my mother's 27 children but was taken away from my mother when I was one-and-a-half." (Other accounts say he was four). He says a burlesque show dancer took him from his mother, eventually depositing him at a whiskey house where he was raised. There was a Rock-Ola jukebox in the room he slept in, and Holley says the owner struck him on the head with a poker.

As an adolescent, he worked at an Alabama drive-in movie theater, and Holley credits the sounds he heard there with influencing his own music. "I got a chance to hear the sound of sci-fi, the mystery sounds that was on the movie. Or the sounds of Dracula and Frankenstein and the old Mummy, all those old movies, those are the kind of sounds were embedded in my brain."

He was a runaway teenager who ended up in the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children. After one attempted escape, Holley was tied to a cedar tree and whipped with a stick soaked in tractor oil. He says he has no particularly vengeful feelings toward the people who made him suffer.

"Maybe others have had things much more serious and hurtable than mine, and I have to realize that," he says. "It's not that I couldn't cry dearly about that, but my art allows me to rise above it. I love my art."

He learned to shut out the external world and cultivate an inner life, a process that has fed his art. In 1979 his sister's house caught on fire and two nieces were killed. To cope with the atrocity, Holley says he took slabs of sandstone and began sawing into them with kitchen tools, intent on making tombstones for the children. A creative outlet opened up to him. "I didn't know it was art. I thought I was making baby tombstones," he once told an interviewer. Others began to notice.

The director of the Birmingham Museum helped get him included in a 1981 traveling Smithsonian exhibition of American art. Holley would sing while he made his work, and sometimes he'd tape his songs and pass them around to friends. The chain of friends grew larger,

and in time, included famed Southern collector of African-American and so-called "outsider" or vernacular art, . (Arnett's son Matt is Holley's de facto road manager.)

Today music magazines interview Holley; he has been a featured performer in the exhibition of blues-inspired art that was at the Whitney Museum in New York City this spring. It traveled to the Wexner Center in Columbus this month, and Holley also arrived for a performance of music from *Keeping A Record of It*.

He's the first half of a show headlined by a tribute to . He sits down at a wheezy keyboard; a moment later a guitarist comes out, loosely strumming, looking for places to fit into what Holley is playing. He gets high marks for trying, but Holley plays from feel, and he doesn't follow obvious patterns with his keening, prayerlike songs. The guitar player keeps getting thrown off the merry-go-round only Holley controls. It is his music, he made it, and he understands it better than anybody.

"I'm not trying to copy nobody, not trying to outdo nobody with my music," he says to me. "I'm trying to celebrate the opportunities that music allows for each individual. Because if you look back at music, music didn't need no classroom, music didn't need nobody to give it a Grade A. Music was made in the fields, it was made in some of the meanest conditions. I'm not giving you no mind, mister man, music made people get out of their sick bed."