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Lonnie Holley, the Insider's Outsider

By MARK BINELLI JAN. 23, 2014



Lonnie Holley in his apartment in Atlanta. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

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.”



Holley rehearses at a studio in the Ormewood Park neighborhood of Atlanta. Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

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.



A sculpture, titled "Power of a Mother," in Holley's home.
Credit Gillian Laub for The New York Times

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, scattin', 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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