

LONNIE HOLLEY'S GLORIOUS IMPROVISATIONS

On his new album, "Mith," history and invention are crucial but imagination is the thing that saves.

By Amanda Petrusich



Holley's music invites us to make sense of the world together.

Photograph by Elijah Gowin / Robert Mann Gallery

The centerpiece of the artist and musician Lonnie Holley's new album, "Mith," is a brutal and dissonant song called "I Woke Up in a Fucked-Up America." The title could refer to the nation right now, or to Holley's childhood in the pre-civil-rights-era South. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1950, the seventh of twenty-seven children, and brought up by an itinerant burlesque dancer who may have stolen him from his biological mother. At the age of four, he says, he was traded for a bottle of whiskey. Later, after he fled the home of an abusive foster parent, he was hit by a car and

declared brain-dead. At eleven, he was sent to the Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children, an infamous juvenile facility in Montgomery County, where he picked cotton and collected trash from the side of the highway. After he got out, he took a job as a short-order cook at Disney World. Eventually, he found work as a gravedigger.

Holley is surely aware that there is significant power in mythmaking. Art that feels like the product of an unlikely journey is frequently presumed to be more

authentic; if that journey is marked by disenfranchisement and injustice, the work becomes doubly profound. The culture fetishizes and rewards an unorthodox path—or, at least, the appearance of an unorthodox path—so there is value, sometimes, in embellishing the details. The title of Holley’s new album (and its purposeful misspelling) seems like a nod to the practice and the tradition of folklore.

For the record: the burlesque dancer who raised Holley was supposed to watch him for only a few days. When she and Holley visited a so-called whiskey house on the edge of the Alabama state fairgrounds, the proprietor noticed that Holley appeared underfed, and offered to take care of him. He didn’t flee, but got lost while searching for his birth mother. Holley’s paternal grandmother eventually took him in. She was a devout Baptist, and hoped that Holley might become a preacher, but he found that the church alone couldn’t contain his generative spirit.

Holley figured out that he was a talented sculptor while fashioning ad-hoc tombstones for his sister’s two young children, who had died in a house fire. His career as a visual artist began in earnest in 1981, when he delivered a few examples of his sandstone carvings to the director of the Birmingham Museum of Art, who agreed to display them. In the mid-eighties, Holley met Bill Arnett, a collector known for sponsoring and promoting self-taught black artists from the South. Arnett helped Holley place his work in more museums and private collections. (Arnett has also raised the profile of the sculptor Thornton Dial, and of the quilters of Gee’s Bend, Alabama.) Holley’s sculptures have since been displayed in the White House Rose Garden and the Smithsonian Institution, and at the United Nations. He assembles the pieces, which are heavy with personal and political meaning, from scavenged widgets and rusty bits of trash that he often lashes together with barbed wire.

Holley didn’t begin releasing music until 2012, when he was sixty-two. His voice is sometimes gruff and sometimes honeyed—a mixture of Tom Waits and Marvin Gaye. He started out creating songs on a Casio keyboard that he purchased at a Goodwill store, and first recorded his work on a karaoke machine from a flea market. With some assistance from Arnett’s son, Matt, who now manages Holley’s music career, Holley signed to Dust-to-Digital, an Atlanta-based record label that specializes in the artful excavation and repackaging of lost or underappreciated music. “Mith,” which was

released by Jagjaguwar last month, is Holley’s third record.

Holley’s music, which is largely improvised, contains hints of Stevie Wonder, Sun Ra, Lou Reed, Alice Coltrane, Gil Scott-Heron, Miles Davis, and at least a dozen other singers and composers. His precise influences are difficult to identify and parse. Holley is interested in *mélange*—the soldering together of disparate objects or ideas, in order to build something that feels both new and borrowed. On paper, this might sound like an intellectual exercise—especially since his work is often explicitly political—but, in practice, his music is strange and warm. Unlike some experimental musicians, who rely on drone and discord to unsettle their listeners, Holley does not seem to have an antagonistic relationship with his audience; he merely wants to pull people deeper into his embrace.

“Mith” contains an almost eighteen-minute song titled “I Snuck Off the Slave Ship.” “Tossing us down in the galleys / Tossing us down into darkness / So many humans crying / Whining, wiggling, and moving,” Holley sings, his voice clear over a haze of loops and synthesizers. Ultimately, it’s a song about perseverance. Holley often quotes Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, which King delivered to sanitation workers in Memphis the day before he was assassinated. King shared the details of his “mental flight” to ancient Egypt, “through the wilderness, on toward the promised land.” On “I Snuck Off the Slave Ship,” Holley’s mental flight involves dissociation: he leaves his body, and floats to shore. His spiritual journey continues from there, through humankind’s innovations and failures—the Hindenburg, space shuttles, satellites, the “windows of technology.” Imagination becomes a way of saving yourself, and a method of taking stock. It’s also required for creative improvisation. Holley prefers to reinvent his songs each time he plays them. The idea is to close your eyes and see where you land.

Popular music hasn’t struggled quite as much as visual art has with the seemingly paradoxical phrase “outsider art.” Following the considerable commercial success of rock and roll, the high-versus-low divide in popular music was largely obliterated; an anti-authoritarian quality was recognized as plainly profitable in a pop or rock star. Still, there are a handful of unclassifiable artists (Daniel Johnston, Wesley Willis, Moondog) who have been stuck with the “outsider” tag. It occasionally comes up in conversations about Holley, perhaps

because his music can't be easily slotted into a continuum.

The cover of "Mith" features a blurry black-and-white portrait of Holley, giving a thumbs-up. The gesture feels genuine. He is inviting us to try to make sense of the world together. In person, Holley has an almost shamanistic quality, as if he possessed all the wisdom of the universe, and would happily share it with you, if you let him. He is beautiful: long, graying dreadlocks, wrists full of bracelets, and a ring (or two or three or four) on every finger. This spring, I saw him perform at the Mariposa Museum and World Culture Center, in Peterborough, New Hampshire, as part of a local music-and-arts festival. A gallery around the corner was hosting an exhibit of Holley's art work, so it was possible to see his sculptures before settling in for the show, and to ponder the relation between his chosen forms. All his work is focussed on ideas of history and invention—how we can use the past to unlock the future.

To fully understand his work, it's important to watch him make it. He improvises a new set every time he plays. In New Hampshire, he had his eyeglasses pushed up on his forehead, and his keyboard was wrapped in a blue quilt with the letter "H" in the middle. He opened with a long, meandering interpretation of "I'm a Suspect," from "Mith." It's a song about prejudice. "No matter if I'm up or if I'm down / I'm a suspect / In America," Holley sings. The chorus (if you can call it that—his work largely resists structure) became a stabbing proclamation: "I'm a sus! Pect!" He repeated the phrase until it felt like a mantra. His backing band—the multi-instrumentalist Shahzad Ismaily, the trombonist Dave Nelson, and the percussionist Marlon Patton—added spontaneous ornamentation.

When Holley gets going, he conjures something in a room. There is his own trance—he disappears into a song, and goes soft around the edges—and the audience's collective trip. "Watch me deteriorate into a dust speck," he sang. For me, the Mariposa show felt like a kind of glorious refuge, in which the sins of our ancestors were seen and sublimated. What Holley's offering isn't forgiveness, exactly, but something more like love. ♦