

Lonnie Holley's 'MITH' is a Humanistic Lament for a Fucked up America

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It's hard to ignore how much Lonnie Holley uses the word "humans." Usually when we hear that word it's out of the mouth of a killer robot or an alien invader in a Saturday morning cartoon. Maybe it's just one of Holley's weird quirks, like wearing mesh beanies festooned with trinkets made of trash or greeting people with a fist-bump with thumb extended. But it's a better word than "people," anyway. "People" reduces the sum of humanity to an indistinct mass. "Humans" highlights the individuals. Besides, to be thought of as human isn't a given. It's something a lot of people have to fight for.



Photo courtesy of artist Facebook page

MITH, Holley's third album since beginning a recording career early this decade after years as an acclaimed sculptor, is a humanistic lament for an America that was, is, and likely will always be fucked-up. Holley was born in Jim Crow Alabama in 1950 and might have been doomed to a life of extreme poverty had he not dragged his first sculptures to the Birmingham Museum of Art in the '80s. He must be fairly well-off now as a prominent figure in the art world. But he remains—as he phrases it in the first words of this gargantuan, 76-minute record—a “suspect in America.”

This is a “political” record, I suppose, but it's not polemical. It doesn't offer any solutions, though Holley takes a lot of stock in the redemptive power of art (“see what a brain can do,” he sings on “Take Me Back”). The closer “Sometimes I Wanna Dance” might seem like a grim joke after all the weighty material on this album, but it's an ode to life, to freedom, to the things worth fighting for. And on the 18-minute “I Snuck Off The Slave Ship,” named for one of his exhibitions, it's through the power of his imagination that he's able to astrally project away from the hold of the ship, floating through the past and future. This isn't a record that tells. It shows.

“Slave Ship” is one of the most visceral accounts of human suffering I've heard on record. Through small, patient steps, Holley leads us from shore and drops us with him into a stinking brig of dying, writhing bodies. “Some of them looked pregnant,” he laments, followed by a visceral scream foretelling their fate. When he sneaks off (“bedoobedoobedoobedoo,” goes a backing vocal, imitating the tiptoe of feet) it's to see “unaccountable bodies” drowning offshore and their souls flying overhead like airplanes. Holley wails at the top of his voice all the while, and at the end, what's the consolation? “They built museums,” he scoffs, as a stately piano figure waltzes across the frame.

Holley's music is filled with such asides, in-jokes, and footnotes. His music is mostly improvised, and the version of “I Woke Up In A Fucked-Up America” here might not be the one he plays in San Francisco or Utrecht or wherever he might find himself on a given night. It seems as if, after stabbing out an unedited vocal-and-keyboard take, he overdubs as much as possible. The mix is at times near-impenetrable with voices, not to mention the crashing of drums and horns in an apocalyptic din. It's impossible to catch everything he says the first time around—which naturally rewards repeat listening.

This isn't an album a lot of people will find easy to listen to. Tunefulness isn't Holley's strong suit. And few of these songs have what you might consider a rhythm; they seem to stumble over each other, or else they crescendo in climaxes of noise as if trying to will change into the world through the sheer power of the sound they make. It's easy to admire the scope of Holley's statement, but only those accustomed to the structural and sonic extremes of experimental music might find themselves going back again and again.

Oddly, the area in which Holley seems to be making the strongest impact is in indie rock. His champions include Bill Callahan, Black Lips, Bon Iver, and Deerhunter, and he's signed to Jagjaguwar, better-known for rootsy indie folk acts like Okkervil River. Many of us first became aware of him through a barely-promoted opening slot on Animal Collective's recent *Sung Tongs* tour, where the physical impact of his voice and two-man band (trombone and drums)

must have knocked many an unsuspecting hipster on their ass.



There's, of course, the risk that his eccentricity, life story, and novelty as a 68-year-old black sculptor playing indie rock stages will become the main draw, as with so many other "outsider artists." Indeed, his own account of his life is repeated incessantly in most press about his music, as if his records alone weren't gripping enough to recommend without "he's this guy..." context. It'd be a shame if *MITH* was seen as little more the world-weary recollections of a survivor, or an addendum to a sordid life story, rather than the great American album it is.

-Daniel Bromfield