

Music Man

Lemon Tree, very pretty, and the story behind it's sweet.

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

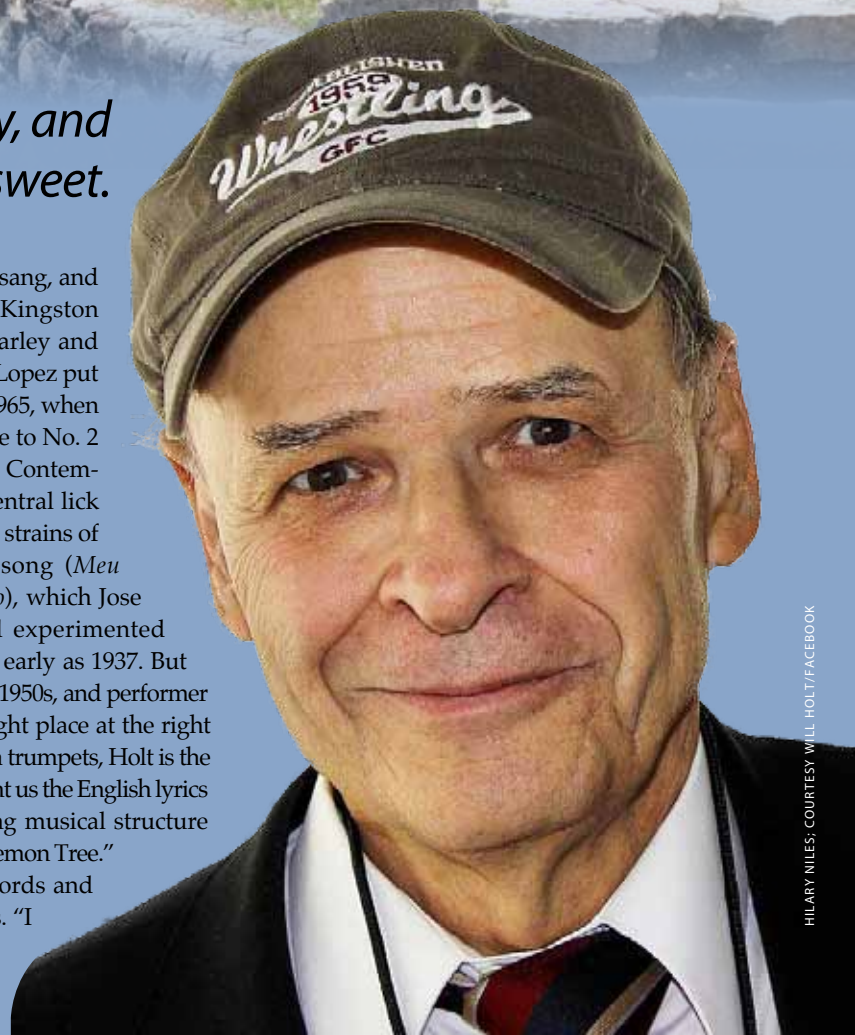
We know “The Maine Stein Song” hails from this neck of the woods. But “Lemon Tree”?

“I was in Chicago with my wife, Dolly Jonah (1930-1983),” says composer/lyricist Will Holt, a Portland native. “We needed a song for the opening. It was a nightclub, so we said, ‘We should do something kind of nightclubby!’ With a swizzle stick and a glass, I started tapping out the melody. It was just the opening to the song. It had no words. I’d heard it first from Gene and Francesca, a folksinging duo. ‘This seems kind of fun,’ they told me. I said, ‘Yeah, there ought to be words to it.’ That was it. It just hit.”

The tune Portland native Will Holt is talking about is what the world celebrates as “Lemon Tree.” It’s the same haunting melody that Peter, Paul and Mary sang in their first album, that

Chad and Jeremy sang, and The Seekers, the Kingston Trio, even Bob Marley and the Wailers. Trini Lopez put it over the top in 1965, when “Lemon Tree” rose to No. 2 on the Hot Adult Contemporary list. The central lick hearkened back to strains of a Brazilian folk song (*Meu limão, meu limoeiro*), which Jose Carlos Burle had experimented with musically as early as 1937. But this was in the late 1950s, and performer Holt was in the right place at the right time. As Wikipedia trumpets, Holt is the person who brought us the English lyrics and the enchanting musical structure which lights up “Lemon Tree.”

“I wrote the words and the verse,” he says. “I



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wish I'd kept the swizzle stick!" Musicians agree that it is Holt's genius intro, complete with a dead-perfect key change, that magically sets off the refrain. "It put my kid through college!"

Holt clearly embraces the irony that someone from icy Maine could pen the words to such a warm song.

"I was born in Maine General Hospital (now Maine Medical Center)," he says. During the summer of 1929, "when I was three months old, my family and I came to North Bridgton. I still spend summers in the same cottage on Bell's Point at the top of Long Lake," on a green lollipop peninsula that dangles off the end of Holt Road. "My father bought the cottage from Professor Edward Spooner. It was white and green, with a porch," as it is today. "The narrow-gauge railroad came right by my door. It was wonderful. Do you know where the Academy Beach is? I'm right across from the Beach. I grew up there, learned to swim there, and snuck out to dances at Freeloove's Pavilion. The owner's name was Alvin Freeloove. People had difficulty saying it without snickering."

Before Holt headed off to Exeter Academy, "I worked as a boy/slave at Long Lake Lodge in 1944. I pared the vegetables, did everything that one can do." Among those things was to "get everybody into the Cadillac, I remember the green interior, and we'd all go to the Mayfair theater in Bridgton, driving fast as I could down the hill. All the work boys and staff. I can't believe we weren't killed."

Meanwhile, Holt was making a name for himself as a singer and guitarist, in places so cold they still come back to him. "One of them was in Portland, singing at the Columbia Hotel, which had a nightclub and dinner and so forth." Performing late, "I had no place

to go other than to sleep in the rain."

In Maine, one of his arch rivals was "Mark Stimson. He was a very good singer with very good high notes. I was never quite as good as Mark. He really was a soprano. He stayed in Portland and went into real estate."

Restless, Holt kept performing and tuned his skills as he went from Exeter to Williams College to the Richard Dyer Bennett School of Minstrelsy.

He married actress Dolly Jonah (who played Elaine in 1974's *Harry and Tonto*—sadly, she died in North Bridgton during the summer of 1983 at just 53), and together they

What makes a song memorable? "Usage." —Will Holt, 2013

launched a sophisticated act grounded by Holt's lyrics and enriched by the German cabaret works made famous by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht in 1926. A string of influential songs and albums culminated in a 1971 Tony nomination for Holt, for Best Lyrics (Musical) in Broadway's for "The Me Nobody Knows."

On the way to all of this, Holt and Jonah found themselves in venues like Greenwich Village and San Francisco where famous people knew each other before they were famous. As for "Lemon Tree," "Peter, Paul and Mary had heard me playing it at the Hungry Eye and the Purple Onion [in San Francisco]," Holt recalls. "The two clubs were across the square from each other."

Holt had first come across the trio in New York. "I remember Al Grossman said, 'I've got this group. Peter, Paul and Mary. Give them a listen. See if they're any good.' We went to Al's flat in the Village. They started to sing—two songs. He said to them, 'Okay, you can go now.' I said, 'Get them out of here. They're terrific!'"

It was a different world then. When Holt heard Peter, Paul and Mary singing "Lemon Tree" around 1959 or 1960, he thought nothing of it. "Everybody swapped. It was the thing to do.

"I remember meeting Trini Lopez," Holt says. "He was a sweet guy, really charming. I heard his version of 'Lemon Tree,' and I thought, that's another take of the song. Trini was unique."

Holt, 84, who is still in good voice, sings a



few bars of "Lemon Tree" the way he performed it, where the lemon flower is sweet. Then he shifts and starts singing the song in Trini Lopez's voice, in his jazzy, percussive style. "But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat." Asked what makes a song memorable, Holt says very unromantically, but very thoughtfully, "Usage."

It's why he must have loved the Lemon Pledge commercial, so famous in the 1960s, lilt-ing to the Brazilian stylings of "Lemon Tree."

It's at the base of his fascination with novelist Tim O'Brien having used the song as a motif in one of the most famous short stories in his book *The Things They Carried*. Remember "Lemon Tree" in the soundtrack for *Apollo 13*? With an ear for music like Holt's, what goes around, comes around.

Trini Lopez, a Holt fan, agrees. Reached in California, the years peel away when he remembers "Lemon Tree." Asked about the background of the song, he says, "Oh, my gosh. I know Will Holt wrote it," speaking as though Holt is a near-mystical presence. "I think I might have met him once, somewhere in L.A., just in passing. I remember it was very personable. I remember that. Is he still alive? That's nice to hear. People ask about 'Lemon Tree' all the time. It's one of my most favorite requested songs. It's a very catchy tune. I just happen to like the chorus. My father always used to tell me as a kid to be careful with women. As you well know. Everyone should be careful with the ladies."

Does Lopez ever get sick of performing "Lemon Tree"? Does the haunting melody keep him up at night like the theme song that stalked Harry Lime in *The Third Man*? "Oh, no! I'm always in the mood. I wouldn't get onstage otherwise. I remember one time I was performing at Disney World, in the beautiful nightclub where the monorail goes through. David Cassidy was in the audience. He wanted to see me afterward—he seemed to have something urgent to ask me. 'Trini,' he said, 'don't you get tired of doing all those songs over and over again? I just have two or three hits, and I'm already tired.'"

Lopez was astonished. "I didn't know what to say. I never sing a song I don't want to sing."

Sure. But remember, Trini, he wasn't singing "Lemon Tree." Try making a furniture spray out of "I Think I Love You." ■

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