

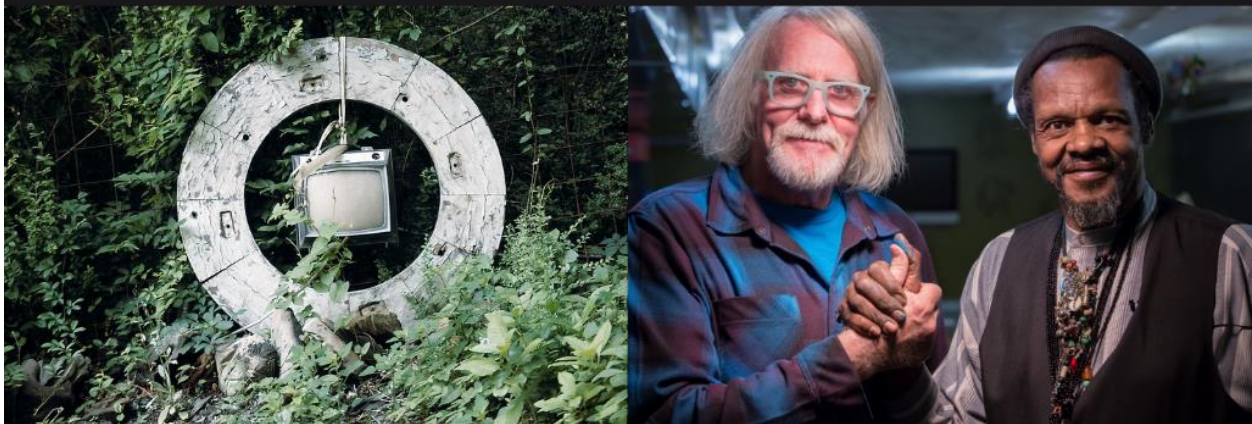
# MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE

THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG KICKS OFF 2023 FALL PROGRAMMING SEASON  
WITH *ART ON FILM: AN EVENING WITH LONNIE HOLLEY*

The MFA welcomes legendary artist and musician Lonnie Holley for a special screening of *Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley* and conversation with film director George King on September 7, 2023.

Holley's critically admired art practice spans painting, drawing, assemblage sculpture, sandstone carvings, and performance that combines experimental music and poetry. The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg holds several of Holley's works in the permanent collection.

## ART ON FILM AN EVENING WITH LONNIE HOLLEY

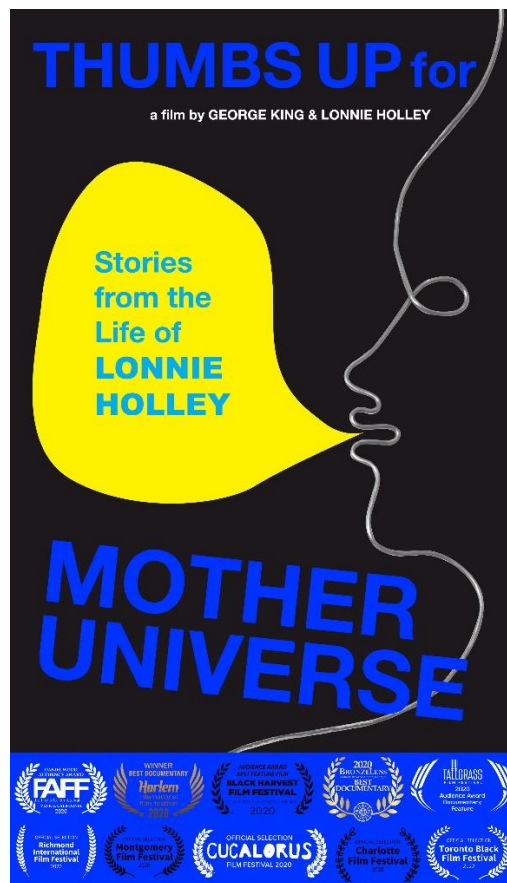


**ST. PETERSBURG, FL (August 14, 2023)** — [The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg](#) (MFA), is thrilled to announce the kickoff to the 2023 fall programming season with an event featuring the screening of *Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley*. Directed by George King, this 58-minute documentary delves into the life and accomplishments of Lonnie Holley, an artist and musician

from Alabama, spanning over two decades. Following the screening, there will be a captivating dialogue between Lonnie Holley and George King.

"Thanks to the prescience and generosity of MFA supporters, we steward over a dozen of Lonnie Holley's works, the first one entering the collection in 2007. Holley's extraordinary path as an artist greatly inspires all of us at the MFA. Music has been integral to the MFA since our founding, so to have the honor to work with an artist whose creative pursuits array across a variety of media is a special gift to our community," says Anne-Marie Russell, Executive Director & CEO. "We're delighted to present the documentary to our community and extend a heartfelt welcome to both Lonnie Holley and George King at the MFA. We're especially thrilled to continue this collaboration with an upcoming project guided by our Senior Curator of Contemporary Art, Katherine Pill, featuring Holley and long-time collaborator artist and musician Lizzi Bougatsos. Thus, the Museum serves as a platform for facilitating exciting and imaginative partnerships among artists spanning various disciplines, including music, painting, film, and beyond."

The experiences of Holley, spanning more than twenty years and showcased in the documentary ***Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley***, offer invaluable wisdom and motivation to anyone who engages with his creations. When Holley was abandoned by the world, the Universe bestowed upon him the blessing of art. This documentary narrates the journey of how Holley defied every obstacle to transform into an unexpected art sensation.



This narrative of fortitude, determination, and triumph holds profound significance in its exploration of themes such as race, societal hierarchy, and cultural intricacies within the American South. While Holley's extraordinary life and the improbable journey of his artistic success stand as a wellspring of inspiration, it's important to acknowledge that grappling with the enduring pain stemming from the harsh adversities of his childhood remains a part of his daily reality. As he aptly expresses in the film, "My art was the remedy for many of those recollections."

The movie has garnered numerous honors, among them the Daniel Wood Audience Award at the Fine Arts Film Festival in Venice, CA; the title of Best Documentary at the Harlem International Film Festival in Harlem, N.Y.; the distinction of Best Feature Film at the Black Harvest Film Festival in Chicago, IL; the Audience Award at the TallGrass Film Festival in Wichita, KS; and the honor of Best Documentary at the Bronze Lens Film Festival in Atlanta, GA, just to mention a selection.

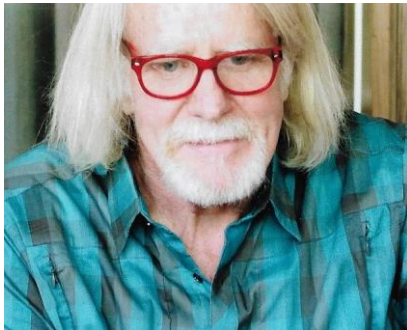
The MFA is especially indebted to Martha and Jim Sweeny (pictured below in front of two works by Lonnie Holley), who have gifted over a dozen of Lonnie Holley's works to the MFA's collection.





**Lonnie Holley** was born on February 10, 1950 in Birmingham, Alabama. He was one of 27 children. Holley was stolen as an infant and sold for a pint of whiskey. From the age of five, he worked various jobs: picking up trash at a drive-in movie theatre, washing dishes, and cooking. He lived in a whiskey house, on the state fairgrounds, and in several foster homes. His early life was chaotic, and Holley was never afforded the pleasure of a real childhood. Since 1979, 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, has manifested itself 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. His work is now in the collections of major museums throughout the country, on permanent display in the United Nations, and has been displayed 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.



**George King** is a UK national living in Atlanta in the southeast United States. As a writer/producer/director of nonfiction film, television radio, and theater projects, his work has consistently won national and international acclaim (Peabody, Cine Golden Eagles, Golden Reels, nominated for Prix Italia, etc.) and garnered reviews in the U.S. national and regional press (CNN, NYT, L.A Times, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Atlanta Journal/Constitution, etc.). He has also taught film and video production on the faculty of colleges and universities and through workshops in Europe, Asia and the United States. George's work addresses diverse subjects such as race, civil rights, art & culture, the environment, labor, education, poverty,

housing, and community development. He has always been involved in broad community participation to ensure the work accurately reflects historical and cultural truths. In this documentary, in addition to community screenings, George also worked closely with a core team of African American colleagues including artist and activist Charmaine Minniefield, scholar and musician Mausiki Scales, and filmmakers Sam Pollard and Lewis Erskine.

### **ART ON FILM | AN EVENING WITH LONNIE HOLLEY**

Film screening of *Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley* and conversation with Lonnie Holley and George King.

**Thursday, September 7, 6:00 pm–8:00 pm**

Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg

255 Beach Drive NE, St. Petersburg, FL 33701

\$20 MFA Members; \$40 Not-Yet Members

*MFA Member Pre-Sale August 14–18; Tickets on sale to the public on August 19*

<https://mfastpete.org/event/an-evening-with-lonnie-holley/>



***Thumbs Up for Mother Universe: Stories from the Life of Lonnie Holley:*** [Press Kit](#)

**IMAGE CREDITS**

Photograph of Jim Sweeny by Scott Keeler for the *Tampa Bay Times*

Photograph of Lonnie Holley courtesy of Lonnie Holley

Photograph of George King courtesy of George King

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**ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG**

The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg (MFA) has an encyclopedic collection of art from around the globe and across the centuries, with almost 5,000 years of civilization represented in thousands of objects extending from antiquity to the present. The collection includes works by Georgia O’Keefe, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Auguste Rodin, Kehinde Wiley, Jacob Lawrence, and many others, as well as ancient Greek and Roman, Asian, African, Art of the Americas and Native American art. The Museum’s photographic collection is one of the largest and well-respected in the Southeast. The museum’s rotating exhibition galleries feature a diverse selection of temporary exhibitions from all over the world, as well as exhibitions curated from the museum’s extensive collection. In addition to its robust exhibition program, the MFA engages the community through exciting public programs and events and serves students through youth programs and a partnership with the Pinellas County School System.

**MEDIA CONTACT**

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