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Edwin Holt

Blues singer, East Texas native



Ric Moore/Special to the News-Journal

East Texas native Edwin Holt performs at a recent festival. Holt and the Conspiracy Band will headline the Texas Blues Festival Saturday in Tyler.

He's a blues man

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Edwin Holt was smitten by the music at the tender age of 6, but it was more than a decade later that his infatuation with rhythm and blues became a full-fledged love affair.

Holt, a graduate of West Rusk High

School in New London, will headline the 11th annual Texas Blues Festival in Tyler Saturday. He and the Conspiracy Band, a 12-piece crew of veteran musicians who played with Johnnie Taylor until Taylor's death four years ago, will take to the main stage at 10:30 p.m. for an hour set to close out the event.

"I'm looking forward to playing in Tyler," Holt said in a telephone interview from his Dallas-based office. "So many of my

family and friends are back in East Texas, and it's always fun to go back and play there. I don't think they have seen me with this new band. It's going to be different than anything they have seen from me in the past."

Holt, the son of former Kilgore College Rangerette Lynn Holt and retired Kilgore dentist Rene' Holt, was born in Dallas while his father attended dental school. The family moved to New London when



Edwin Holt, far left, performs with the Nacogdoches Interdenominational Choir.

he was 1, and he lived there until he graduated from high school in 1985.

Shortly after graduation, he moved to Mississippi to attend college at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. It was there that his longtime fascination with music, a seed that was planted 12 years earlier when he sat on the front row of a concert given by Jerry Lee Lewis at the state penitentiary in Huntsville, became too strong to ignore.

"My uncle was a prison guard. They booked Jerry Lee Lewis for the prisoners, and I was allowed to sit on the front row," Holt said. "It's just something you never forget. I remember the cigarette smoke, and I remember the prisoners all being chained together at the arms and legs. The show was something that will stay in my mind forever. Mr. Lewis was just something to behold. He essentially destroyed the piano, and brought the house down. That experience would lay the foundation to my current obsession with a music that was not easily accessible in the town I grew up in."

Holt said he became "addicted" to his father's 45 records as a way to feed his thirst for music.

"Chuck Berry and Little Richard were my favorites," he said. "Their songs held the music that I was so infatuated with, but did not fully understand."

The picture became clear for Holt during his freshman year at the University of Mississippi while attending the Mississippi Delta Blues Festival with a couple of friends.

"That day in the Delta would become the spark that would ignite my entire life in search of the roots of the blues," he said.

Holt began to play his harmonica with a vengeance, nearly driving his roommate insane in the process and playing the bars and juke joints in Memphis as often as possible in an attempt to learn from Delta legends like James "Son" Thomas and Willie Foster. He moved back to East Texas, playing for a short time with a country and western band that allowed him to play the blues at the end of gigs just to humor him.

He credits his family's former housekeeper, Louise Bagley of Overton, with helping him earn his first, big break in the business. Bagley's daughter had married Don Williams, the original bass player for Big Bo Thomas during the 1960s. R.L. Griffin was the drummer for that combo.

"Louise Bagley introduced me to the real thing in South Dallas," Holt said. "She took me to R.L. Griffin's Blues Palace one night. Me and my dad were the only white people in the club, but when I got up on that stage you would have thought I was a long lost nephew. I got a standing ovation when I was finished. I knew they had accepted me as a musician, and that was a great feeling. It's a great feeling when you go into the black community, sing their music and have them accept you."

Holt joined with Clarence "Little World" Starks, and that band played as an opening act for different cover artists that came through Dallas on their way to Los Angeles. Two years ago, shortly after Johnnie Taylor

died, Taylor's band leader, Big Jack Williams, approached Holt to join up with the group.

"Since I had been opening for Johnnie on occasion at the Longhorn Ballroom, he (the band leader) knew me and what I was capable of on stage," Holt said.

When Holt steps on the stage carrying his fishing tackle box full of blues harps, a transformation not even he understands takes place.

"Something comes out of me that's not even natural when I step on the stage," he said. "My wife says it's almost like I am possessed. It's like I am two different people. During the day, I put on a suit and go to work, and then when I get on the stage, I just don't know what happens. It's like I transform into something else."

Holt and his wife, Jennifer, a former Henderson resident he met at while bowling with friends in Longview, have been married for 13 years. They have four children - all boys - William, 10, Mac, 7, Homer, 3 and 9-month-old Solon.

With a business to run and four children at home, Holt said he mainly plays festivals now. Occasionally, however, the mood hits and the opportunity arises and Holt finds himself back in a South Dallas juke joint clouded in smoke, drenched in sweat and trying to win over a crowd that knows and lives the blues.

"Every once in a while my wife lets me escape, and I'll go down to R.L. Griffin's Blues Palace or some other place," he said. "My wife hates it, because I don't get home until 2 or 4 in the morning, but she understands I have to do it occasionally."

The music, after all, was his first love.



Edwin Holt and James "Son" Thomas Delta Blues Festival, Greenville, Mississippi