Will Holt

April 30, 1929 - May 31, 2015 Will Holt was born in 1929 and spent his childhood between Portland and North Bridgton, Maine. He was a singer and musician from an early age, learning to play the piano at six.

He attended Phillips Exeter Academy, Williams College and studied with folk singer Richard Dyer-Bennet. He later toured Europe on a motorcycle, seeking out real life experiences and collecting folk songs from country to country, and also served in the Air Force. He married Dolly Jonah Holt, a singer and actress, and they settled in New York’s West Village, becoming a part of the emerging bohemian community. Holt was known first and primarily as a folk performer during the ‘50s and ‘60s and as an interpreter of the music of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht in performances and recordings with soprano singer Martha Schlamme. Holt recorded songs for several record labels including Coral, Elektra and Atlantic Records and many of his songs were popularized by other artists of the era. Holt wrote his biggest hit in 1957, “Lemon Tree,” which has been recorded by a diverse roster of artists including Peter, Paul and Mary, The Kingston Trio, The Seekers, Bob Marley, Sandie Shaw and Trini Lopez. Holt made his Broadway debut in 1969 with “Come Summer” directed by Agnes de Mille. He enjoyed great success with “The Me Nobody Knows,” which opened the following year and won him the Drama Desk Award for Most Promising Musical Writer and a Tony nomination for Best Lyrics. In 1974, Holt wrote the book for the musical "Over Here!" starring the Andrews Sisters, with a song score supplied by the Sherman Brothers. With Linda Hopkins, he conceived and wrote "Me and Bessie," a 1975 revue about the life and career of blues singer Bessie Smith. He collaborated with George Abbott and Richard Adler in 1976 on "Music Is," an adaptation of the Shakespeare play "Twelfth Night". He also wrote the lyrics for the 1978 musical "Platinum," starring Alexis Smith as a ‘40s and ‘50s film star attempting a comeback as a rock singer. His last Broadway project was the 1979 revival of "A Kurt Weill Cabaret," in which he performed and translated some of the lyrics. Holt won the Los Angeles Dramalogue Critics Award in 1988 for "A Walk on the Wild Side," for which he wrote the book, music and lyrics. Holt is survived by his wife, Dion Alden, and his son, Courtney, who resides in Los Angeles with his wife Carrie and their two children. He will be buried in North Bridgton, Maine at the end of June.

Published in the Los Angeles Times from June 6 to June 8, 2015
Will Holt, Who Wrote ‘Lemon Tree’ and for the Musical Stage, Dies at 86

By BRUCE WEBER  JUNE 4, 2015

Will Holt, a songwriter whose lyrics for the 1970 musical “The Me Nobody Knows” were nominated for a Tony Award, and whose Latin-tinged folk song “Lemon Tree” became a musical signpost of the 1960s, covered by myriad artists and finding its way into advertising and the literature of the Vietnam War, died on Sunday in Los Angeles. He was 86.

The death was confirmed by his son, Courtney, who said his father had Alzheimer’s disease.

Mr. Holt spent much of his musical career creating theater projects. They included “The World of Kurt Weill in Song,” an Off Broadway revue that he conceived and performed with the Viennese soprano Martha Schlamme in a handful of different incarnations in 1963 and 1964. He also wrote a pair of one-acts, twinned under the title “That 5 A.M. Jazz,” and produced Off Broadway in 1964, starring James Coco. The first was a playlet in the form of a creation parable, the second a rhythm-and-blues musical set in a Las Vegas hotel suite. Another project Mr. Holt conceived and staged was a tribute to the theater music of Leonard Bernstein in 1965. “A Walk on the Wild Side,” a musical he wrote based on Nelson Algren’s novel of New Orleans, had its premiere in Los Angeles in 1988.

Mr. Holt’s first foray on Broadway — a 1969 musical called “Come Summer,” for which he wrote the book and lyrics — vanished quickly after
unfavorable reviews. He had much better success in the 1970s, lending a
significant hand to three well-received shows.

The first, "The Me Nobody Knows," a surprise hit that began Off
Broadway, was about city youngsters living in poverty and was based on essays
written by New York schoolchildren. Mr. Holt's lyrics, to a pop-rock score by
Gary William Friedman that evoked both pain and hope, were all adapted from
the ideas of the original child writers.

"I keep on knocking/No one is there," Mr. Holt wrote for a plaintive
chorus in "Let Me Come In," a lyric that continues:

Windows are black, and the walls are all bare
I stand in darkness, followed by fear
Tell me I'm dreaming, tell me you're here
Look through the window, give me some light
Tell me I'm home now, say it's all right.

Though Mr. Holt failed to win the Tony (Stephen Sondheim did, for
"Company"), the show ran on Broadway for nearly a year, first at the Helen
Hayes Theater and then at the Longacre. He subsequently wrote the book for
"Over Here!," a 1974 musical about life on the home front during World War
II, starring two of the Andrews Sisters, Patty and Maxene, and Ann Reinking.
And in 1975, with the actress and singer Linda Hopkins, he conceived and
wrote the show "Me and Bessie," which starred Ms. Hopkins as the blues
singer Bessie Smith and ran for more than 450 performances.

Mr. Holt was part of the folk-music revival of the 1950s and '60s. His
melancholy song about the passage of time, "Raspberries, Strawberries," was a
hit for the Kingston Trio. His most enduring song, "Lemon Tree," was written
in Chicago in the late 1950s for a nightclub act he was performing with Dolly
Jonah, his wife at the time. The melody was adapted from a Brazilian song,
"Meu Limão, Meu Limoeiro," and it retained its samba-like lilt. Mr. Holt's lyric
tells of a father's warning about the vicissitudes of love, invoking the title as a
metaphor:

Lemon tree very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon is impossible to eat.
Catnip for folk singers of the era (and others, subsequently), the song was recorded by Peter, Paul and Mary, the Kingston Trio, Chad and Jeremy, the Seekers and Trini Lopez. It was appropriated for a television commercial for Pledge, a lemon-scented wood furniture cleaner. And much later, in 1990, in Tim O’Brien’s celebrated novel about the Vietnam War, “The Things They Carried,” one passage testified to the song as an emblem of that era. The narrator recalls a soldier named Lemon, who had stepped on a booby trap and was blown to bits, his remains sprayed onto nearby branches.

“The parts were just hanging there,” Mr. O’Brien wrote, “so Dave Jensen and I were ordered to shinny up and peel him off.”

“The gore was horrible and stays with me,” he continued. “But what wakes me up 20 years later is Dave Jensen singing ‘Lemon Tree’ as we threw down the parts.”

Will Holt — that was his full name — was born in Portland, Me., on April 30, 1929. His father, William, was a doctor. His mother, the former Marjorie Scribner, who played the piano, was the musician in the family.

He attended Phillips-Exeter Academy and Williams College and studied with the folk singer and voice teacher Richard Dyer-Bennet. After traveling for a time in Europe — he found work in a Helsinki nightclub singing cowboy songs — he served in the Air Force. For much of the 1950s he performed in clubs in St. Louis, Las Vegas, New York and elsewhere.

Mr. Holt’s later stage projects included three shows with short Broadway lives: “Music Is,” a 1976 musical adaptation of “Twelfth Night,” for which he wrote the lyrics in a collaboration with the director and book writer George Abbott and the composer Richard Adler; a 1978 musical, “Platinum,” starring Alexis Smith as a film star of the ’40s and ’50s attempting a comeback as a rock singer, for which he wrote the lyrics and, with Bruce Vilanch, the book; and “A Kurt Weill Cabaret” (1979), in which he performed and also translated some of the lyrics.

Ms. Jonah, an actress, died in 1983. In addition to his son, Mr. Holt is survived by his second wife, Dion Alden, and two grandchildren.

A version of this article appears in print on June 5, 2015, on page A24 of the New York edition with the headline: Will Holt, Who Wrote ‘Lemon Tree,’ Dies at 86.
Portland native Will Holt, lyricist, performer who wrote ‘Lemon Tree,’ dies at 86

He grew up on Deering Street in Portland's Parkside neighborhood and his musical abilities were recognized at a young age.

BY DENNIS HOEY STAFF WRITER
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Maine native Will Holt, who turned his love and deep appreciation of music into a successful singing/songwriting career, died Sunday at his home in Los Angeles.

Holt, who was born in Portland and spent his summers at his family’s home on Long Lake in North Bridgton throughout his childhood and adult life, was 86 at the time of his death.

Holt’s son, Courtney Holt of Los Angeles, said his father was a prolific songwriter, many of which were popularized by some of America’s best known performing artists.

Though he may not have been as well known as some other American songwriters and lyricists, his son said his father touched a lot of people through his music.

“He always worked behind the scenes inspiring other people, which I think is really cool,” Holt said.

Will Holt established himself as a folk song performer in the 1950s and 1960s.

In a 2013 interview with Portland Monthly magazine, Holt said he was in Chicago where he was preparing to open for a nightclub act. He said he used a swizzle stick and a glass to tap out the melody for the song that would become known as “Lemon Tree.”

“He had this idea for a very simple song, but it turned out to be a song that a lot of people over the years still feel connected to,” his son said.

“Lemon Tree,” which Holt wrote in 1957 became his biggest hit after it was recorded by the musical trio known as Peter, Paul and Mary. Several other artists including the Kingston Trio, The Seekers, Bob Marley and The Wailers, and Trini Lopez also recorded “Lemon Tree.”

http://www.pressherald.com/2015/06/04/lyricist-performer-will-h... 6/9/2015
Holt, who was born at the former Maine General Hospital in Portland, recognized his musical abilities at a young age after learning how to play the piano at the age of 6.

Holt grew up on Deering Street in Portland’s Parkside neighborhood. He attended Portland schools before enrolling at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. Holt also attended Williams College in Massachusetts and The Richard Dyer-Bennet School of Minstrelsy.

LONG LAKE INSPIRATION

Steve Halpert of Portland became a longtime friend of Holt’s after meeting him in high school.

“I can still remember Will sitting in my parents’ living room and playing guitar. He was a very warm, a very dynamic performer,” Halpert said.

Holt’s family brought him to their cottage on Bell’s Point in North Bridgton when he was three months old. The cottage overlooks the top of Long Lake. He returned to the cottage each year, spending countless hours writing and playing music and enjoying the beauty of his home.

“He was in my opinion deeply connected to Maine. It served as his center of gravity. He always felt good whenever he visited Maine,” his son said.

In 1950, Holt fled the United States for Europe where spent a year touring the continent. His European adventures allowed him to seek out real-life experiences and offered him the chance to collect folk songs from various countries, his son said.

Holt married Dolly Jonah Holt, a singer and actress who he toured and recorded music with. They settled in New York City and became part of the West Village’s bohemian community. She died in 1983 from illness.

During his career, Holt interpreted the music of German composer Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht in performances and recordings that he did with Martha Schlamme.
Portland native Will Holt, lyricist, performer who wrote ‘Lem... Page 4 of 7

Holt recorded songs for several record labels including Coral, Elektra and Atlantic.

Holt made his Broadway debut in 1969 with “Come Summer,” which was directed by Agnes DeMille.

TONY NOMINATION

He enjoyed success with “The Me Nobody Knows,” a rock musical that opened the following year and won him the Drama Desk Award for most promising musical writer. His lyrics for that musical won him a Tony nomination in 1971 for best lyrics.

In 1974, Holt wrote the book for the musical, “Over Here” starring the Andrews Sisters. The Andrews Sisters were a three-sisters singing group from the Swing and Boogie-Woogie eras. “Over Here” provided a nostalgic look at the home front during World War II.

He worked with Linda Hopkins in 1975 to write “Me and Bessie,” a revue of the life and career of blues singer Bessie Smith.

In 1988, he won the Los Angeles Dramalogue Critics Award for “A Walk on the Wild Side,” for which he wrote the book, music and lyrics.

He is survived by his wife, Dion Alden, and his son. A memorial service has been tentatively set for June 28 at the North Bridgton Cemetery.