

19TH ANNUAL BLUES FESTIVAL GUIDE 2021

Holle Thee Maxwell from Opera to the Blues – Black Musicians Matters



By Lynn Orman Weiss

One person can change the world. And that one person may very well be Chicago blues, soul, jazz legend, Holle Thee Maxwell. "It's my mission, it's my gift to Chicago Black musicians, it is my 75th year and my time to pay it forward," said Holle.

And pay it forward she has over the last year during the pandemic Holle created Black Musicians Matters Foundation. She created the movement to recognize the equity needs of Black musicians. To provide food, financial resources, community resources, music industry information, to elevate Black voices within the Chicago community and create a dynamic platform for those who deserve to be heard. This includes information related to housing, health insurance, gear and renter's insurance, musician's rights organizations (MusiCares, BMI, ASCAP, Chicago Federation of Musicians), collecting royalties, and performance opportunities. BMM also serves as a central meeting place for musicians of color to discuss and dissect issues relating specifically to their needs.

Holle grew up on the south side of Chicago and began entertaining at five years old at the Metropolitan Baptist Church — it was her first paying gig. She sang the "Lord's Prayer," and was a hit in church singing gospel with a classical flair. Classical became her first love and then jazz. So how did she fall into the blues? The bio on her life is aptly titled, "Opera to the Blues' is what I'm going to call it," says Holle.

Holle's mother was her mentor and manager and honed the talent that was God-given in her little girl. She brought her to Dr. Lena McLin, a notable music teacher, composer and pastor who became Holle's mentor. From grammar school and high school performances to big stages, she won awards and educational opportunities leading to a full scholarship to Roosevelt University and Juilliard. As a young girl Holle sang in three different languages as a lyric soprano, hitting notes like Minnie Ripperton.

At 12 years old being raped by her mother's boyfriend and her mother's arrest for killing him did not detour the journey to the big stage. The next day she performed at the Lyric Opera House, her mother stood behind the curtain in hand-cuffs. Holle was the first African American child to perform at the Opera House.

"All I ever wanted to do was sing," says Holle.

She had told her mother, "One day I'm going to sing with Ike Turner and record with great artists." And she did. At 27 years old she was living in Los Angeles when a friend called and told her Ike Turner wanted her to come in for an interview/audition and on the same day the great jazz organist Jimmy Smith called her too. Holle got both of the jobs and sang with Ike Turner replacing Tina Turner and as Jimmy Smith's first vocalist.

In Holle's new book, *Freebase Ain't Free*, co-authored by David A. Kozin, she tells about the journey with Ike, "the untold truth" she declares. When Ike was released from prison he came and lived at Holle's mother's home in Chicago (you'll have to buy the book to know the whole story).

Holle went to Paris in 1995 until 2006 where she sang at her club The Maxwell Cafe' in partnership with Gerard Vacher, and where she cut the CD, *Live In Paris*.

In 2006 Holle came home to take care of her mother who was suffering from early stages of dementia. She was going back and forth to court to fight for her mother's care and in the middle of the struggle the courts accused her of elder abuse. "It was all untruths and it devastated me," she said. In 2007-2009 Holle found herself homeless, the state took her mother's house, her car and they put Holle in jail.

"I got out of jail and declared, "I'm back and you're not gonna knock me down. I was homeless, my mother was in a nursing home and I found a friend to stay with. I would make my way by bus to Buddy Guy's Legends every Monday night for the Blues Jam so I could sing and sell my CDs to make some change. I wasn't accepted by the Blues community at first, not even Buddy. But, I kept going. In the 60s I made my living singing in blues and jazz clubs on the south side six nights a week, three clubs a night and I wasn't gonna let anybody knock me down now," said Holle.

Then in 2009 the call came from the Chicago Blues Festival and they invited her to perform on the Budweiser Stage. That was a game changer for Holle. She hired Willie Henderson as music director and guitarist Eric 'Guitar' Davis (RIP).

Teaming up with Paul Hanover she then recorded, *All Kinds's Blues...All Kinds'a All Ways*, a full-length Blues album. She became a regular on Monday nights at Buddy Guy's Legends and performed in clubs and festivals throughout the country.

Two years ago, at age 73, Holle had thyroid goiter surgery and has been unable to sing since the procedure. "I know what it is like not to be able to sing, perform in front of an audience, tour, travel, do interviews. So I could feel the ache deep down in my soul of all these musicians out of work during the pandemic. I had to do something. So, I started Black Musicians Matters," said Holle.

"Holle has been a great help and friend. I was able to receive fresh meat and produce and I cooked myself some delicious beef stew... the gig money helped with necessary utility bills," said Delmark Recording artist, Jimmy Burns.