

searching for HOLLAND TENNYSON

a photographer's search for his elusive self
By Michael Brohm

Then I looked up. Up there, approaching fast, was one of the ubiquitous green interstate signs. Two small Indiana towns were at the next exit, one north of the highway- Holland, and one south- Tennyson. The big green sign gave me the name I'd been searching for. Holland Tennyson was the next exit. I got off.

I wrote the name HOLLAND TENNYSON large in a notebook and, smiling, put the notebook on the passenger seat next to me where I could see it. I was driving east along Interstate 64 through Indiana headed for Kentucky. I'd been on a photo shoot in St. Louis and was happy for the quiet four hour trip home. This stretch of highway is a beautiful drive through the rolling green hills of southern Indiana. I'm a freelance commercial photographer, meaning that I'll go almost anywhere and shoot many kinds of photographs... for money. That sounds more prostititutional than it really is.

On this drive I was thinking about a pen name, a pseudonym, an alias, ala Mark wain, George Orwell, Dr. Suess and O. Henry. I'd been thinking for some time about establishing a photographic alter ego. I was searching for the "other I", the "second self". Perhaps it was a run-in with a gallery director who could only think about my commercial work while I wanted to show my "other" work, that prompted my search for my "second personality". I'd gone weeks trying to figure out what to call my other self. The name certainly had to be high falutin! Why bother if the name wasn't elite, educated, powerful, memorable? It had to be a name that worked in New York, Santa Fe, Los Angeles, London, Paris and Berlin. So, I drove along in silence, occasionally saying

out loud this name or that. Nothing was sticking. Then came the exit Holland Tennyson. Serendipity. Synchronicity. I became Holland Tennyson.

This was all a fanciful experiment. I was interested in seeing my images when attributed to "the other". I wanted to be able to go into galleries and listen over the shoulders of people viewing my photographs. I could even stand in the gallery and comment on the work... start conversations, critique, even praise! I could step away from the work, view it from afar. Certainly, that would be good for my art, to look afresh at my images. Wouldn't my pseudonym allow me to make photographs that I might not normally make?

Back up on the highway, I started to give Holland a life. Now that I had the name, the whole process of invention began. Holland would be a bit younger than me, full of vigor and opportunity. He was from a small town in Indiana.

Looking at the map there were many good choices- Frogtown, Okawville, Loafer's Station, Folsomville, Jockey and Santa Claus (yes, Santa Claus, Indiana!) Holland had received his Master of Fine Arts degree in photography from Indiana University, up the road in Bloomington. After grad school, he had chosen to settle in a corner of rural Indiana. He's a loner.

Holland was also a bit of a Luddite, his interest in new the digital cameras was minimal. He had grown up smelling the chemicals from his father's small darkroom in the basement. His father made portraits at First Communion and Easter, making the





exposures with the simple, mechanical cameras of the time.

In college, Holland had prided himself on mastering the camera. He knew that the camera was just a tool, as non thinking a tool as a hammer or wrench. The photographer was the master of the tool, evaluating the light falling on the subject, making the focus precise, studying the composition. The camera offered no help, no guidance. Holland thought this mastery was as much a part of the art as the finished print. Then along came the digital camera. Now everyone could be a photographer. Now the camera had a brain, a computer with a lens. It would determine the correct exposure. It would focus the lens, making everything sharp. Even the composition would be determined by the camera, with a little silhouette of a person in the viewfinder to guide the photographer to the "correct" composition.

Holland rebelled. He decided that from then on he would use only the most basic of cameras to make his images. He thought of cameras from his past... the plastic, toy cameras that he had as a child. These were the antithesis of the new cameras, offering no control, just point and shoot. He went on ebay and eventually decided on a camera called "Diana", made in the 1950s in Hong Kong. He bought the gray plastic camera for \$10.

The first month Holland shot 15 rolls of film with Diana. He enjoyed the learning curve that was required to make usable images. He photographed around the house and on nearby farms. In a spare, empty room in his house he began making portraits. He brought people in and shot nudes. The soft focus of the plastic lens was exactly what Holland needed. He began to master this simple camera, making images that excited him. He had found a new muse in Diana.

Standing next to the xray machine at the airport, Holland watched as the contents of his carry on bag appeared on the screen. He laughed to himself. Although his bag contained two Diana cameras, nothing showed on the monitor. Holland took great comfort that his all-plastic cameras were invisible. He had reached the most basic place in photography he had ever been. He walked the streets of Paris, Diana in hand, making photographs. He sang to himself the lyrics of a Joni Mitchell song... "I was a free man in Paris. I felt unfettered and alive."

I stood apart in the gallery, away from the crowd. I was watching, listening.

A row of Holland Tennyson's framed photographs hung on the wall. I listened to the comments and added my own. The gallery owner was mad...

Holland Tennyson had not shown up for the opening.

Holland Tennyson...er...Michael Brohm lives in Louisville, Kentucky.



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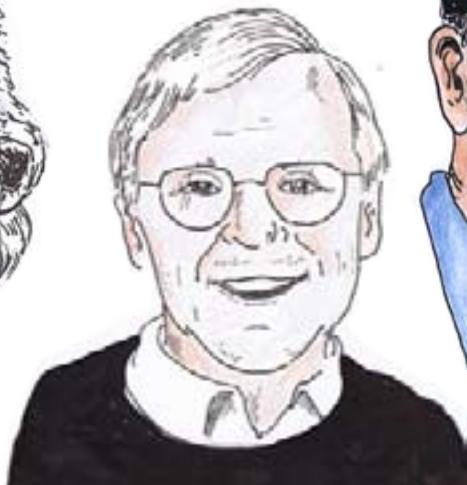
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**YEAH...BUT NOT
QUITE YET.**

