

Holsapple, Peter ^[1]

Peter Holsapple

February 19, 1956-

Fisher Coan, 2013, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

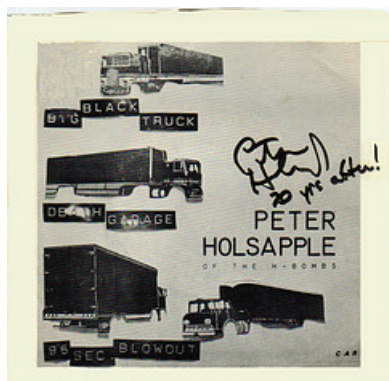


Peter Holsapple performing with the dB's in Chapel Hill, November 1, 2008. Image from Flickr user Jeffrey L. Cohen.

^[2]Pioneering singer/songwriter, guitarist, and front man Peter Livingston Holsapple was born in [Greenwich, Connecticut](#) ^[3] on February 19, 1956 to [Henry Taylor Holsapple](#) ^[4], a Harvard-educated lawyer and banker, and homemaker Ann Hamilton Curtis Holsapple. He has one older brother, Merritt Curtis Holsapple, deceased. Holsapple is best known as the co-principal songwriter and vocalist for the acclaimed southern jangle-pop band [the dB's](#) ^[5] in the 1980s, along with his longtime friend and collaborator [Chris Stamey](#) ^[6]. He has also performed as a sideman, studio musician, and touring guitarist for big name acts such as [R.E.M.](#) ^[7] and [Hootie & the Blowfish](#) ^[8] during his career. Holsapple continues to champion up-and-coming bands and artists, such as [Max Indian](#) ^[9] and [Luego](#) ^[10], in addition to his own projects through his blog, "[Does This Band Make Me Look Fat?](#)" ^[11]

Holsapple's family moved to [Winston-Salem](#) ^[12] when he was six years old and Holsapple began playing guitar at age eight. While still in elementary school, he first met his future band mates [Chris Stamey](#) ^[6] and [Will Rigby](#) ^[13], as well as another budding guitar player, [Mitch Easter](#) ^[14], with whom he would play and produce albums throughout his career. In 1970, at the age of 14, Holsapple left Winston-Salem to attend [Phillips Exeter Academy](#) ^[15] in New Hampshire. There he became friends with future [Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers](#) ^[16] keyboardist [Benmont Tench](#) ^[17]. Sharing an affinity for early 1960s R&B music and British band [Mott the Hoople](#) ^[18], they spent many hours jamming. Their union was short-lived, however, as Holsapple moved back to Winston-Salem in 1972 to finish high school. Upon returning to Winston-Salem, Holsapple attended R.J. Reynolds High School, where he reunited with old friends Stamey, Rigby, and Easter. The foursome, along with another young drummer and producer, Bobby Locke, re-formed the second incarnation of the band [Rittenhouse Square](#) ^[19] in the summer of 1972. This local high school rock band went through several lineup shifts

throughout the early 1970s and achieved cult status throughout the Triad area. Described by Mitch Easter as “a bunch of kids that listened to good records and were trying to make a good record, too,” the band released an EP later that year but broke up in the summer of 1973 when several members went off to college. Following the breakup of Rittenhouse Square, Holsapple joined a proto-punk band with Rigby called Little Diesel. The band included, at various times, Chris Stamey and Mitch Easter as well as guitarists [Tommy Eshelman](#) ^[20] and [Phil Thomas](#) ^[21], lead singer Bob Northcott, and drummer Chris Chamis. The group recorded one album, *No Lie* ^[22], in 1974, but it was not released until 2006.



The cover of Holsapple's 1978 EP, autographed. Image from Flickr user Klaus Hiltcher.

^[23]Peter Holsapple graduated from Reynolds High School and went to college at the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#) ^[24] in 1974. He had hoped to keep Little Diesel together but the band broke up in early 1975 after playing only a handful of live shows. Meanwhile Stamey had moved to New York City and started another band with Easter and Rigby called [Sneakers](#) ^[25]. Sneakers was heavily influenced by the innovative power-pop of Big Star and had garnered a strong cult following by the late 1970s, having toured large areas of the country. In late 1978 Easter left the band and moved back to North Carolina in order to start his own recording studio.

Holsapple formed another band in college, [The H-Bombs](#) ^[26]. Sneakers' bassist Robert Keely became The H-Bombs' bassist. In 1978, Holsapple left college prior to graduating and released an EP with Mitch Easter and Chris Chamis called *Big Black Truck* ^[26] on Chris Stamey's label, [Car Records](#) ^[27]. The band was short-lived, however, and broke up later that year when Holsapple moved to Memphis, Tennessee to work with one of his idols, [Richard Rosebrough](#) ^[28], an associate of the band [Big Star](#) ^[29].

Holsapple was invited to New York to join the group. Eager to reunite with his old friends and be a part of a promising band, Holsapple made the move to the Big Apple. The new group of Rigby, Stamey, Holsapple, and bassist Gene Holder, became the dB's, and quickly picked up where Sneakers had left off. Garnering heavy praise from rock critics for their smart, hook-filled, quirky pop-rock tunes, they quickly won a small but ardent fan base.



The cover of the dB's single for the song "Dynamite," on Albion Records, 1980. Image from Flickr user Klaus Hiltcher.

^[30]Unfortunately, complications with their record labels kept the dB's from reaching a larger audience. The band's first two albums, 1981's *The dB's (Stands for Decibels)* ^[31] and 1982's *Repercussion* ^[32], were released by [Albion Records](#) ^[33] only in the U.K., as the band could not secure distribution in the United States. The dB's signed with [Bearsville Records](#) ^[34] for their third album, 1984's *Like This* ^[35]. However, once again the dB's were hit with a string of bad luck and problems arose with the album's release. Chris Stamey left the band shortly before they headed to Bearsville Studios in upstate New York to record the album. The band, now a trio, were eager to work with producer [Chris Butler](#) ^[36], songwriter and guitarist for [The Waitresses](#) ^[37], of whom the dB's were big fans. The band had a great working dynamic with Butler, who was very excited about the batch of songs the band had brought with them, all of which had been written by Holsapple. However, Todd Rundgren – another musician the band greatly admired - was managing

Bearsville at the time and had a very specific idea for how the record should sound. Rundgren did not like some of the final masters for *Like This* and had the album remixed by Gene and Mark McKenna who was the chief engineer at Bearsville Studios at the time. To make matters much worse for the dB's, Bearsville's owner unexpectedly died shortly after the release of *Like This*, and the label simultaneously soon lost their distribution deal with Warner Bros. [38] and the album quickly vanished from store shelves. Subsequent legal problems kept the band from recording for another two years, and although their 1987 album *The Sound of Music* [39] was well-received, the band split up due to personal reasons in 1988, before a full-fledged tour could be mounted. In 1992, Holsapple's marriage to his first wife ended in divorce.

Holsapple found himself involved with several new projects soon after the dB's split up. He worked primarily as a session musician for a period during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Initially as an occasional member of Eric "Roscoe" Ambel [40]'s group, Roscoe's Gang [41], with whom he appeared on their first album. Ambel had been Holsapple's neighbor during their days living and recording in New York City, when Ambel was leading The Del-Lords [42] and Holsapple was still with the dB's.

Holsapple did session work with the Indigo Girls [43], Syd Straw [44] (who he also knew from his dB's days), and Ben Vaughn [45]. In 1990, he reunited with Stamey to play on Stamey's solo record, *Fireworks* [46]. Later that year, the two longtime friends teamed up to record as a duo, resulting in the critically acclaimed 1991 release, *Mavericks* [47]. Although *Mavericks* fell below the pop radar, it garnered strong admiration from longtime fans. Holsapple and Stamey toured in support of the record but still failed to produce significant sales of *Mavericks*; it went out of print shortly after its release by RNA records [48] (it was reissued in 2007 by Collector's Choice Music).

Despite the lack of commercial success generated by *Mavericks*, Holsapple got one of the biggest breaks of his career in 1990. While recording the album he was invited to join popular band R.E.M. as a sideman during their Green [49] album tour. Prior to going on tour with Stamey to support *Mavericks*, Holsapple played guitar, bass, accordion, and organ as a session player on R.E.M.'s 1991 release *Out of Time* [50]. Later that year he appeared with the band on *Saturday Night Live* [51] and performed with them during their appearance on MTV's [52] *Unplugged*.

Following his stint with R.E.M., Holsapple settled in Los Angeles and joined the Continental Drifters [53] with several other seasoned musicians. The Continental Drifters were bassist Mark Walton [54] of The Dream Syndicate [55], guitarist Ray Ganucheau, and expatriate New Orleans musician, Carlo Nuccio, on drums. After enlisting guitarist Gary Eaton [56], formerly of Giant Sand and Steve Wynn's [57] band, and professional sideman Danny McGough [58] on keyboards, the group put together a regular gig at Raji's Club in Hollywood and soon attracted a fervent following. Holsapple was soon recruited by the Drifters as an auxiliary keyboard player, along with Susan Cowsill [59] of the 1960s family band The Cowsills [60], and Vicki Peterson [61] of The Bangles [62] on backing vocals. Billed as something of a supergroup, The Continental Drifters were really a typical alternative country band, described by Holsapple as "a cross between The Mamas and the Papas [63] and The Band [64]." McGough left the group following the release of their 1992 single "The Mississippi" and Holsapple assumed full-time keyboard duties. Cowsill and Peterson soon joined on a permanent basis as well. In 1993, Holsapple married his band mate Susan Cowsill in 1993 and had a daughter, Miranda Victoria Cowsill Holsapple [4]. Around this time the band relocated to New Orleans after several more personnel changes. Ganucheau left the group for medical reasons following the move and was replaced by Robert Mache [65], formerly of Sparks and the Steve Wynn Band. It was this lineup that ultimately settled in New Orleans and recorded the group's self-titled debut LP in 1994 on Razor & Tie Records [66], earning critical praise. Nuccio soon departed after its release and was replaced by journeyman drummer Russ Broussard [67].

As the Continental Drifters worked to acquire a major label recording contract, Holsapple was recruited by Hootie & the Blowfish [8] to play additional guitar and keyboards during his time off from the Drifters. He joined as a sideman while the band was touring in support of its multi-platinum 1994 debut release *Cracked Rear View* [68]. Holsapple joined Hootie in the studio during recording sessions for their follow-up, *Fairweather Johnson* [69], released April 1996, and again for the band's third release, *Musical Chairs* [70], September 1998. In addition to studio work, Holsapple played auxiliary guitar and keyboards on each album's follow-up tour. Between the Hootie & the Blowfish albums, Holsapple recorded and released a low-key solo album in 1997 entitled *Out of My Way* [71]. That same year he recorded the single "Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway" [72] with the Continental Drifters, who had still not secured a major label recording deal (the song was subsequently released on the tiny Black Dog [73] label). The band's second full-length, *Vermilion* [74], followed in

May of 1999 on *Razor & Tie*, although it was released in Europe on *Blue Rose* in October of 1998, just days before the release of Hootie's *Musical Chairs*. The period of 1998-1999 marked one of the busiest and most prolific points of Holsapple's career, which saw him constantly traveling back and forth while recording each record with the two bands simultaneously. He rejoined the Continental Drifters in 1999, immediately after disembarking from the *Musical Chairs* tour, and toured in support of the U.S. release of *Vermillion*. By 2000 the constant stress of recording and touring with multiple bands and multiple projects had taken its toll on Holsapple's marriage to Cowsill and they divorced. The two continued to work together as musical partners in the Continental Drifters. Through the late 1990s and into the 2000s, Holsapple stayed busy as a sideman recording with a variety of acts: *the Kennedys* [75], *NRBQ* [76], and the newly reunited Bangles. He would also continue to record and perform live with the Continental Drifters sporadically. The Drifters, despite their talented line-up and topnotch songwriting, never got a major label deal. They released three more albums however, one U.S. release, *Better Day* [77], on *Razor & Tie* in 2001, and two more European-only releases, 2001's *Listen Listen* [78] and 2003's *Nineteen Ninety-Three* [79], both on *Blue Rose* [80] records. Holsapple divorced Susan Cowsill in 2002.

By 2003, although the Continental Drifters were still together, Holsapple was experiencing a lull in his career. He found a day job in a New Orleans bookstore, where he met artist/clothing designer Sarah Webb, and the two married in 2003. Holsapple and Webb were forced to leave New Orleans during *Hurricane Katrina* [81], an event which consequently caused the Continental Drifters to break up for good. Ultimately Holsapple settled near his old Chapel Hill stomping grounds in *Durham* [82], North Carolina. There he quickly reasserted himself as a fixture in the indie-rock scene thriving in the Triangle region of North Carolina – a scene that he had helped grow from its roots thirty years earlier. Holsapple and wife Sarah had a baby boy, Webb, in 2003, and a daughter, Maggie Jane, in 2007. Holsapple reunited with Chris Stamey and The dB's again writing some new songs and re-working some old, unreleased tracks written twenty plus years earlier. Holsapple also began working with new artists emerging out of the triangle. In the summer and fall of 2008 Holsapple played keyboards for the pop-country duo Sugarland, substituting for Brandon Bush for four tour dates. By 2009 he was recording with new Triangle artist Luego and finishing up his collaboration with Chris Stamey, their first since 1991's *Mavericks*. The second Holsapple-Stamey release entitled *hERE aND nOw* hit shelves in June of 2009 courtesy of *Bar/None* [83] records and featured a new dB's tune. Though the album received positive reviews, the following tour consisted of only a limited number of regional dates as *Here and Now* mainly served as a holdover offering until Holsapple and Stamey could finish a new dB's album with the rest of the band. Their efforts finally paid off when Gene Holder and Will Rigby, who had flown back and forth to take part in scattered sessions over the years, joined Holsapple and Stamey for the final sessions. All four members contributed equal parts to *Falling Off the Sky* [84], released on June 12, 2012 on Bar/None.

Additional Resources:

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Holsapple, Peter & Chris Stamey, "Angels." YouTube video. 4:05. Posted by ErockDrewes on June 30, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfZ_Kq2YOHE [87] (accessed on February 1, 2012)

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