

[Sign in](#) | [Register](#)

Go to:

The Guardian Weekly Global Network.  
Your take on world news.  
theguardianweekly.co.uk

In partnership with  
MARIE STOPES INTERNATIONAL

**guardian.co.uk**

Search:

[News](#) [Sport](#) [Comment](#) [Culture](#) [Business](#) [Money](#) [Life & style](#) [Travel](#) [Environment](#) [Blogs](#) [Jobs](#) [A-Z](#)  
[Culture](#) [Music](#)

**music Obituaries**

[Home](#) [News](#) [Reviews](#) [Pop](#) [Urban](#) [Classical](#) [Jazz](#) [Video](#) [Festivals](#) [Culture home](#)  
[Blog](#) [Live](#) [Rock](#) [Folk](#) [Electronic](#) [World](#) [Quiz](#) [Podcast](#) [Readers recommend](#)



Obituary

## Larry Norman

He combined the rhythms of Elvis and the words of Christ to create Jesus Rock

Search Music

**Steve Turner**  
**Wednesday February 27, 2008**  
[The Guardian](#)

**Go to ...**  
[More obituaries](#)  
[More from Guardian](#)  
[Unlimited Music](#)

**Recent articles**

- [Obituary: Steve Harris](#)
- [Obituary: Mike Smith](#)
- [Obituary: Opera singer Giuseppe di Stefano, 1921-2008](#)
- [Obituary: Adam Sweeting](#)
- [Obituary: Teo Macero](#)
- [Obituary: Les Condon](#)
- [Obituary: Larry Norman](#)
- [Obituary: Henri Salvador](#)
- [Obituary: Freddie Bell](#)
- [Obituary: Inga Nielsen](#)
- [Obituary: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi](#)
- [Obituary: Joe Dolan](#)

Larry Norman, who has died at the age of 61, was a pioneer of what became known as Jesus Rock, which combined the rhythms of rock'n'roll with the social and spiritual observations of Christianity. Norman, who was instinctively an outsider, was resigned to the fact that his music would cause offence to the church and the music industry, and once summed his position up as "too secular for the Christians and too Christian for the secularists".

Yet it was his hybrid that provided the template for the development of the multimillion dollar contemporary Christian music industry, a genre that now outsells jazz, classical and new age combined in America.

Norman was born in Corpus Christi, Texas, but moved to San Francisco as a child. He claimed that he thought of the possibility of Jesus Rock as early as 1956, when he was as excited by the sound of Elvis Presley as he was by the words of Jesus Christ. It occurred to him that the two could be combined; as a boy of nine, he would invent Christian lyrics to fit the music of Elvis hits.

A decade later, caught up in the mood of the west coast music explosion, he formed the band People, the name supposedly a jibe at a trend for animal and insect names. In June 1968, they made a Billboard top 20 hit with their cover version of the Zombies' I Love You, but broke up shortly after releasing their debut album for Capitol. Norman had wanted it to be called We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus and a Lot Less Rock'n'Roll, but the executives wanted I Love You. The record company won.

Larry, always uncompromising, saw this as a victory for big business over artistic vision and for secular pop over spiritual rock. From then on, he ploughed an often lonely furrow as a solo artist who tried to combine the thrill of

the Beatles and the Rolling Stones with the spiritual insight of writers such as CS Lewis and GK Chesterton.

He was helped by the emergence of the Jesus movement, for which he became a figurehead. Not only were American churches taking note of counterculture complaints, but many hippies were becoming Christians, and rock music was the natural forum of expression for these changes. Norman's songs, such as I Wish We'd All Been Ready, Why Don't You Look Into Jesus, The Outlaw, The Great American Novel, I Am Your Servant and Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music, were as vital to this new community as Give Peace a Chance and Street Fighting Man had been to the counterculture.

His first album, Upon This Rock, was released in 1969 by Capitol, which by then had surmised that Jesus Rock might be worth investing in. By 1972, he had transferred to MGM, where he began the most fertile period of his career. He created a trilogy of albums - Only Visiting This Planet, So Long Ago the Garden and In Another Land - that told the story of creation, fall and redemption. During this period, he played to full houses in such venues as the Royal Albert Hall, London, and Sydney Opera House. His big fan Cliff Richard later covered his songs and claimed that Norman was proof that Christian views could merge with rock.

Although never innovative as a musician or singer, he was a mesmerising performer who knew the value of every word and gesture on stage: he borrowed the movements of Charlie Chaplin, the pace of Woody Allen's delivery and the forceful logic of Lenny Bruce to create a stage act that drew the audience into his world. Usually, he was accompanied only by his acoustic guitar, but he sometimes toured with pick-up bands.

He was also a powerful lyricist who could turn complex theological ideas into simple statements. He was well known for songs with a strong and deliberate sense of propaganda, but was also a master of obliqueness, preferring to see his songs as threads in a tapestry rather than as individual pictures of Christian doctrine.

His work in the 1980s and 1990s was uneven, underfunded and derivative of his earlier material. In 1981, after moving to Oregon, he began to record exclusively for mail-order albums on his own label, Phydeaux. Records by Bob Dylan such as Slow Train Coming, Saved and Shot of Love, and the emergence of U2 in the 1980s, made his splicing of rock and religion less uncommon, and the Christian music market that he had helped create didn't find him slick enough, sweet enough or overt enough. As he once noted, he wasn't there to provide "a comfortable experience".

His personal life was erratic. He tended to alienate even his closest friends, had a reputation for stubbornness and unreliability, and was dogged by ill health. He suffered a head injury during a bad plane landing at Los Angeles and claimed to have been poisoned by the KGB during a tour of Russia in 1988. In 1992 he had a heart attack and from then on he was a frequent hospital patient. He recently lost the sight in his right eye.

By choosing to work outside both the church and the music industry, Norman limited his audience. However, in 1995 he was the subject of a tribute album, One Way:

The Songs of Larry Norman, and in 2001 he was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame. For a concert in his home town of Salem, Oregon, in 2005, he was joined on stage by Black Francis of the Pixies, a longtime fan.

- Larry David Norman, musician, born April 8 1947; died February 24 2008

---

[Printable version](#) | [Send it to a friend](#) | [Clip](#)



[Privacy policy](#) | [Terms & conditions](#) | [Advertising guide](#) | [A-Z index](#) | [About this site](#)  
[Join our dating site today](#)

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2008