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From The Times

March 7, 2008

## Larry Norman

### Musician who was known as 'the father of Christian rock' for his path-breaking marriage of pop music to the gospel

"Why should the Devil have all the good music?" This question was the basis of Larry Norman's career, as well as the title of one of his songs. Widely hailed as "the father of Christian rock", he was the first to combine rock'n'roll rhythms with an evangelical message, creating a \$700-million-a-year genre which in the US now easily outsells jazz and classical combined.



Norman was born in 1947 and grew up in a black district of San Francisco, where he began writing songs at the age of 9. Elvis Presley had just burst on to the scene, and Norman, already a Christian, recognised the gospel origin of the new music. "I thought Elvis was stealing the Church's music," he later said. "And I thought I should steal it back."

Although he studied music at San Jose College, he found the technical side too challenging and dropped out. But his band, People!, was soon signed to Capitol Records, and had a Top 20 hit with I Love You. They opened for such artists as the Doors, Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead but, although Norman imbibed the musical spirit of late 1960s San Francisco, he kept his distance from the excesses of the era.

Norman left the band after fellow members began experimenting with Scientology. His 1969 solo release, Upon This Rock, is generally acknowledged as the first Christian rock album. Only Visiting This Planet (1972), on which he worked with George Martin, was later voted the most influential Christian album by Contemporary Christian Music magazine.

Yet at the time, sales numbered only in the thousands. Many churches were openly hostile to Norman, with his long hair and whiff of the counterculture. His music was branded "satanic" and banned in many Christian shops. Norman thought this ridiculous: "I want the people to know that He saved my soul / but I still like to listen to the radio," he sang. "I know what's right, I know what's wrong/ I don't confuse it. / All I'm really tryin' to say is, why should the Devil have all the good music?"

This was the question famously asked by Colonel William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, and Norman was firmly in the

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same tradition of using the power of music to reach out to the disenfranchised. "I feel there is a war going on, a war for young people's hearts," Norman said. "They may not always find something in the Church. I feel my role is to say 'Don't abandon God. Don't think there's nothing there for you just because you don't like the particular congregation you're familiar with.'"

Norman did not feel any more at home with conventional American Christianity than it did with him. "I had no desire to preach the gospel to the converted. I wanted to be out on the sidewalk preaching to the runaways and the druggies and the prostitutes". His mellow chords, owing something to Simon & Garfunkel, were accompanied by blunt and often sarcastic lyrics condemning racism, the plight of the poor and the hypocrisies of televangelism in a way that would have satisfied any Sixties protest singer.

Much of his touring was done outside the US, in Eastern Europe, Israel, and later China. He filled the Albert Hall, the Sydney Opera House and the Moscow Olympic Stadium without attracting the attention of the mainstream.

In 1975 he set up his own label, Solid Rock Records, which helped to launch the career of numerous other Christian rockers. By the late 1980s, "contemporary Christian music", as it had become known, was rapidly becoming ever more popular, and lucrative. But Norman never felt at ease with Christian music as an industry. "I think we should read the Bible for personal reasons and not say, well, I'm going to put God into the meat grinder and come out with something that will be printed on sheet music, sung by choirs and have synchronisation rights".

An aircraft accident in 1978 left Norman with brain damage that hampered his performance for many years afterwards, and in 1992 he almost died of a heart attack. He was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 2001 and gave a farewell concert in 2005 in Salem, Oregon, where he lived quietly in poor health.

Many of the younger generation of Christian musicians have spoken of their debt to Norman, and hundreds of cover versions of his songs have been recorded.

Modern Christian rock has moved away from its hippyish beginnings, but Norman welcomed the vitality of the many Goth and metal-influenced acts who play to packed festivals of young people across the US. "Christian music isn't supposed to be polite. It's supposed to be relevant."

**Larry Norman, evangelical rock musician, was born on April 8, 1947. He died of heart failure on February 24, 2008, aged 61**

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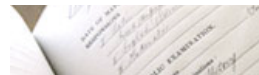


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