

TVFan [Track your favorite shows](#) [Talk about last night's episodes](#) [Share your opinions](#) [Challenge other TV fans to a debate](#)



SPECIAL COVERAGE:

[American Idol](#)

['Lost' Coverage](#)

[2008 Spring Movie Preview](#)

[Oscars 2008](#)

[The A-List](#)

[Subscribe to EW](#) | [Give the Gift of EW](#)

Search...

SEARCH

[Home](#) // [News](#) // PopWatch Blog

[Get Latest Headlines](#)

REMEMBERING CHRISTIAN ROCK MAVERICK LARRY NORMAN

Feb 26, 2008, 06:00 AM | by Chris Willman

Categories: [In Memoriam](#), [Music](#)



Larry Norman, the singer/songwriter often referred to as “the father of Christian rock,” died Sunday at age 60 after years of declining health. His first two solo albums, *Upon This Rock* (originally released on Capitol in 1969) and *Only Visiting This Planet* (issued by Verve in 1972), are widely considered the first Christian rock albums of any real significance. All these decades later, they’re probably still the two best. Fans of contemporary Christian music (or CCM, as it’s come to be known) often claim that their heroes could be mainstream stars if only they didn’t sing about Jesus. Usually, that’s a lot of malarkey, but in Norman’s case, it happened to be true: A lot of his early work wouldn’t sound at all out of place between Wings and the Stones on a classic rock station, if not for his (usually) righteous lyrical concerns. How far his influence really extended is up for debate, given the relatively few records he sold — although as unlikely an acolyte as Frank Black of the Pixies has cited him as a hero and even recorded his songs. “Larry was my door into the music business,

and he was the most Christlike person I ever met,” Black said in a statement Monday.

For quite a few years, the sum total of the Christian rock genre was pretty much Larry Norman. It may be difficult now — at a time when bands like Paramore find wide acceptance in both the Christian and mainstream worlds (and almost a quarter-century on from the advent of Stryper) — to remember a time when there was no such thing as CCM, and when, if any such thing did pop up, it was greeted with distrust and scorn on either side of the evangelical/pop divide. The Beatles were about to break up, yet the cutting edge of Christian music was still represented by the folksy/choral records made by Ralph Carmichael, better known as Billy Graham’s musical director. Then along came an unsmiling, almost sneering guy who, like Johnny Cash, usually dressed all in black, though, unlike Cash, he had whiteish blond hair down past his chest. And he was singing about salvation and the rapture, with humor and sass, in a voice that clearly owed a lot to Mick Jagger’s cocky intonation. In the church vs. counterculture world of the ‘60s and early ‘70s, this officially counted as cognitive dissonance, and maybe it still does.

Norman initially appeared on the rock scene as part of the San Jose-based group People, which had a No. 7 hit on the *Billboard* chart in 1968 with “I Love You,” a remake of a Zombies tune. Though he was the principal songwriter, he quit the band about the time their first album came out. (Reportedly, the other members wanted to convert *him* to Scientology; also they and/or Capitol had managed to override Norman’s choice for the debut album’s title, which was originally set to be *We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus and a Lot Less Rock ‘N’ Roll*.) Capitol kept him on for one solo album, *Upon This Rock*, which introduced a venerable end-times anthem, “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” He moved over to Verve for a follow-up, *Only Visiting This Planet*, which has been [voted the best Christian album of all time](#) by CCM magazine, the longtime bible — if you will — of the business. It didn’t sell much, but whatever born-again kids there were out there with Fender guitars all had a copy and wore out the grooves. Beatles producer George Martin got a credit for production assistance (it was recorded at Martin’s London studio), and you can feel Martin’s influence, if not his direct touch, in some of the LP’s fully orchestrated rockers. Here, Norman was taking a more holistic approach, lyrically: The album opener and first single, “I’ve Got to Learn to Live Without You,” was a lost-love lament that used the word “baby,” which didn’t necessarily endear him to rock-hating fundamentalists. Social commentary tracks like the Vietnam-themed “Six O’Clock News” confounded

some of the faithful, too. Even signature God-rock tunes like “Why Don’t You Look Into Jesus” didn’t quite make it onto the folk-mass circuit; maybe it was lines like “Gonorrhea on Valentine’s Day/And you’re still looking for the perfect lay.”

Norman made one last album for a secular label, *So Long Ago the Garden* (on Verve’s sister imprint, MGM), in 1973. It marked the only time he recorded an entire album free of explicit Christian content, and besides some love-and-loneliness tracks, it included novel standouts like “Christmas Time,” a rocking condemnation of Xmas commercialism, and the tune I’d consider his masterpiece, “Nightmare #71,” a funny, rambling, overtly Dylan-influenced dreamscape that wittily invoked the names of deceased silent-screen stars amid allusions to the Book of Revelation. But even a less Jesus-y Norman couldn’t sell records.

From that point on, he tended to preach to the converted, despite declared intentions otherwise, and the songs he wrote in the later parts of his career tended to be explicitly evangelical, if not evangelistic, often to their needlessly preachy detriment. He made one more terrific-sounding LP, 1976’s *In Another Land*, which sounded like it had a major-label budget, even though he released it on his own imprint through Word, the Christian conglomerate. Soon after, at the height of his popularity in the evangelical world, Norman sang at the White House at the invitation of President Carter. But from 1980 on, his discography becomes difficult to track, as he self-released literally dozens of projects, mostly live albums and outtakes collections. His shot at making it in the mainstream had passed, but Norman was too much of a maverick to really make nice with the burgeoning Christian music community, still paranoid over the rejection he suffered when he was the lone long-haired born-again on the landscape. Norman built a confusing mythology around himself, laid out in copious liner notes that accompanied most of the LPs — with claims that Pete Townshend had been inspired by one of Norman’s early rock operas to write *Tommy*, or that he was somehow indirectly responsible for Dylan’s conversion or baptism, or that he’d influenced or even become pals with U2. Was it all true? Which of his myriad records were official releases and which were bootlegs? Norman’s weirdnesses finally got too tiring to sort out, even for most fans, and his profile shrank. (Eventually, the singer blamed his erratic later output on a head injury suffered in a plane mishap in 1978.)

But though he remained the eternal misfit in and out of Christian music, there were acknowledgments, as well, in the later part of his life. Norman was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 2001, along with his first hero, Elvis Presley. A tribute album with acts like DC Talk was produced in the ‘90s. And support came from unlikely quarters. Frank Black recorded one of his apocalyptic ballads, “Six-Sixty-Six,” on his first solo album, and a biography reported that Black and producer Steve Albini bonded over their Larry Norman fandom in the studio while making the first Pixies album, which was named after a Norman lyric. When the ailing Norman did his “farewell concert” in Oregon a few years ago, Black even showed up to duet with him on “Watch What You’re Doing” — the song that was the source of the “Come on, pilgrim!” line that became the title of the Pixies’ debut.

A press release issued by Norman’s brother says that “at the time of his death, he was working on an album with Frank Black and Isaac Brock of Modest Mouse, which will be released later this year.” A message the singer dictated from his hospital bed the day before his death, [posted on his website](#), reads in part: “I feel like a prize in a box of cracker jacks with God’s hand reaching down to pick me up... My wounds are getting bigger. I have trouble breathing. I am ready to fly home... Goodbye, farewell, we will meet again.”

Personal aside: I grew up in a suburban environment where parents were thrusting nascent Christian rock albums on their kids, hoping to provide a theologically sound or wholesome alternative to Bowie, Alice Cooper, the Stones, et al. Most of the records were mediocre and a chore to sit through, but Larry Norman’s were the ones you actually looked forward to — not just because the finest ones were of the same quality as anything on FM radio, but because he was just strange enough that you felt like he might be capable of throwing your parents as well as you for a loop. One of my favorite memories of Norman involves attending a concert in the ‘70s in Akron, Ohio. I was sitting next to a youth pastor who was glowing with the thought that the boys he’d brought along were being exposed to positive religious values in songs like “Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?” Then, somebody shouted out a request for one of Norman’s least explicable songs, “Pardon Me,” a haunting ballad about an attempted seduction that happens to be entirely free of recognizable Christian content but has its share of worldly sensuality and loneliness. I remember looking over and watching the grin on the youth leader’s face turn into a puzzled grimace as Norman sang lines like “Pardon me, kissing you like I’m afraid/But I feel I’m being played.../Close your eyes, and pretend that you are me/See how empty it can be/Making love if love’s not really there/Watch me go, watch me walk away alone/As your clothing comes undone/And you pull the ribbon from your hair.” Of course, I got a big smile on my face as the youth pastor’s disappeared, because, as a rock kid, I lived for status quo-breaking moments like that one, when a “Christian concert” could turn into something altogether less predictable. He didn’t always follow through on his early promise, but that’s the Larry Norman I’ll remember — the maverick who never deviated from his chosen mission in search of any big brass ring, but who didn’t give many second thoughts to subverting the expectations of fellow believers, either.

Sponsored Links**Do Lip Plumpers Work?**

See which ones actually Plump your Lips, and which ones don't!
<http://www.Lip-Plumper-Reviews.com>

Up To 75% Off Cruises

Huge selection of discounted cruises. All lines and destinations.
www.VacationsToGo.com

[Buy a link here](#)

COMMENTS

Emme [Mon, Mar 3, 2008 at 02:04 AM EST](#)

Pardon me is my favorite LN Song.

Rodney Jones [Fri, Feb 29, 2008 at 06:00 PM EST](#)

I cut my teeth on Larry Norman at the same time I was diggin' the Archers, Andre' Crouch, and Love Song. My youth leaders all indulged me and my buds, but never bothered to listen. Several years later, we were at our annual Ichthus festival gathering, me now a quasi-leader and Larry Norman came on stage with just a guitar and piano, all in black. He talked about being a servant, singing that song with passion, moving into In Another Land, and several other of his classics. He talked about healing within the body of Christ, about unity in the spirit. My youth leaders were awed with him and said, you were right, he is the real deal. He had a few "odd" moments, no denying. However, his impact on my life has been profound, and I'm guessing I'm not alone. I'm 48 and I love my Larry Norman CDs. They are still relevant and needed in this crazy world of ours. Rest well in that other land Larry, you made a difference. Enter in and rest.

Daiv Whaley [Fri, Feb 29, 2008 at 10:49 AM EST](#)

My girlfriend and I met Larry after a small church concert in ohio. We were huge Pixies fans also and loved the odd association between those two forces of musical nature. I remember how kind and sweet and humble he was to everyone, and how he offered to go out to dinner with us after the show cuz the church wanted us all to leave so they could lock up(!) Like many creative "visionaries," being misunderstood was part of the messianic magic I think. Shalom, Larry.

Doug Watson from Glasgow, Scotland [Fri, Feb 29, 2008 at 01:31 AM EST](#)

Like most people who have commented I'd like to say thanks for the article about Larry. H had an impact all over the world. I first heard his music when I lived in London more than 25 years ago. I loved him from that moment and now I live in Scotland I find more people who loved him also. He will be missed be us, but I'm sure he's just glad to be home.

Chuck Hall [Thu, Feb 28, 2008 at 06:04 PM EST](#)

I became a Christian in 1971, at least in part through the influence of a guy who came home from the Army with a Bible in one hand and two Larry Norman LPs in the other. I keep waiting for another to come along, but none has - we are unique and unrepeatabe, after all. When I heard about his passing, I picked up a guitar and played every Larry Norman song I knew, and I was amazed at how much I remembered. I listened and listened, and I think he set a standard that hasn't been met very often.

This morning, when I was tempted to be sad once again at his passing, I thought I heard a gigantic "Halleluia!" on the wind, complete with a power chord, through an angelic Marshall stack, and I knew he made it home.

Robert [Thu, Feb 28, 2008 at 03:30 PM EST](#)

I do not want to think about what my life would be like without the influence of Larry and his music. I had been a fan of his for many years when I finally had a chance to meet him at an IXTHUS festival. We had a great time and he treated me like a friend and brother even though we had never met prior to that.

That short meeting meant a lot to me and his music has stayed with me my whole life.

Let there be no question that a man from Nazareth, named Jesus, has changed the world through changing the hearts of people, in spite of what the preachers and politicians do with his name.

We are celebrating the memory of Larry, and we will do so every time his music is played.

Thanks to the Norman family for all your hard work on our behalf in memory of Larry.

"Well, my life is filled with clogs, but I just could not get along without my Keds".

Rob

Darby Kern [Thu, Feb 28, 2008 at 01:41 AM EST](#)

"Place my body in the ground but let my spirit touch the sky..."

Don't stop there, brother.

Janie West [Wed, Feb 27, 2008 at 01:07 PM EST](#)

I was a teenager, a music fanatic, and a new Christian in the '70s when I heard Larry Norman's music for the first time. I was delightfully surprised to discover that Christian music had its own Dylan, and that he had a wonderful wealth of material for me to absorb. Songs like "The Outlaw", "The Great American Novel", "Sweet Song of Salvation", and "I Hope I See You In Heaven" continue to be some of my very favorite songs ever written. I was part of a duo that sang in Christian coffee houses throughout my high school and college days, and we borrowed heavily from Larry's catalog. Larry also was a talented producer who discovered and produced another one of my favorite CCM singer/songwriters - Randy Stonehill. I never had the opportunity to meet Larry, and I only saw him

in concert once, but his music made a lasting impression on my life that will stay with me until I see him in heaven. May God continue to use Larry Norman's music to bring others into His kingdom.

Josh [Wed, Feb 27, 2008 at 11:17 AM EST](#)

Great writeup. Larry was one of the most brilliant, frustrating people in the music business, whose music is still better than almost all of the christian music that has been created since (although I do prefer Daniel Amos' best work).

Bram Floria [Wed, Feb 27, 2008 at 09:16 AM EST](#)

I grew up around the Christian music industry and was always fascinated by Larry. He would rarely bend so far as to associate with the industry insiders at the Christian Artists seminar and when he did, he was always a headache. A glorious, scintillating, exuberant migraine of an inconvenience. The church's Jeremiah; the industry's Nathan. He was the Jekyll/Hyde of Christian music, with a gentleness that could erupt into rage against the machine. On stage, all those explosive lyrics – off stage all that searing commentary! He was Don Quixote, tilting at the windmills of Christian Music Megacorps, as they stamped out freshly-minted mammon, strip-mined from the newly discovered pockets of evangelical youth.

We have the treasure of his music, but more than that, the truth he told us all those years. Now you have the treasure of a new heart, and 'all the good music.' The devil's got none of that. I know the first concert I'm signing up for when I make my move to the big house.

K [Wed, Feb 27, 2008 at 09:09 AM EST](#)

Great piece, Chris. Thank you so much for writing it and I deeply appreciate EW for allowing it to be published here. In the words of Bob Briner, Larry Norman was a true "roaring lamb". We should all be such.

Mark Valente [Wed, Feb 27, 2008 at 09:07 AM EST](#)

Chris,
Thanks again for the well spoken and reminisced tribute to a guy who never got caught up in the "Pop Pomp" but remained a REAL guy whose art remained uncompromised til the very end. Bravo! I hope your article will stand as a lightning rod to engage a stirring and wandering culture looking for true heroes from these few ashes.

Mark [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 11:44 PM EST](#)

What was the most intriguing aspect of the man Larry Norman was his life and art brought to the edge of a gray world where most Christians have the biggest sins concealed in only a dark world of white only. He lived his life like a true liberal that Jesus was despising the labels the pharisees would attach to him. I hope I can receive his baton passed to me and the last of my generation....

The Theory [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 08:58 PM EST](#)

nice write-up. I, too, take issue with the assertion that there is little else of note in "Christian" music. I've been fond of saying that the percentages between the "mainstream" and "Christian" music industry is about the same... only there is so much more in the mainstream that it seems like "Christian" music doesn't measure up. But we do have Phil Keaggy, Daniel Amos (headed by one of the craziest people in Christian music, Terry Scott Taylor), The Danielson Famile (who have recently become indie rock icons in their own right), and mewwithoutYou. All amazing visionaries, even though they aren't flavor-of-the-month pop radio icons.

Ben [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 08:52 PM EST](#)

Chris --- thanks for the write-up on Larry. I'd love to see EW have some more coverage on Christian music. Now we just need to have some good bands that are the caliber of Daniel Amos, The Choir, The 77's, anything with Mike Knott, etc. By the way, I sold you a LN CD (Christmastime) on eBay a few years ago.

Ben [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 08:52 PM EST](#)

Chris --- thanks for the write-up on Larry. I'd love to see EW have some more coverage on Christian music. Now we just need to have some good bands that are the caliber of Daniel Amos, The Choir, The 77's, anything with Mike Knott, etc. By the way, I sold you a LN CD (Christmastime) on eBay a few years ago.

Rich [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 07:36 PM EST](#)

I too am pleasantly surprised to find the tribute to Mr. Norman here and greatly appreciate it. That said, I also have to take exception to the assertion that Christian music fans are full of malarkey when they say the genre's artists could go toe to toe with the mainstream. I sense Mr. Willman may be an older listener who hasn't tuned in for a while. I grew up in the 80s when, with a few exceptions, I would have agreed with that assertion. But in the last decade, the genre has raised its game with artists such as Jars of Clay, Switchfoot, Relient K, P.O.D. and numerous others who can, and many of whom do play to mainstream and faith-based audiences. The quality is a testament to Norman's achievement and enduring influence.

Jael [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 06:48 PM EST](#)

Thank you so much for writing this! I found Larry Norman when I was a teen in the late 90s, and loved his honesty. I wish the CCM scene had more people like him, but most of my favorite artists (Dime Store Prophets, Five Iron Frenzy, Viva Voce, 5 o'clock People) were driven out during corporate mergers. Now I need to listen to some old, good stuff by Larry and some other passed CCM artists like Rich Mullins and Keith Green.

Scott [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 05:45 PM EST](#)

Larry never wanted to be a Christian entertainer, rather it was his desire to reach non-Christians with the gospel message. I spent a few weeks with him in 1999 and he was fun to be with. I am glad he no longer has to put up with the things of this world. I look forward to seeing him in heaven with a strong heart and a full head of blonde hair (and some new songs).

To Josh [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 03:34 PM EST](#)

I wish there were good CCM artists now, but there really aren't many. As a Christian teen, I don't think that it is bad to want to really rock and we are lacking that BIG TIME

Sharon [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 03:02 PM EST](#)

I had the opportunity to meet Larry Norman when I was about 8 years old. My dad was a pastor in southern MN and we had a "woodstock" type festival with a bunch of CCM artists. I remember his as very quiet and very pale. He was very kind to a star struck little girl who could sing all of his songs along with him. Thanks, EW, for the lovely tribute.

josh [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 02:23 PM EST](#)

i appreciate the tribute, but certainly don't appreciate the degrading tone with which you refer to the rest of the entire genre of CCM. while CCM has released it's share of mediocre music (which never happens in the mainstream world with great artists like nickelback and fergie ruling the radio)there are endless number of artists who have incorporated their christian faith into their music with amazing results. many are directly involved with ccm, while others are not, but i didn't appreciate the condescending nature with which the entire genre was dismissed. it showed quite a lot of ignorance and arrogance on the author's part. that being said, larry norman was not a "man-pleaser". he wrote challenging lyrics that offended christians, non christians, and everyone in between. he was devoted to looking towards God while also singing about true cultural issues that could sometimes make people uncomfortable. his great talent and his boldness is inspiration to many great musicians.

Heather B. [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 01:45 PM EST](#)

Like everyone else I just want to thank you for writing this and EW for publishing it. Larry Norman was a total treasure - talented, weird, funny, and devoted - and he will definitely be missed.

Richard [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 01:40 PM EST](#)

One of my favorite songs is Larry Norman's "I Wished We'd all Been Ready." Without the impact he had on music, I would not be who I am today. Thank you for your article.

Amy [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 01:21 PM EST](#)

I appreciate this article and the reflection of the life's work of Larry Norman. Christian music is an often overlooked genre, and I'm glad that you took the time to pay tribute to this great artist.

Ann [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 01:14 PM EST](#)

I just want to thank you for even acknowledging Norman's passing. I don't know when I would have heard about it if it hadn't been posted here. I grew up in the 90s listening to dc talk, charlie peacock, steve taylor, etc and grew to have a deep respect for Larry Norman and his music. As I got older and the artists I respected either disappeared or were pushed even further to the fringes to make way for the generic, cookie cutter knock-offs popular today I totally lost interest in the CCM scene. If only all Christians working in the arts could allow themselves to be as authentic and honest as Norman, then they would be able to produce work that is well crafted, provocative, and relevant to an audience so much larger than the evangelical ghetto to which they seem forever relegated to. To those lucky enough to be aware of Larry Norman, he will always serve as an inspiration. May he never be forgotten.

Manny [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 12:06 PM EST](#)

Randy Stonehill, his closest collaborator for many years, later estranged, has issued a statement:
<http://blog.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendID=72549251&blogID=361597764>

Nick [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 11:49 AM EST](#)

Loooooooooove Larry Norman's music. Particularly "Watch What You're Doing", "Righteous Rocker", and the one where he sings "I've been listening to some of Paul's records / I'm beginning to think he really is dead."
From that same song: "This world is not my home... I'm just paaaasssing thru...."

Stephanie T. [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 11:37 AM EST](#)

There are some people who really don't like Christian Rock because it's all about Jesus, but it's also about positive thinking. I am a Jew and I admit that groups like Jars of Clay and DC Talk are not that bad. I am glad that Norman was their inspiration.

Matthew [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 10:44 AM EST](#)

This is why I enjoy EW so much. Thanks for the kind words regarding Larry Norman.

John [Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 09:41 AM EST](#)

Thanks for this article; I'm quite surprised to find it here. I got to see Larry Norman in concert in 1998 at Cornerstone Festival; it was just him on a slightly out of tune classical guitar, and yet somehow, it was awesome. I

know that today Larry is healed, whole, and fulfilled, making music with his King.

Mark Kelly Hall Tue, Feb 26, 2008 at 09:33 AM EST

Thanks for this loving and balanced review of Larry Norman's life's work. He was a unique individual and a visionary artist. He was an example of why it's more important to be true to oneself (even if it causes friction at times) than to conform to what others tell you to be. I don't doubt he got plenty of advice that would've made him fit into the system better...and that would have rendered him utterly forgettable as well.

Sponsored Links

Do Lip Plumpers Work?

See which ones actually Plump your Lips, and which ones don't!
<http://www.Lip-Plumper-Reviews.com>

Up To 75% Off Cruises

Huge selection of discounted cruises. All lines and destinations.
www.VacationsToGo.com

[Buy a link here](#)

PERMALINK

Link to this post using this URL:

<http://www.typepad.com/t/trackback/392561/26521224>

[LATER POST](#) [EARLIER POST](#)

Sponsored Links

Do Lip Plumpers Work?

See which ones actually Plump your Lips, and which ones don't!
<http://www.Lip-Plumper-Reviews.com>

Up To 75% Off Cruises

Huge selection of discounted cruises. All lines and destinations.
www.VacationsToGo.com

[Buy a link here](#)

[Home](#) | [Help](#) | [Site Map](#) | [About Us](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Magazine Customer Service](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Promotions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) |

Copyright ©2008 Entertainment Weekly and Time Inc. All rights reserved.