

Larry Norman Visited This Planet

BY AL TIZON

Larry Norman—singer-songwriter, pioneer of “Jesus rock,” and 2001 inductee into the Gospel Music Association Hall of Fame—died on February 24, 2008. He was 60 years old. The earth didn’t shake, flags didn’t fly at half-mast, and news of Britney Spears didn’t get eclipsed. But upon finding out that Larry Norman had breathed his last, this boy took a mental health day off. I admit, long distance grief for someone I didn’t even know might seem a bit odd. But Norman’s music saved my life (I’ll explain in a minute); so allow me a few nostalgic tears as I ponder life after Larry.

Just when I thought that my decision to follow Jesus at age 17 meant listening to Lawrence Welk—and liking it—I had a date with destiny. While going through the “N” section at a Christian music store, I saw a strange-looking record—“strange” in that it looked like a rock album ... but in a Christian establishment? (Yes, that was an issue in the early ’80s!) The title at the top of the cover, *Only Visiting This Planet*, glowed bright orange, and there was a man dressed in street clothes right below it. Angst lined his face, and long, blonde hair straddled the top of his head like a bad wig. The hippie’s name was spelled out: “LARRY NORMAN,” with a lightning bolt through the “O.”

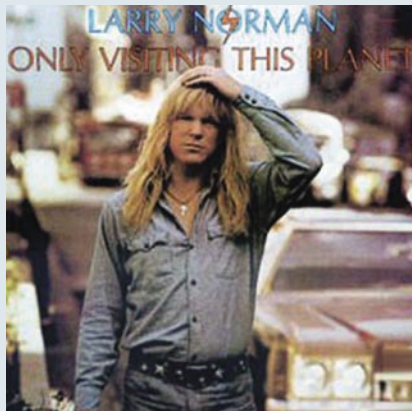
Hungry for music to replace my recently incinerated rock-and-roll collection, I judged the album by its cover and bought it. Hurrying home, I anxiously tore off the cellophane, placed the

record on the turntable, guided the arm onto the most provocative song title (“Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?”), and waited. After a few crackly needle-to-vinyl revolutions, a nasally voice came commandingly through the speakers: *I want the people to know that he saved my soul / But I still like to listen to the radio.*

Adrenaline percolated up from the depth of my soul. *They say rock and roll is wrong / I’ll give you one more chance / I say I feel so good I gotta get up and dance.*

I got up and danced. *I know what’s right, I know what’s wrong / I don’t confuse it / All I’m really trying to say is / why should the devil have all the good music?*

Yeah, why *should* the devil have all the good music? I reasoned as I moved to the beat. Followers of the Most High



should be playing not just good music, but the best music. And Norman delivered, with one faith-affirming rock song following the other. I was hooked.

I played that album until it warped, and I eventually found Norman’s other important releases, including *So Long Ago the Garden* (MGM/Verve, 1973) and *Something New Under the Son* (Solid Rock, 1981). Furthermore, his music opened the door to other pre-CCM artists like Daniel Amos, Randy Stonehill, and the late great Mark Heard. And even though I eventually grew weary of the commercialization and artistic limitations of

what CCM became, I continued to regard Larry Norman and his early disciples with great appreciation.

As I said, his music saved my life, or at least my faith, which are arguably one and the same. That is, it showed me that the Christian life did not have to mean settling for mediocre. It did not have to mean staying safe and maintaining the status quo. It did not have to mean swallowing emotional lithium, repressing passion and joy. And it did not have to mean burning social bridges, limiting oneself to fellow Christians and church potlucks. I began to fear these things, thanks to well-meaning Christians who were telling me that good music (read: thoughtful lyrics and kick-your-butt rock and roll), good movies (read: quality acting and plots that don’t necessarily end in conversion), and good drink (read: “hide the beer, the pastor’s here”) are now anathema. That’s what Larry’s music did—it saved me from an uncreative, unreflective, unexciting life.

More positively, his music pointed to an approach to faith that not only pulsed with vitality and poetry, but one that also cultivated a social conscience. In the classic “Great American Novel,” he didn’t hold back: *You are far across the ocean in a war that’s not your own [Vietnam] / And while you’re winning theirs, you’re gonna lose the one at home.*

And again: *Do you really think the only way to bring about the peace / Is to sacrifice your children and kill all your enemies?*

He ended the song with the only solution that Larry ever proposed: *Don’t ask me for the answers; I only got one / That a man leaves his darkness when he follows the Son.*

Righteous rocker. Jesus freak. Friend of the White House. Suspected communist. Left-wing. Right-wing. Too spiritual. Too secular. Devil-worshipper. Evangelist. Norman was called all of these things at different points in his life. And his response? *I been shot down, talked about, some people scandalize my name / But here*

I am talking 'bout Jesus just the same.

The insistence to sing about his faith cost him much, including his own commercial success. He was undoubtedly on his way to the top. His band, People!, released two successful albums with Capitol Records, and they hit the charts with the single "I Love You" in 1968. By the early 1970s, *Billboard Magazine* described Norman as "the most important writer since Paul Simon." And *Time* called him "the most significant artist in his field." But at the height of his popularity, Norman left the band and eventually the label and chose to go his own way in order to sing about what he wanted to sing about—Jesus. With songs such as "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" and "Sweet Song of Salvation," he basically declined the invitation to join the rock elite. But for what it's worth, in my household, he was called such things

as "Father Larry" and "LaNo the Wise." These reflect where he sits on my list of musical greats—right up there with Dylan, Heard, and U2.

Nevertheless Larry Norman was far from perfect, as two failed marriages, a history of relational fallouts, and a bipolar condition can attest. There was a day when someone's brokenness hindered me from receiving anything from that person, but nowadays I'm suspicious of anyone who comes across as unbroken. This is not to justify or dismiss the demons with which Norman obviously wrestled, but rather to give thanks to the God whose track record shows that he indeed uses weak and wounded people to accomplish extraordinary things. Larry Norman was broken, imperfect. He was a misfit who was at home neither in the church nor in the world: *What a mess this world is in / I wonder who*

began it / Don't ask me / I'm only visiting this planet.

On the grand notoriety scale, not a whole lot of people knew who Larry Norman was, so his passing didn't mean much to the wider world. But for a small circle of friends and a larger circle of enduring fans, his death signified the end of a magnificent run. More importantly, it beckoned the faithful to remember that life in the Son should reflect authenticity, creativity, and responsibility.

Thanks for everything, Larry. Your visit to this planet has made the world a little less messy. 🎵🎵

Al Tizon is assistant professor of holistic ministry at Palmer Theological Seminary in Wynnwood, Pa., director of ESA's Word & Deed Network, and PRISM magazine's Word, Deed & Spirit columnist.



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