

Christian Music Icon Larry Norman Is 'Up' Despite Poor Health

The affable 'Jesus Rock' founder told Charisma he needs heart rehabilitation and hand surgery

Contemporary Christian music founder Larry Norman was just a boy when he first considered using his musical gifts for evangelism. But he had quite a different view then of what was and what wasn't evil, concerning music.

The 54-year-old pioneer of Christian rock is weak after undergoing quadruple-bypass surgery in November that attached one good artery to healthy heart tissue. The other arteries are attached to dead tissue, which resulted from a heart attack he suffered 10 years ago at a California hospital after medical staff had misdiagnosed him with indigestion.

Norman is too weak to play concerts or record, and he lives with his family close to a hospital in Salem, Ore. His poor health over the last decade has left him with dwindling health-insurance coverage and mounting medical bills.

Norman recently was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame on the same day as Elvis Presley, who was picked for his many gospel recordings.

"One reason I started doing Christian rock music was because I thought Elvis was trying to steal the church's music," Norman said during a telephone interview with Charisma from his Salem office of Solid Rock—his record company and ministry.

"I thought rock 'n' roll was bad—evil. I was trying to reclaim that style of music for the church. That was naïve on my part, but then I was only 9 years old at the time. I thought: Is no one going to stop this insanity? If rock is evil, let's do something about it. "

Norman had a change of spiritual heart in those early years about how to use rock music to win people to Jesus. In 1956 he started to perform publicly and write songs, at the tender age of 9.

After a successful but brief career in the Los Angeles band People!—with a Top 40 hit in 1968 titled "I Love You" (Capitol)—Norman spent 1968-69 as a missionary on Hollywood Boulevard, wandering the streets talking to hippies, prostitutes, homosexuals and the occasional movie star about Jesus.

By the early 1970s he had blown away the barriers the body of Christ had installed to "protect" people from the evils of rock music. His early work on his own albums—especially *Upon This Rock* (1969), *Only Visiting This Planet* (1972) and *In Another Land* (1976)—received mainstream critical recognition, including by former Beatle Paul McCartney, whom Norman had met in 1968. McCartney years later said in an interview that if "Larry Norman had not concentrated only on Christian music, he would have been a very big international artist."

Today, because of his weak heart, Norman bides his days praying for life. He never sought fame, he told *Charisma*, but just wanted a platform from which to tell people about Jesus.

He no longer plays guitar because his left arm and hand are

slightly paralyzed—the result of a blocked nerve also related to his heart ailments. He has to sleep sitting in a chair because if he lies down he can't breathe.

"I am very up," he said. "Most of the time I am resting comfortably. I have had to go to the hospital a few times with symptoms. But they let me out a few days later. I haven't been back to the hospital in a few weeks now, and I am starting to feel stronger."

Asked how he rates himself on communicating the gospel to non-Christians, Norman said: "I hope I created a new kind of music to provide a bridge between the secular mind and Christian truth. That was my goal. It was never my intention to be acceptable to Christians or to have my music performed by Christians.

"I had one goal," he continued, "and that was to change the nature or expand the nature of Christian music so that non-Christians could see themselves in the music. The effect that I was hoping to cause actually happened. People would say, 'When I heard your music, I realized I could become a Christian.'"

Friends have set up a trust fund to help Norman with his rising medical costs. He said he will need surgery later this year to repair his left hand so he can play his guitar.

Billy Bruce

Donations can be sent to The Larry Norman Trust Fund, c/o Solid Rock, 3760 Market St. N.E., PMB #306, Salem, OR 97301; or call (503) 391-1175. Visit the Web site at .