**WHY SHOULD THE DEVIL HAVE ALL THE GOOD MUSIC? LARRY NORMAN AND THE PERILS OF CHRISTIAN ROCK, GREGORY ALAN THORNBURY (2018)**

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*Reviewed by Rupert Loydell, Falmouth University*

Whilst Larry Norman (1947-2008) may be unknown to most *Punk & Post-Punk* readers, and his music rooted in mainstream rock, his outspoken mix of unholy christianity and rock, whether live or in the studio, influenced and provoked musicians across many genres, as well as unwittingly helping spawn the christian music industry and inspiring other musicians who shared his faith to work within the secular music industry that many had previously spawned. Late 1970s new wave bands such as Writz (later Famous Names) and After the Fire struggled to reconcile religious faith with the secular music business, as did early U2, whose lead singer Bono finally got to meet Norman in 2002 (Thompson, 2008).

Whilst Norman has little directly to do with punk or post-punk, beyond a 'punk remix' of one of his songs, The Pixies used a Larry Norman song line, 'Come on, pilgrim!', as the title of their first mini-album, and Frank Black later recorded a cover version of a Norman song on his first solo album and played with Norman at a 'farewell concert', an event you can watch on youtube (Willman 2008). *CCM* magazine also reported that 'Black and producer Steve Albini bonded over their Larry Norman fandom in the studio while making the first Pixies album'! (Willman 2008). So who was this man, and what does Gregory Alan Thornbury have to say about him in his new book?

Larry Norman grew up in San Francisco, a pale albino-like kid in a black neighbourhood, and went on to be hailed as 'the father of christian rock', having served a musical apprenticeship in People!, a band with a hit single who supported the likes of Janis Joplin, The Who and the Doors. He went on to have solo deals with Capitol and MGM before starting his own record labels, his own management company and his own house church (which, pretty much after he moved on, would be instrumental in Bob Dylan's 'conversion'). Later he would slide into cult status as the American christian music industry became big business without him. For the last decades of his life he issued CDs and CDRs of half-completed demos, remixes and versions of his 'classic' albums, often with bonus material, and occasional new music. When he died he was given obituaries in *The New York Times* (Hevesi 2008), *The Times* (unknown author, 2008) and *The Guardian* (Turner 2008).

Steve Turner, an accomplished English music journalist with a number of famous musician's biographies to his name might serve as an example to Thornbury, whose book is being touted by the publisher's publicity department as 'the untold story of the most influential rockstar you've never heard of...'. This is strange in itself, as Convergent is a niche imprint of Penguin Random House, whose list mainly consists of cozy religious non-fiction titles such as *7 Lessons from Heaven* and *You Are The Beloved: Daily Meditations for Spiritual Living.* Turner is known as a pedantic and thorough researcher, as well as a superb writer and critic, and he may be somewhat surprised to find a manuscript of his own unpublished book on Larry Norman in the 1970s used as a major source for Thornbury's book.

Turner took on a commission to accompany Norman on a world tour in 1977 and write a book about him. Turner made it clear to Norman that it would not be a whitewash job and that there were questions to be asked about Norman and his music, as well as the nature of christian rock. His book (which I have not seen or read) was apparently not what Norman wanted and the project was buried, with the manuscript being consigned to what this book's bibliography refers to as 'Larry Norman Papers, Salem, OR'. Unfortunately, it is this archive which is the main source of Thornbury's book, which is actually a mundane biography with little contextualisation or critical engagement.

Thornbury sets his book up as a series of confrontations, with chapters such as 'Jesus Versus Superman', ‘Jesus Versus Organized Religion', ‘Jesus Versus the Critics' and the final 'Jesus Versus Larry Norman', yet what he really means is 'Larry Norman Versus...'. Norman became a christian at a very young age, just as he started writing and singing, yet he was drawn towards a non-religious faith that meant he mostly stayed outside the organized church, instead embracing the Jesus Movement, the religious wing of the hippy movement, which swept through much of America and Europe in the early 70s. His first album *Upon This Rock* (1970) received rave reviews, and was played by the likes of John Peel. It was quirky, witty and gently subversive towards the spirituality it evidenced.

Throughout his career, Norman was as likely to play in the street or clubs as churches or christian concerts and festivals. He wanted to speak about faith but not to those who already possessed it, and not in syrupy religious terms. He tired of christians who despised rock and roll and turned his PA down or his vocals up, suggesting that that was where any 'message' might be found. His place, he felt was within rock'n'roll, as his denim and leather clothes and long blonde hair proclaimed. His next major album release, following a couple of low-fi, semi-bootleg releases he often gave out on the streets of LA, was regarded as his masterpiece, one that he never surpassed. Recorded at George Martin's AIR studios in London, with a studio band of hired musicians, and released by Verve/MGM, *Only Visiting This Planet* (1972), saw Norman critiquing American religion, America's leaders, the media and the moon landing, as well as addressing isolation, despair and sexuality. His use of words like 'gonorrhoae' in his lyrics may seem tame in the 21st century, but it shocked christians at the time, even as they flocked to see him in venues such as London's Royal Albert Hall, which he sold out twice. His next MGM album *So Long Ago The Garden* (1973) contained almost hallucinatory songs of despair and conflict inside its photo-collaged cover of a nude Norman and a South African lion, which also provoked religious disdain.

Norman was not completely a loner or rebel though. He attempted to set up a new label, Solid Rock, and management that would nurture and record new talent to a professional standard, and an associated business, Street Level, to organize tours. After that initial support he wanted musicians to move on to mainstream deals. He persuaded ABC and Word Records to fund this endeavour, but over the years failed to find and produce enough new artists to fulfil his contractual obligations. He also had a different vision of Sold Rock to many who did sign up, and eventually the organisation collapsed in acrimony, not helped by Norman's own divorce around the same time. Even an upbeat, very obviously 'christian' album such as 1976's *In Another Land* could not stop continued assaults in the religious media and Norman retreated away from the limelight, angry and rejected.

In later years Norman became obtuse, awkward and hard-to-fathom. Blaming an accident involving an aeroplane panel falling on his head, he was unable, he said, to complete planned albums, but *was* able to occasionally tour and release CDRs until eventual heart problems led to the cessation of these and his eventual death. One or two of the later albums, such as *Stranded in Babylon* (1993) saw a partial return to the musical vigour and accomplishment of earlier work, but most did not. Norman relied on a slowly declining cult status and much self-mythologising to maintain a fanbase. Yet he could be an amusing and sardonic commentator live, and a friendly email correspondent or letter writer if the mood took him.

I confess I've always been fascinated by Norman, and did indeed correspond with him over many years. Like Turner I had questions about his religion, his music and his business dealings I wanted to know about. I wanted to understand why his music was so oblivious to musical change, how the UK christian music business pretty much collapsed whilst the North American one became a multi-million dollar industry. Whether his proposed albums and series of concept works actually existed or not, and why he just didn't chill out and release them if they did. Why wouldn't he respond to his critics, including those who accused him of having an illegitimate son in Australia? And, of course I wanted to know what some of his allusionary and gnomic song lyrics actually meant.

The disappointing thing about this book is that Thornbury asks none of these questions. Instead, he has rooted through Norman's papers and let the deceased Norman dictate (not literally!) a kind of autobiography, without stopping to question what actually happened, or to involve other people who were there at the time, be that critics, reviewers, authors, musicians or associates. Much is mentioned in passing and aside, my proof copy has notes but no bibliography or discography, and little pre-existing published material over the last 40 years has been considered. Thornbury notes that Norman was self-mythologising, but seems complicit with this, although in a friendly aside earlier in the book Thornbury refers to his subject as 'the Forrest Gump of evangelical christianity'. (4) My own feeling is that Thornbury is the Forrest Gump for writing such a tame and ultimately disinteresting book about such a charismatic, questioning and intriguing musician.

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E-mail: rupert.loydell@falmouth.ac.uk