

Junior Norman and the Fugitives:  
African American Talent Meets the Hillbilly Genre

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## Junior Norman and the Fugitives

(African American Talent Meets the Hillbilly Genre)

This paper will examine and discuss the musical career and influences of the late Sylva “Catfish” Norman, Junior. “Junior Norman,” as he was known professionally, was an African American singer and musician who lived in Morgan County, Ohio and performed traditional country music and square dance music across Southeastern Ohio, Northern West Virginia and Western Pennsylvania from the mid-1960s through the late-1990s.

Junior Norman was arguably the most successful African American country music artist to emerge from the Ohio River Valley in the Twentieth Century. He recorded at least one record in Nashville (“Reflections of a Fool” b/w “A Word or Two to Mary”) and performed regularly on the WWVA-AM “Wheeling Jamboree.” Junior Norman and the Fugitives frequently performed on other radio programs in Marietta and Columbus, Ohio and appeared on television programs in Zanesville, Ohio and Parkersburg, West Virginia.

Junior’s band, “The Fugitives,” was at various times composed entirely of African American musicians, several of whom had served time in jail, thus precipitating the name “The Fugitives.” All untrained, but highly skilled musicians, Junior Norman and The Fugitives played to almost exclusively white audiences, in a genre that has traditionally been the restricted domain of white performers.

Junior’s music touched literally thousands of lives during his life and career, and yet has not been documented. Junior Norman left a legacy across the Ohio River Valley that includes musical influences on subsequent generations of performers, who will be interviewed for this paper.

## **Introduction**

In 1980, just about everyone in Morgan County, Ohio knew Junior Norman. In fact Junior had achieved a level of musical success in the Ohio and Muskingum Valleys that made him a regional celebrity. Junior was always immaculately groomed, with every hair perfectly combed into place, and his clothes spotlessly clean and perfectly pressed. His blue jeans bore a sharp crease. Junior kept his vehicles absolutely spotless inside and out. He covered the seats to keep both them and his clothes clean. When he performed, he played a 1953 Gibson ES 155 that looked just as it did the day it was newly purchased. (*See Appendix 1: Publicity Photograph of Junior Norman with Gibson guitar.*) He doted on the guitar and meticulously wiped every fingerprint off it before returning it to its case. Junior was not “showy.” He wore no jewelry. He would never wear a hat. He loved to joke and he was a prankster, but the twinkle in his eye would almost always betray his intent.

What made Junior Norman’s story truly unique was his racial heritage, the choice of musical genre through which he achieved his success, and the part of the country where he lived and performed. Junior was of tri-racial descent. He did not look African-American, and was often asked about his ethnicity. He regularly answered by saying “I’m a little bit Indian, a little bit Dutch, a little bit colored, but not too much.”

Growing up in predominantly white rural southeastern Ohio, Junior was immersed in Appalachian farm culture. In this paper the author intends to show that the inescapable presence and influence of the country music genre in this region helped to shape Junior Norman's musical career, despite the unlikelihood that a colored performer would choose a white musical form. In fact, it is likely that timing and coincidence factored into Junior's musical choice, as he was refining his style at a time when country music was becoming gentrified.

### **Junior Norman's Family and Early Years**

Silvey Dale Norman, Jr. was born October 8, 1933 to Sylva and Mildred (Jackson) Norman, and was soon dubbed "Junior," a name that stayed with him the rest of his life. Later, Junior would become the professional name under which he performed for over three decades. Sylva and Mildred Norman were divorced soon after Junior's birth. Sylva remarried Mabel Norris in 1936, and they immediately adopted Junior, and went on to have five more children, Junior's half-siblings Roy, Jean, Patty, Shirley, and Kay. (*See Appendix 2: Photograph of Junior and Roy Norman.*)

Junior Norman grew up in Malta-McConnelsville, in Morgan County, Ohio and demonstrated his musical ability nearly from the time he was able to talk.

According to his stepmother Mabel, now ninety years old, Junior sang almost constantly and by the time he was in elementary school he had begun to play guitar. Immediately after graduating from Malta-McConnelsville high school,

Junior joined the Navy and did a four-year stint at sea. He returned to Morgan County in about 1955 and continued to develop his musical abilities by singing at meetings, family gatherings, picnics and “just about anywhere there was an audience.”

Most Morgan County folks only knew young Silvey by one of his nicknames. As was a common practice in the African-American and tri-racial communities in rural southern Ohio, Junior also acquired a second nickname. Early on he had become known by the nickname of “Catfish.” (His uncles bore nicknames like “Boxer,” “Slim” and “Hamburg.”) And throughout the rest of his life he would continue to be “Catfish” to friends and acquaintances, even having his leather belts and guitar straps hand-embossed with the nickname. But what makes Junior Norman’s story unique in Appalachian Ohio is his chosen musical genre: country music.

Junior Norman began playing country music in the late 1950s, at a time when the genre was maturing and emerging as a more widely accepted musical style, shedding its previous designation of “hillbilly” music. But, the late 1950s was a time when there were virtually no African American performers, particularly in southern Ohio. The country music of the latter twentieth century began as an amalgam of hillbilly music of the eastern U.S. Appalachian regions and “cowboy” music of the southwest. “Country and western” music was becoming a more sophisticated art form in the 1950s, typified by solo vocalists rather than the vocal

duets and trios that had been built around the traditional harmonies found in bluegrass and mountain music. Country music was also abandoning the yodeling cattle calls of the singing cowboys.

### **The Growth and Influences of Country Music**

Still, country music was a decidedly white musical form in every way.

By the mid 1950s, country music became dominated by the “Nashville sound” which was characterized by a more “pop” ensemble sound including drums, electric guitar and electric bass guitar, pedal steel guitar, and lush orchestrations featuring strings and horns. Popular performers of the “Nashville sound” included Patsy Cline (“Walking After Midnight,” “Crazy”), Jim Reeves (“Four Walls,” “He’ll Have to Go”) Floyd Cramer (“Last Date”) and Chet Atkins. That Nashville sound was being embraced by a wider and more diverse audience.

By the early 1960s other subgenres of country music were emerging, such as the “Bakersfield” sound, which extended country’s reach into still wider audiences.

The “Bakersfield” sound is associated with performers like Buck Owens and the Buckaroos (“Act Naturally,” “Tiger by the Tail,” “Together Again”) and Merle Haggard and the Strangers (“Mama Tried,” “Green Green Grass of Home,” “The Fugitive”).

The popularity of country music was further helped along by its acceptance in the electronic media. AM radio was still the dominant broadcast technology on the

radio airwaves in the 1960s as Junior Norman began his musical career, and AM waves' ability to skip across the globe at night made programs like WSM's *Grand Ol' Opry* nationally accessible. Dozens of local radio stations in the Muskingum and Ohio River Valleys produced weekly programs that mimicked the popular *Grand Ol' Opry* format. Cincinnati's WLW launched the long-running *Midwestern Hayride*. Wheeling, West Virginia's WWVA began airing the still popular *Jamboree*. (See Appendices 3 and 4: *WWVA Jamboree*.)

Closer to Morgan County, Columbus radio station WMNI, known as the "Country Giant" broadcast live country music shows each Saturday. Signals from Marietta-Parkersburg or Zanesville were the dominant influences for daytime radio listeners in Morgan County, Ohio. Stations in those markets like Marietta's WBRJ offered *Country Cavalcade*, a localized version of the live country music variety show broadcast each Saturday from the Pottmeyer Dodge dealership.

Television programs added more fuel to the country music phenomenon in the 1960s and early 1970s. Many nationally known country artists hosted their own programs like *The Porter Wagoner Show*, *The Wilburn Brothers*, and *The Johnny Cash Show*. Most local television stations, including those in the Muskingum and Ohio River Valleys, had their lower budget country music variety shows, frequently titled *Barn Dance*, *Hayride* or *Jamboree*. It was during this period that country music's presence on network television peaked, with primetime programming like the very popular *Hee Haw*, and the slickly produced *The Glenn Campbell Hour*.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s country music had evolved into the “Countryopolitan” sound, which was positioned as a crossover genre, and trying to siphon off segments of the young upscale pop audience with artists such as Glenn Campbell (“Wichita Lineman,” “Gentle on My Mind”), Kenny Rogers (“Ruby Don’t Take Your Love to Town,” “The Gambler”) and one of country music’s few African American artists, Charley Pride (“Kiss an Angel Good Morning,” “Kaw Liga,” “Is Anybody Going to San Antone”). (See *Appendix 5: WMNI playlist chart*.)

### **Morgan County**

These were the dominant styles that would influence Junior Norman’s musical tastes and shape his style. And this was the unique socio-cultural milieu in which Junior Norman would develop his personality and presence: rural southern Ohio in the mid-twentieth century with its conservative values, steeped in Appalachian traditions, and still with pronounced racial biases. Morgan County has traditionally been a somewhat “bi-polar” community. On the one hand, some areas of the county played a role in the Underground Railroad, and have embraced racial and cultural diversity. But conversely, many Morgan County residents have said that in other parts of the county, the Ku Klux Klan was reported to have existed well into the final decades of the twentieth century.

While many members of Morgan County's African American and tri-racial populations achieved economic success by becoming highly skilled tradesmen or professionals, many more still performed menial tasks such as trash collection, attending dumps and junkyards, or day labor. Morgan County was a stratified society, and people of color most often struggled to rise beyond the lower levels. That is another part of what makes Junior Norman's story unusual. Junior crossed race and color lines easily in his musical career, although he still worked as an hourly employee in a machining factory.

### **Junior Norman's Musical Career**

By the mid 1960s, Junior had refined his talent, developed a repertoire composed largely of the more pop oriented, easily and widely accepted forms of country music, like the "Bakersfield" and "Countryopolitan" sounds. Junior was ready to perform professionally. His talent and personality enabled him to easily open doors that would normally be closed to colored performers. Junior's tri-racial ancestry also made him light-skinned, with wavy hair and facial features that were more native-American than African. Junior Norman had no difficulty in finding venues in which to perform.

Junior's first band was composed of Hamer "Donnie" Wilson, Jr. playing guitar, Doug Parsons playing bass, and Dick "Blinky" Curry playing drums.

Coincidentally, all three of these men had served some short terms in jail, generally for some minor offense. Junior played rhythm guitar and of course

sang. When Junior made the first booking for the four-piece band, they were billed as “Junior Norman and the Fugitives,” as a wink to the somewhat shaded pasts of the other three musicians. That name stuck, and Junior Norman continued to play with the “Fugitives” for over twenty-five years. Various musicians came and went in the band, but the name never changed.

Junior Norman’s baritone voice was deep, smooth, and controlled; and he exhibited precise enunciation and diction. His was a far cry from the whiny, nasal twang and southern drawl now popularized by so many Nashville artists. The growing popularity of country music coupled with Junior’s considerable talent and distinctiveness combined to accelerate his career in a way of which many performers only dream. The band quickly moved on from beer joints and honky-tonks to fairs, festivals, nightclubs and variety shows. Fraternal clubs throughout southern Ohio, northern West Virginia, and western Pennsylvania were eager to book Junior Norman and the Fugitives, even though they would not admit non-white patrons.

Country music’s immense popularity in the electronic media, and possibly the national success of artist Charley Pride, to whom Junior bore a strong resemblance, helped put Junior’s career into overdrive. Junior had developed a relationship with a booking agent, Nina Miller, in Beverly, Ohio and he began performing to ever-larger audiences at larger venues: outdoor amphitheaters at Ponderosa Park, Royma Acres, and larger county and state fairs, where he

opened for nationally known Nashville performers. By 1969 he was doing live performances regularly on radio and television broadcasts throughout the Ohio River Valley and Central Ohio.

It was also in about 1969 that Junior Norman made his first appearance on WWVA's *Jamboree USA*. This live country music show, broadcast over WWVA's 50,000-watt transmitter, was heard over most of the eastern U.S., Canada and Nova Scotia. Audience reaction was so positive that Junior Norman became a *Jamboree* "regular." He was the only non-white performer on their roster, and one of only a few performers of African American descent to ever perform on the *Jamboree*. As a *Jamboree* regular, Junior performed in road shows with other *Jamboree* stars all across the station's listening area. Sadly, Junior Norman's affiliation with the WWVA *Jamboree* is poorly documented, and he is one of the performers whose twenty-five year affiliation did not earn him a place in the *Jamboree* "Hall of Fame." (See *Appendix 6: Show Line-up for 1976 WWVA "Jamboree in the Hills."*)

Junior Norman's popularity in the Ohio River Valley continued to expand into the 1970s. The personnel in "the Fugitives" gradually changed to include some of the best country musicians in the area. Paul "Dave" Mayle replaced Donnie Wilson on guitar, and bass duties were handled by Dennis Huck, and then later by Tom Parsons. For a time, [author of this article] Rick Shriver played drums with "the Fugitives."

Junior had also begun a family in the early 1960s. He married Mary Mayle, and together they had seven children: Doug, Tom, Bonnie, Tracey, Tim, Sarah, and Jamie. All of his children inherited some of Junior's musical ability, and by the early 1980s, they occasionally joined him onstage, with Doug playing bass, Tom on drums, Tracey playing guitar, and both Bonnie and Sarah singing.

In the mid-1970s Junior recorded his first and only record in Nashville, Tennessee. He was no stranger to Nashville, as he had traveled there every fall since the late 1960s to participate in the combined Country Music Association and Country Disk Jockey Convention. During the one-week convention, all the Nashville recording artists returned to the city to perform in lavish showcases sponsored by their record labels, and ply the DJs with free food and liquor. Junior would perform at the Ohio Country Music Association showcase and in hospitality suites and local bars, in hopes that an A & R representative from a major label would hear him and offer him a contract.

The studio selected was "Artist of America," located on Church Street in Nashville's "Music Row". Marshall Miller produced the session. The song chosen for the "A" side of the single was "Reflection of a Fool," written by Ivan Strother, and the "B" side would be "A Word or Two to Mary," written by Vince Bulla and Peter Cotton. Charley Pride had previously recorded "A Word or Two to Mary" in 1968, but it had never been released as a single.

Miller sent cassette tapes of the two songs for Junior to learn. While he was an untrained musician and did not read notation, tablature or the Nashville Notation System, Junior had flawless relative pitch and could learn a song merely by hearing it a few times. He changed the keys of the songs to suit his vocal range, and worked out arrangements to suit his style. Junior then recorded the songs on a cassette, which he sent back to Nashville, where Miller hired studio musicians to perfect the arrangements and record the basic tracks. When the tracks were recorded, Miller again sent a cassette of the final arrangements back to Junior to rehearse. After a minor bit of vocal coaching on enunciation, Junior recorded the lead vocal tracks in one take.

Like most recording deals in the Music City, delivering the disks is where the label's responsibility ended. The tracks were pressed into 45-rpm singles, which were delivered to Junior for him to distribute. There was no promotional department to get the record onto radio station play lists, into jukeboxes or record stores. But, Junior's regional success and affiliation with radio stations in the Ohio and Muskingum Valleys served him well. The A side, "Reflection of a Fool," was put into the rotation at many radio stations for which he had performed live shows. Unfortunately the recordings never pushed Junior Norman to the next level of achievement in the music industry. He sold the records dutifully at his performances, but a major label never picked him up. (See *Appendices 7 and 8, Images of Junior Norman's record.*)

Junior Norman continued to perform nearly every weekend across southern Ohio, northern West Virginia, and eastern Pennsylvania until the mid-1990s. He also continued to work a day job as tool crib supervisor at the Malta “J-Line” factory until its closing in the late 1970s, and then as driver and laborer at the Ohio Department of Transportation Garage until his retirement.

### **Junior Norman’s Passing**

Junior Norman passed away October 20, 1998. He had been diagnosed with Addison’s disease in the 1970s, which is characterized by a complete lack of hormones from the adrenal cortex. Treatment for the disease is regular doses of steroids (cortisone), with some expected side effects from the medication. It was therefore not a surprise that Junior suffered some health problems by the time he reached his sixties.

It was a surprise, however, that Junior was diagnosed with Mantel Cell Lymphoma, a rare form of Leukemia. Junior suffered from gastric symptoms that were consistent with pancreatitis, and it was during his examination for the cause of these symptoms that his condition was diagnosed. The same symptoms are consistent with MCL. According to his daughter, Junior had been hospitalized in Columbus, Ohio for testing. He was injected with a contrast dye to facilitate a CT-scan examination. Upon return to his hospital room, he unexpectedly died.

Tragically, Junior Norman's legacy is in danger of being lost. Only a few copies of his record remain, and are owned by family and close friends. Photographs are very difficult to find. Web searches for Junior Norman return no results. While other regular performers on the Wheeling Jamboree are commemorated in photographs and/or inductance to the Jamboree Hall of Fame, Junior is only occasionally mentioned in the printed programs as a performer at the "Jamboree in the Hills." In the early 1990s, Junior returned to Nashville to discover the recording studio where he recorded was recently closed. The building was abandoned and strewn about the floors of the building were boxes of tapes, including the masters for his single. Junior retrieved his master tapes and brought them back to Morgan County. The whereabouts of those tapes is not known. Hopefully, this paper is a meager beginning at carving out a place for Junior Norman in the musical heritage of the Ohio River Valley.

## Sources

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## Author's note:

Much of the information in this paper was based on interviews with Sarah Norman, Ronnie Norman and Mabel Norman.

Other information obtained from recollections of Darnell Miller (performer on WWVA Jamboree), and the author.

Appendix 1.



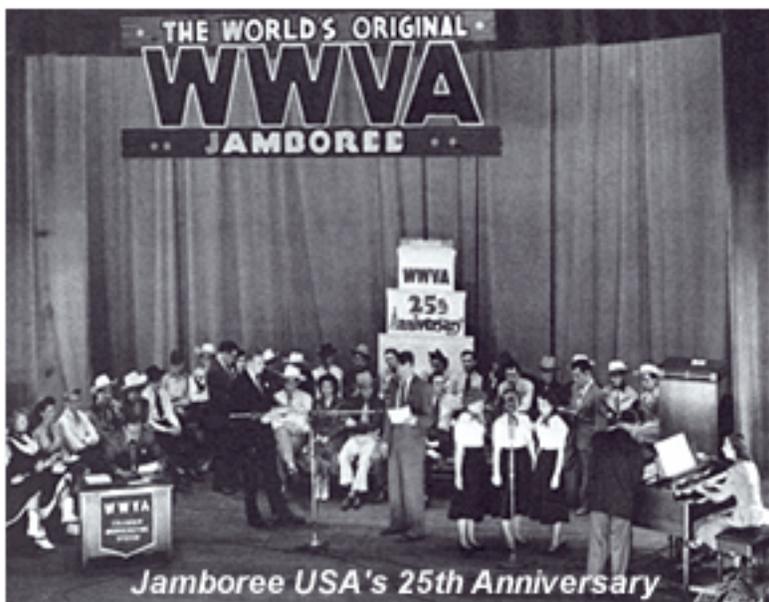
Junior Norman Publicity Photo.

Appendix 2.



Junior Norman and Roy Norman

Appendix 3.



Cast of WWVA Jamboree USA in 1958.

Appendix 4.



Left to right—Reed Dunn, Eileen Newcomer, Sunflower, Joe Barker, Maxine Newcomer, Bonnie Baldwin, Honey Davis, Millie Wayne, Vernon Hyles, Lucky Carter, Denver Crumpler, Shirley Barker, Walter Leverett, Gay Schwing, Arnold Hyles, Ramona, Rex McDowell, Toby Stroud, Herman Schwing, Paul Yost, Tex King, Dick Biddle, Wyn Sheldon.

**WWVA**

**Hillbilly Program Schedule**

- 4:30 Toby Stroud
- 5:00 Davis Twins
- 5:30 Chuckwagon Gang
- 6:00 Reed Dunn
- 6:15 Radio Rangerettes
- 7:30 Toby Stroud
- 9:15 Sunflower and Paul
- 1:30 Toby Stroud
- 1:45 Newcomer Twins
- 2:00 Gay Schwing's Gang
- 2:15 Radio Rangerettes
- 2:30 Rangers Quartet
- 2:45 Reed Dunn
- 3:00 Sunflower and Paul
- 4:15 Chuckwagon Gang
- 4:45 Davis Twins
- 11:30 Rangers Quartet
- 12:00 Chuckwagon Gang
- 12:30 Gay Schwing's Gang

**1170 On Your Dial**

*Handwritten scribbles and illegible text.*

WWVA Jamboree cast in 1945.



Appendix 6.

**Wheeling Jamboree In The Hills-1977**

**(Brush Run Park, St. Clairsville, Ohio)**

Web site by [RON NEWCOMER](#)  
[Click here to view my profile](#)

*For information about Jamboree In The Hills 2006 which will take place on July 13-16, 2006 [click here](#).*

*Click on the names to see the photos.*

**Saturday, July 16**

**12:00 Noon-Staff Band Intro**  
**12:02 PM-Tommy Wills**  
**12:15 PM-Dody Lynn**  
**12:30 PM-Cochran Family**  
**12:45 PM-Slim Lehart**  
**1:00 PM-Barbara Mandrell**  
**2:00 PM-Les SeEVERS**  
**2:15 PM-Jimmy Gateley**  
**2:30 PM-Linda Cassady**  
**2:45 PM-Darnell Miller**  
**3:00 PM-Asleep At The Wheel**  
**4:00 PM-Ray Kirkland**  
**4:15 PM-Tom T. Hall**  
**5:15 PM-Kathy Shaw**  
**5:30 PM-Joey Ross**  
**5:45 PM-Junior Norman**  
**6:00 PM-Tammy Wynette**  
**7:00 PM-Mark Dalton**  
**7:15 PM-Lynn Stewart**  
**7:30 PM-Leon Douglas**  
**7:45 PM-Mike White/Sliter Bros.**  
**8:00 PM-The Johnny Cash Show**  
**Johnny Cash**

**June Carter Cash**  
**Johnny Cash & June Carter Cash**  
**Carter Family (Jan Howard, June Carter Cash, Anita Carter)**  
**Jan Howard**  
**Rosey Nix**  
**10:00 PM-Mayf Nutter**  
**10:15 PM-Julie Howe/Crazy Elmer**  
**10:30 PM-Skinney Clark**  
**11:00 PM-Mickey Gilley**

**Sunday, July 17**

**10:45 AM-Jimmy Stephens & JoAnn Davis**  
**11:00 AM-Blue Ridge Quartet**  
**11:30 AM-Bob Harrington**  
**12:00 Noon-Charlie Rich**  
**1:00 PM-Ernest Tubb**  
**1:30 PM-Kiddog**  
**1:45 PM-The Doc Williams Show**  
**2:00 PM-Johnny Russell**  
**2:30 PM-Freddy Fender**  
**3:30 PM-Mike White/Sliter Bros.**  
**3:45 PM-Charlie Moore/Dixie Partners**  
**4:00 PM-Donna Fargo**  
**5:00 PM-Merle Haggard**  
**Bonnie Owens**  
**Bob Eubanks**

Show line-up for 1977 Jamboree in the Hills.

Appendix 7.



Appendix 8.

