



Norrine Linderman  
is still the 'Outlaw Queen'  
at 80 years old

# Nightclub Royalty

BY BETH JUDY



Norrine 'The Outlaw Queen' Linderman entertains guests at Happy Pappy's Cookout along Pryor Creek near Billings. | Photo by Larry Mayer/Billings Gazette





"Howdy howdy cowboys, come right in this house, I'm going to sing some songs for you."

It's Norrine, the Outlaw Queen—Norrine Linderman of Billings—on the bandstand in Trixi's Saloon in Ovando. The Framus guitar in her arms is almost as big as she is, though it takes a while to realize that she is tiny. Her hair is red, soft and curled, under a favorite cowboy hat. Black velvet pants are tucked into high-heeled boots; she wears a black sequined top under a loose, colorful jacket that lets her move. Move she does, as she plays, kicking one foot out for emphasis—or joy; switching her weight side to side as a song heats up; crouching low to egg her bass player on. Songs by Floyd Tillman, Gene Autry, Patti Page and Patsy Montana flow by, songs like *Slippin' Around*, *Back in the Saddle Again*, *Walking After Midnight*, *Love Knot in my Lariat*.

Norrine throws in a jitterbug; Dwight Yoakum's *Guitars, Cadillacs*; another tune that shows off her yodeling. In between, she chats about the artists who wrote and performed the music, as well as her own life—a full one. Norrine is 80. "There's only one like me," she boasts with a wink.

She grew up in the Rock River area of Illinois, near Prophetstown. Her parents farmed and ran a hunting-and-fishing camp. Good teachers and school music programs got Norrine started singing, then visitors to her family's camp recognized her talent and urged her folks to buy her a guitar. Norrine was 13. "I kept monkeying and working with it," she remembers.

A musical sponge, she soaked up songs and techniques from records "on the Victrola"—Jimmie Rodgers was one major influence—and from musician friends. She won a talent show and got to sing on Chicago's WLS Radio.

## 'There's only one like me.'

Norrine Linderman

In 1947, the legendary 17 Club was opening in Billings. Musician friends talked her parents into letting her go west with them to work there. Her dad put her on the train.

Montana, Norrine says, was "plum different. It was beautiful. Excitement. Cowboys.

Nightclubs. I sure fell in love with the country. I sure wasn't going back to Illinois."

At 18, she performed six nights a week with the five-piece 17 Bar Band and sang on a live country-radio show two mornings a week. "We ended with a gospel song." In a black-and-white photo, young Norrine stands in a fringed skirt, satin cowgirl blouse, and kerchief, her booted feet together, guitar at the ready, looking for all the world like a meadowlark. One July 4th, she and fellow band members took the day off and drove over the Beartooth Highway. "I couldn't believe that country," she says. They wrote a song together that she still sings, *In the Shadow of the Rockies*.

The 17 Club was near the stockyards and rodeo grounds. "Cowboy heaven," she grins. "I intended to work in music, not get married." But she did in 1949, two years after arriving in Billings, to rodeo athlete Doug Linderman, a lean, handsome man with a boyish smile. The Lindermans of Belfry were Montana royalty, a family full of rodeo champs. For 4½ seasons, Norrine accompanied Doug on rodeo road. Winters, she sang and Doug dealt cards at the 17. In 1952, after their first child, they bought a nightclub in Red Lodge, the Swinging Doors, and made it one of the liveliest spots in the state.

Five years later, at age 33, Doug died of a heart attack. "I've had some roaring men," Norrine says, "but he was my big love."

It was hard. "I had a nightclub, a big house, a 6-year-old and a 5-month-old," she remembers. But she went on living. She married twice more, spending some years in Las Vegas with one husband. But these men died too. She was done with marriage by 1978. In 1965, the Swinging Doors burned; over the years, Norrine bought or leased other bars, including the Hayloft in Billings. "I loved the nightclub business," she says. Making her way past tables on one of her rare breaks at Trixi's ("When I work, I



Linderman has entertained the crowd during the annual Christmas dinners at the Montana Rescue Mission in Billings since the late 1980s.

Photo by Larry Mayer/Billings Gazette

WORK!"), she stops to clear glasses, for old time's sake.

Through it all, she performed. "I've played nightclubs, rodeos, hotel lounges, even warehouses," she says, referring to the former Wild Horse Pavilion in Miles City. Today, she plays Tiny's in Billings on Sundays, the Bull and Bear in Red Lodge once a month, Chico Hot Springs four or five times a year and other venues.

"Norrine's a professional, an entertainer," says old friend Lane Coulston. She feels out her audience, he says, what music they'll like. She's a strong bandleader. "She knows every key a song should be played in." Her memory for names and faces is phenomenal, and she tosses out songs to individuals like roses. "I learned it from old hands at the 17," she confesses. "Make people feel important."

"She still has a fantastic voice and thrives on everyone having a good time," says Lucy Checketts of the Bull and Bear. "Performing keeps her young."

Musically, Norrine is a living treasure. Fellow performer Stan Howe estimates she knows 2,000 to 3,000 songs. Norrine explains, "I started learning them in the 1940s. I don't know how I keep them in my head."

Cowboy poet friends thought up Norrine's current sobriquet in the 1980s. It fits. A true outlaw, she's hard to

keep up with and hard to pin down. When I arrived at her hotel to interview her, she wasn't there. I tracked her to Trixi's. "We're just moving some equipment," she said, as her nephew wrestled speakers into a silver Lincoln's cavernous trunk. Their second Ovando gig was that night, a barn dance. It was noon, and Norrine was unadorned yet stylish in a beaded denim duster, bellbottom jeans, and high-heeled sandals. At the barn, she picked her way ladylike across uneven floorboards while giving orders like a general and answering my questions in between. That night, to *Happy Trails*, the last couple glided to a stop. The last sleeping child was lifted from hay bales into chilly night air. Norrine and her companions packed up and turned the big car's nose east. They would drive all night.

At Trixi's, a friend had whispered to me, "That would be something, to have her memories." As if she heard her, Norrine said, "A lot of girls dream about where I've been."

At the barn dance, five-year-old Iris Swanberg approached the singer. Her father had told her Norrine was a queen.

"Are you royalty?" Iris asked, peering up.

"I'm musician royalty, honey," Norrine answered. **M**

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