

**NORMA
JEAN
BEASLER**
1938-



**SINGING
WITH
PORTER
WAGONER**

Norma Jean was a popular 1960s recording artist and television star, whose cheerful smile and uncompromising, woman-oriented songs created an enduring image of likeable femininity. Along with Jean Shephard and Wanda Jackson, she was an early Oklahoma country singer.

Norma Jean Beasler was born in January 1938 near Wellston. In 1945 the family moved to Oklahoma City. Because her parents were poor, Norma sold her bicycle and bought a guitar from Sears & Roebuck because she loved to sing. She listened to the records of Kitty Wells, often emulating her while singing. She also liked the Western swing of Bob Wills.

By age twelve, she made her professional debut singing “If Teardrops Were Pennies” on radio station KLPR, which led to a weekly show. At sixteen, she toured Oklahoma with Western Swing bands, including Merl Lindsay and His Oklahoma Night Riders and the Bill Gray Band.

From 1958 to 1960, she was a regular cast member on the ABC-TV show Ozark Jubilee in Springfield, Missouri. Host Red Foley shortened her name and she became known as Pretty Miss Norma Jean. She met Porter Wagoner during an early guest appearance. In 1959 after unsuccessful singles with Columbia Records, she moved to Nashville. Wagoner invited her to audition for his syndicated weekly TV program. She became a regular in 1961 and performed with him across the country. This raised her profile, and she signed with RCA Victor producer Chet Atkins.

Her chart singles included “Let’s Go All the Way” (#11), “I’m a Walking Advertisement” (#32) and “Put Your Arm Around Her” (#25). Norma Jean also performed with The Grand Ole Opry from 1964 to 1969. Her love-triangle song “The Game of Triangles” with Bobby Bare and Liz Anderson hit #5 and earned the trio a 1965 Grammy nomination.

Beasler projected a wholesome image on television, but her songs were about hurtin' and cheatin'. A romance with the recent-separated Wagoner ended when he refused to divorce his wife, so Norma Jean married Jody Taylor in 1967 and left the show after six years. She also had a Top-30 hit with "Heaven Help the Working Girl," an early feminist song.

While auditioning Dottie West, Connie Smith and Tammy Wynette, Wagoner discovered Dolly Parton, who soon realized how hard it was to gain acceptance from an audience that loved Norma Jean. Parton stayed for seven years. She wrote “I Will Always Love You” to Wagoner, who was no longer listening to her. He proclaimed “This song would bring you more money and fame than all of your other songs.” Whitney Houston would turn it into a megahit.

Returning to Oklahoma, Norma Jean had her last chart hit in 1971 with "The Kind of Needin' I Need". The feisty themes of vengeful wife, blue-collar strugglers, man-eating honky-tonk women becoming more obvious in her songs, which appealed to the emerging women's movement.

Throughout Norma Jean’s colorful life, she worked with many country legends. She made 13 country singles and 27 albums, and received two Grammy nominations. Overcoming alcoholism through devotion to Christianity, she has also performed at New York's Carnegie Hall and Madison Square Garden. She later founded Branson’s interdenominational Cowboy Church and often performs there.