

THE VANCOUVER WEEKEND EDITION

# courier



## Mining the truth

Back in 1959, a crucial yet little-known moment in the career of country music legend Loretta Lynn took place behind a bungalow in South Vancouver

—story by Rob Howatson



## COVER

Kentucky-born Lynn connected to Vancouver through sawmill owner

# Historic backyard barn demolished in early '70s

Rob Howatson  
Contributing writer

The tiny bungalow on East Kent Avenue is the most unassuming house on the block. Set well back from the road and partially obscured by trees, the simple, four-room abode seems lost among its newer, million-dollar neighbours that overlook the north arm of the Fraser River flowing past the foot of Elliott Street. A stroll down the dead-end lane behind the house, reveals even less, because a wall of wild blackberry bushes protects the back yard from prying eyes. The only notable feature in the alley is a discarded, aluminum balcony railing positioned to discourage vehicles from parking in a small clearing. The scrap metal glimmers in the sun like a grinning set of braces, as if the property savours a secret, which it most certainly does.

Few people know that country music singer Loretta Lynn—she of *Coal Miner's Daughter* fame—was discovered by record executives in that rustic backyard in 1959 when she attended a jam session held in a chicken coop that had been converted to a private party space. Lynn rarely mentions the story to journalists and the barn was demolished in the early '70s, but the truth endures. On Sept. 16, local history buffs will gather at nearby Riverfront Park to unveil a Vancouver Heritage Foundation



After Zero Records, Don Grashey (left) and Chuck Williams retreated to Thunder Bay where they eventually formed DMG Sound Studio. *photo courtesy Sandi LoHanger*

Places That Matter plaque commemorating the Queen of Country's inauspicious, henhouse meeting with representatives from Zero Records, the tiny Vancouver label that launched the superstar's career.

Vancouver music aficionado Mike Harling will be at the plaque party. He was

the first writer to track down the former location of the Chicken Coop in 2002 after his friend, sports historian Fred Hume, told him that Kentucky-born Lynn had a connection to the city through local football pioneer and sawmill owner Norm Burley. "Loretta lived in Washington State in the 1950s and she played any gig she could get, on both sides

of the border, before she moved to Nashville and made it big," says the soft-spoken Harling. "The First Lady of Country likes to say that Burley discovered her when he saw Loretta sing 'Whispering Sea' on Buck Owens TV show out of Tacoma, but in fact it was two music producers from Thunder Bay, Ontario who spotted her at the Coop and signed her to Zero Records."

Don Grashey was the president of the tiny label when it began, and his longtime business partner Chuck Williams was the vice-president. They were stunned when Lynn published her first autobiography, *Coal Miner's Daughter* in 1976 and it contained only a passing mention of Grashey and no word about The Coop. Harling interviewed the two veteran record men a few years before they passed away in 2005 and Grashey, a Canadian Country Music Association Hall of Famer, was still bitter. "I would like her [Lynn] to tell the truth, instead of the bullshit that was in the movie and in her book. Norm Burley did nothing. He was just a shareholder who had some money. That's all he was, y'know. I did all the god darned work. I signed her and I produced her and I published her songs and I promoted her god darned record [*I'm A Honky Tonk Girl*] to number 14 on the Billboard and I got nothing out of it, but a bunch of bullshit."

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# 'Chicken Coop' floorboards bounced during weekend dance events

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Chuck Williams, who was the first of the duo to see Lynn in Vancouver, also felt that their contributions were crucial to her career. "Loretta was in the Pacific Northwest singing for quite awhile before we signed her. No one had made any overtures to record her, so I believe if we hadn't discovered her, if we weren't the professionals that we were and knew how to do things, I honestly don't think she would have made it."

As for The Chicken Coop, the only image of it known to exist is from a 1961 aerial photograph that hangs in the reception area of North Arm Transport, a tug and barge operation across the railway tracks from the property where the party barn once stood.

The black and white photo was hand tinted and shows an unpaved Elliott Street snaking down the South Van slope to the muddy river, the narrow road passing between the massive Fraservue subdivision that was built for Second World War veterans and the golf course of the same name that was built as a Depression-era work relief project.

Marine Drive appears as two lanes of lightly driven blacktop that cuts across the vista mid-frame. Beneath it, a loosely spaced cluster of neatly kept homes overlook the rough, industrial shoreline. Today, most of those houses have been replaced by a tight wall of detached residences and condominiums. Only the tiny 1949 bungalow, standing squat and isolated in the photo's central foreground, remains. And clearly visible behind it is a long, low slung building with a patched roof and a line of small, square windows.



Sandi Loranger and folk band Viper Central jam near former Coop site.

photo Jason Lang

Gino and Leo Stradiotti, two of North Arm's principals who grew up in the neighbourhood, both identify the structure as The Chicken Coop. They heard the noise from the parties, and saw ambulances and police cars attend whenever the revelers got out of hand. Neither cousin had any idea that Lynn had performed there, but they knew the property owners Ernest Clare "Mac" McGregor and his wife Irene. The childless couple were from the Prairies. Mac worked a short walk upriver at the giant Canadian White Pine sawmill, which has since been demolished and is being replaced by the River District condominium development. Irene was a stylish dresser who sewed

her own outfits and could be seen catching the streetcar each morning enroute to her office job at an oil and coal company.

Mrs. McGregor's brother was the longtime *Province* sports writer Clancy Loranger—a cigar chomping, hard drinking, baseball statistic guru for whom the entrance street to Nat Bailey Stadium is named. Loranger passed away in 2010, but not before he gave an interview in which he recalled attending dances at The Coop. He said that his sister and brother-in-law were "a pretty sharp couple," referring to their resourcefulness on limited incomes. The sports scribe had photos that showed the Fraser River squatter shacks that Mac built for

his wife and mother-in-law while they struggled to save enough money to buy land. The "shacks" were attractive cottages on stilts with ample decks and container gardens. In one photo, Clancy and his wife Joye are horsing around on the patio beside a table draped in linen and set with fine dinner china. Mac often swam in the Fraser and if they wanted salmon for lunch, they just tied a line to the railing.

After a few years of living tax free on the river, the McGregors bought the property at 2541 East Kent and built a real house. The Chicken Coop may already have been there, the remnants of a sub-divided farm acreage. Mac either did not want to raise poultry

in the hen house or city bylaws forbade it, or both, so he tried breeding Airedale terriers. When that business failed, he decided to use the barn for his main passion: music. He used every spare penny from his mill job to buy state of the art audio equipment. He dubbed songs from the radio on his reel-to-reel tape recorder. The McGregors cleaned out the coop and installed wooden tables and chairs, a small bar and a closet with a bucket that served as a washroom.

Reports vary on the cleanliness of the venue. Ernie Stratton of the '50s band Hobo Hank and the Sons of the Delta called it a "rat hole." Chuck Mackenzie who grew up on Harrison Drive, up the hill from The Coop, recalls that it was freshly whitewashed inside and out. Guitarist Gord Lundy says it had a distinctive fowl odour. Whatever the space's ambience, it routinely shook as a weekend dance hall for the McGregors' family and friends. The old floorboards bounced during waltzes, polkas and the odd Schottische (a slower, step-hop move that originated in Bohemia and made its way to B.C. via Scandinavia and the prairies). Parties were BYOB, but if a guest ran dry, Mac always had a bootleg bottle.

During IWA labour action, The Coop served as strike headquarters for local mill workers. Mac's union brethren could drop in to the barn to get a free sandwich, play cards or get a haircut before heading out on the river in the union boat to patrol for scabs.

Live music was rare at The Coop, but in the late '50s, a Vancouver drummer-promoter named Johnny "Zapp" Zaplotynsky organized half a dozen jam sessions at the backyard venue.

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# Lynn recalls appearance on Buck Owens show

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The get togethers were primarily intended for local country musicians to socialize on Sunday afternoons when they had no gigs. The events were promoted on the radio, so Loretta Lynn may have heard about them that way, or Zapp may have invited her personally for he had met her during his regular visits to Blaine's clubs. Either way, she showed up to sing at a couple of the jams.

Grashey and Williams knew about the hoe downs through one of their young discoveries, Sandi "Shore" Loranger, the McGregors' niece. The stage was set for a momentous meeting of country music minds, or, as Mike Harling likes to say, "Ground Zero of Lynn's career." But more than 50 years later, there is no mention of the iconic singer's Frasersview debut on her website. And no mention in her recent book, *Honky Tonk Girl: My Life in Lyrics*.

Sandi, who was only 15 years old at the time, has a hazy memory of the American singer performing to a packed barn. "I was more into pop music than country, more interested in the beautiful dresses that Aunt Irene sewed for my singing career, but I do remember Loretta was well received by the pickers who were there that day."

Interviewed the Grand Ole Opry's Grand dame in March, two months before Associated Press ran a story revealing that Lynn was married at age 15, and not 13 as she claimed in *Coal Miner's Daughter*. She reminisced for half an hour about Zero Records in her gentle Kentucky twang and twice broke into song. Loretta recalled The

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Coop, but not who was present when she appeared there. She remembers Grashey and Williams, but not where she first met them, which seems odd given that they were likely the first music producers to approach her.

I told her that I could not find any evidence to show that Norm Burley had tracked her down after seeing her on TV, nor that he had started the label specifically to record her as she claimed in her first book. I suggested that Grashey and Williams delivered her to him. Lynn said, "No, I think that Mr. Burley saw me sing 'Whispering Sea' on the Buck Owens show and then when I went to—I'm sure this is kind of the way it went—and I went to the Chicken Coop and Don and them were there. That's where [Don] probably come over and want to know if I want to record."

This is the most detail Lynn has ever provided about Don Grashey to a journalist. She was hazy about many facts, which is understandable given that the events took place more than 50 years ago, but the Queen of Country's memory was crystal clear

when she suddenly asked rhetorically, "Don didn't own any of that Zero Records, did he?"

He did own some shares, but Norm Burley was the money man, Grashey was merely the music man.

When the Coop was demolished in the early '70s to make room for a row of Vancouver Specials, the McGregors' bungalow was inexplicably spared from the wrecker's ball. Mac and Irene have since passed, as have most of the story's main players, but the home's current owners are aware of the property's unique history. A few years back they discovered an electrical wire buried in the backyard, a line that may have carried Mac's music from his living room DJ set-up to The Coop.

Today in the home there are no signs of the elaborate custom cabinetry that was said to have held Mac's music collection and sound system. No one knows what became of his hobby. Harling hopes that someone has additional details about this story and will contact him through his website [honkytonkgirl.ca](http://honkytonkgirl.ca).

The commemorative plaque being installed across the street from the bungalow is the beginning of a renewed interest in this lost chapter of Vancouver's music history. Local folk band Viper Central recently composed a song about the saga entitled "Thump and Howl." And Lynn continues to tour, but no word yet on whether the upcoming Broadway musical adaptation of her life starring Zoey Deschanel will contain a massive song and dance number set in a chicken coop.

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