

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF HEAVIER THAN HEAVEN

**CHARLES R. CROSS**

**HERE**

**WE ARE**

**THE LASTING IMPACT OF KURT COBAIN**

**NOW**



# HERE WE ARE NOW

THE LASTING IMPACT OF KURT COBAIN

CHARLES R. CROSS



IT! BOOKS

AN IMPRINT OF HARPERCOLLINS PUBLISHERS

# DEDICATION

---

*TO ASHLAND, AND TO EVERY BOY AND GIRL WHO GOT OFF THE SOFA, GRABBED A GUITAR  
AND MADE IT TALK*

# CONTENTS

---

## *Dedication*

- PROLOGUE This Horrible Secret
- ONE Holy Grail  
Music & Influence
- TWO Lamestain on My Wack Slacks  
Grunge & Culture
- THREE The \$6,000 Cobain Trench Coat  
Style & Fashion
- FOUR The Perfect Seattle Moment  
Aberdeen & Seattle
- FIVE Happens Every Day  
Addiction & Suicide
- SIX The Last Rock Star  
Legacy & Blue Eyes

## *Acknowledgments*

*About the Author*

*Also by Charles R. Cross*

*Credits*

*Copyright*

*About the Publisher*

## THIS HORRIBLE SECRET

On the morning of April 8, 1994, I was working in my office at the Seattle magazine *The Rocket* when I received a series of phone calls that would prove unforgettable. Two decades have passed since that day, but those moments still remain vivid and haunting. Sometimes they seem like part of a dream I can't escape, or forget. History was happening around me, but I didn't realize it in the moment. I can still remember my finger pressing the flashing Line One button on my office phone, but I had no clue at the time, that this little red light would announce a sea change in both music and culture. Like a nightmare, I want it to end differently, but it doesn't. It can't; it's not a dream.

The first call to my desk that day came from radio station KXRX-FM. I occasionally did segments for them promoting local bands on the rise as the editor in chief of *The Rocket*, a Seattle music and entertainment magazine with a circulation of one hundred thousand. We championed Northwest bands and were the first publication to do cover stories on Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, and other Seattle groups. Even though I had a bird's-eye view of the Grunge explosion, I was surprised as everyone else in town when our locals—many of them old friends who'd been playing around for years—became international superstars.

I expected this phone call to be about my next radio segment, but the tone of the DJ's voice wasn't that typical fast-talking cadence I was used to. Instead it was somber, deliberate, slightly alarmed.

"Do you think," the DJ asked, "there's a chance Kurt Cobain is dead?"

At that point, early on April 8, 1994, no one else had uttered those words. The radio station had received a phone call just moments before from a dispatcher at an electrician's office, tipping them off that one of their employees had found a body at Kurt's house. The caller had told the station, "You guys are going to owe me some pretty good Pink Floyd tickets for this." The police had just been summoned. The DJ thought that perhaps I might have more information on the identity of the body. "We haven't gone on the air with it yet," he said, "but do you think there's any chance it's Kurt?"

I said no. "It can't be him," I said. "It's got to be one of his drug buddies, who probably overdosed. It can't be Kurt. It just can't." My words were from a place of denial, of course, and felt false even as I said them. I was doing the kind of psychological bargaining that happens when you initially hear bad news. It was the same bargaining millions of Nirvana fans worldwide would be carrying out in a few hours. But at this moment in time, this news—this horrible secret—belonged only to the radio station, the electrical contractor, the police, and me.

It couldn't be Kurt, I repeated in my head. While his struggles with drugs were well known within the tight circle of Seattle music, some of his friends were in far deeper. Kurt had been arrested a few times the previous year, and his ongoing battle with heroin was no secret. But *that* body . . . it couldn't be his, because he couldn't be gone.

But he was.

Not long after that phone call, KXRX went on the air with a report that a body had been found at the Cobain mansion. All at once, all six of our phone lines at *The Rocket* lit up. Members of the media were calling to ask for comment, friends of Kurt's were calling to ask if we knew any details, and our own staff of freelancers was calling in to see if what they'd heard was true. The KXRX DJ later to

me the horrible story of how Kurt's sister had phoned the station to say the body couldn't possibly be Kurt's because this was the first she was hearing about it, and news like that couldn't leak out before the family was notified. But that is exactly what happened. Kurt's family found out he was dead from a report on a radio station.

I was busy making phone calls to Nirvana's publicist, mutual friends, contacts at Geffen Records and Sub Pop, anyone I knew who might have more information. Frustratingly, nobody knew anything more than I did. I was doing what any magazine editor would have done, investigating leads. But this felt personal, too, because everyone in Seattle felt a connection to Kurt. It was even more personal for our magazine because not only had *The Rocket* given Nirvana their first press and covered everything they did from first single to stardom, but the band had advertised in our pages several times, looking for drummers. One of my regrets is that I cashed a check Kurt wrote *The Rocket* for twenty bucks in pay for a classified ad when it was already clear that he was destined for fame. At *The Rocket*, there was a principle that we couldn't treat the bands we covered as stars and still retain the respect they had for us—journalists didn't ask for autographs or keep signed checks. Another connection with the band to our magazine had been that Nirvana's logo—in the Century Condensed font—had been set on *The Rocket's* typesetting machine. That original logo, which had already been slapped on millions of albums, first came out of a giant old type machine a few feet from my desk.

But back on that morning, April 8, 1994, there was no time for nostalgia. I needed immediate answers because I also had a job to do, and that job had become a lot more complicated in the last few hours. *The Rocket* was set to go to press that night, and we'd been waiting all week for an interview we'd been promised with a certain rock star, one Courtney Love. Hole was poised to release *Liv Through This* the following week, and her publicist had set up numerous interviews for us, all of which had been postponed. And, as luck would have it, we had a phone interview with Courtney scheduled for the *very day* Kurt's body was found. A paste-up of our next cover of *The Rocket*, complete with a photo of Courtney and Hole, was sitting on our art director's desk. It was only later that I'd discover the reason Courtney kept missing our scheduled interviews; she was out searching for Kurt, who had escaped rehab. When the news came that the body at the Cobain house had in fact been identified as Kurt's, I had the surreal task of directing our art staff to take Courtney Love *off* the cover of *The Rocket* and put her now-deceased husband *on*.

Amid that deadline drama in my office, the phones never stopped ringing. I tried to juggle the calls while, with my staff, I chose an iconic Charles Peterson photo of Kurt for the cover. It showed him jumping high in the air, almost as if he was already no longer of this earth; it was perfect. Our first cover story on Nirvana had run with the headline NIRVANA INVADES BERLIN. That had been an easy headline to write. Nirvana was on the rise back then. But this time around, no string of words could sum up the loss. It was too big to put into words, really.

In the end, we used the airborne photo with no type other than our logo and the date.

And the phones just kept ringing and ringing. Many of the calls were from media who had never even covered Nirvana before, or had maybe mentioned "Grunge" in one article, and were now trying to create a story where there was nothing to report other than an obituary. The barrage of phone calls began to rattle our office receptionist. This was a woman who was usually so sure of herself that she'd once had the nerve to demand Courtney Love put out a cigarette when Courtney walked into our office smoking (Courtney dropped it on the carpet and rubbed it out with her shoe). But that April day, the endless phone calls had unnerved the receptionist, and I could hear that strain in her voice when she buzzed me for the thousandth time with another call. She didn't say who was waiting. She told me flatly, "Pick up line one." When I did, I heard a raspy sound I recognized immediately, but that didn't

make it any less bizarre.

“This is Larry King, and you’re on the radio live,” said the voice on the line. “What is this thing called Grunge music?” I was speechless. His show was so desperate to get someone in Seattle to take their calls that they’d bypassed the normal protocols of putting in a request for an on-air interview first. I wasn’t given a chance to say no. I had been cold-called, and now I was live on the radio with Larry King.

Only a few weeks before, I’d read a column from James Wolcott about Larry King and his constant seizing on celebrity death. One quote read, “Who elected Larry King America’s griet counselor? We, the viewing public, did, by driving up his ratings whenever somebody famous passes away. Now I was a pawn in Larry King’s indelicate dance between legitimate news and ratings-driven scandal.

King kept on, undeterred by my silence, moving forward in his typical style of asking a series of questions without waiting for answers. “Tell us, just who was Kurt Cobain? Why Seattle? Why should we care? What about drugs?”

I muttered something; I don’t recall what. Larry continued: “Why Kurt? Why Grunge music? Why was he? Why do people care?” This nightmare of a day was spiraling out of control and Larry King, like all people, was interrogating me.

And then, uncharacteristically, Larry King paused for a moment, and asked the one question that had significance. It was more to the point, and it had the kind of clarity that you find when the simplest question is asked instead of a more complicated one. It was the way that Larry King sometimes could end up being brilliant, finding the one truth amid the clutter.

“Tell me, Mr. Cross,” Larry King said, “why did Kurt Cobain matter?”

I don’t recall what I said to Larry King. Given that day’s madness, and the fact that Kurt’s body lay under a coroner’s drape just a few miles away, I’m sure I didn’t properly answer the question. In some small way, this book is my attempt, twenty years later, to do so. The impact of any person’s life is difficult to fully see on the day a life ends, but the long view offers a wider and more accurate vista.

My goal with these pages is to examine how in the long view Kurt’s work and life affected music, fashion, gender roles, the way we treat suicide and drug addiction, the way his hometown views itself, and the very idea of Seattle in culture. In some of these arenas, his impact has been tremendous; in others, it’s been subtle. Still, his twenty-seven years on this earth had ramifications. His legacy continues to evolve and to change. The reality is that in twenty years we haven’t stopped talking about Kurt Cobain. He still matters to me, and, I would argue, he still matters to an entire generation.

Larry King never would have put it this way, but what I’m seeking to address is the eternal question of history: how do we measure the life of a man?

This is not a biography of Kurt Cobain. I’ve already done that with *Heavier Than Heaven* in 2001. That book was a third-person narrative of the events of Kurt’s life. *Here We Are Now*, in contrast, is my first-person analysis of what that life meant, and how that meaning can be quantified—when it can be at all. There were many places in *Heavier Than Heaven* where I could have inserted myself as narrator because I witnessed events, or because I was part of them in some slight way. Doing so would have broken the reader’s trance of experiencing history, though. *Here We Are Now* is not objective, and it brings forth my own intersections with this tale, before and after Kurt’s death, my analysis of that history, and, in some places, the voices of a few other select experts.

I know there are some critics who have already suggested, and certainly will say of this book, that as a society we have talked enough about Kurt Cobain. Maybe. I don’t seek to canonize Kurt, glorify him, or portray him as if he were some kind of God of Rock. Doing that is to take away his humanity.

and to sketch him as he would never have wanted. As a human being, he often showed incredibly bad judgment and made choices that hurt many people who cared for him, his suicide being the most obvious example. But even Kurt's demons have had an impact on the larger culture over the past two decades; his suicide, for example, has been studied and written about extensively. It is without a doubt the most famous suicide of the last two decades. That suicide, as horrible as it was, had a profound impact on who "we"—as a culture—"are now."

At the very least, Nirvana's music touched the generation it was made for. The world has changed much since 1991 when *Nevermind* was released, but the influence of that album has only grown as the years pass. Technology has since turned the music industry upside down, fractionalized genres into smaller slices, and diminished the possibility of any rock act dominating the way Nirvana did. I would argue that no rock star since Kurt has had that same combination of talent, voice, lyric-writing skill, and charisma—another reason he is so significant, two decades after his death. The rarity of that magic combo is also part of the reason Kurt's impact still looms so large over music. There are many reasons for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to include Nirvana, but the catalog of songs Kurt wrote is central to that recognition. Many bands never even get nominated, but Nirvana were nominated the first year they qualified, and they deserve their place on that hallowed ground.

Kurt has become a touchstone as Nirvana's music continues to find an audience with a new crop of teenagers every year. I think some of his enduring popularity is similar to the way every teen I know ends up reading *The Catcher in the Rye* at some point. Kurt and Nirvana are now part of a rite of passage through adolescence, the true "teen spirit."

I was well past adolescence when Nirvana came on the scene, but their music made me feel young again, alive, full of possibility, and helped me understand some of my own adult angst. The greatest gift Kurt Cobain gave listeners was putting his honest pain into his lyrics. J. D. Salinger did the same thing with his prose in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both men had demons of different sorts, and they all shared an uncomfortable relationship with fame. And both could proclaim, as Kurt sang on "Serve the Servants" off *In Utero*, "Teenage angst has paid off well."

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" often comes on my car radio, and during those few minutes I'm a teenager again. Suddenly my Volvo wagon—the same car Kurt drove—turns into a hot rod and I'm screaming, "With the lights out, it's less dangerous." The two speeding tickets I've gotten over the past twenty years are solely the fault of Kurt Cobain.

The lyrics to "Smells Like Teen Spirit," Nirvana's biggest hit, were difficult to comprehend and were debated by fans long before the official lyric sheet was finally published. To see how important those lyrics still are, type "s-m-e-l" into Google and you'll see that the most common search in the world for those four letters is "'Smells Like Teen Spirit' lyrics." Music fans in the UK recently ranked the line "Here we are now, entertain us," as the third-greatest song lyric in music history. The *Here We Are Now* book you hold in your hands seeks to reinterpret that lyric into a statement of where we are now as a collected body of fans, are now after Kurt's death. He's gone, dead for two decades, but here we are now. And in that space and time, how do we measure his significance?

Or, in the words of the philosopher, wise man, and sage sometimes known as Larry King, "What did Kurt Cobain matter?"

## HOLY GRAIL

### Music & Influence

Kurt Cobain sold millions of albums, and the most obvious area where his impact can be quantified in the music industry. During Kurt's lifetime, four official Nirvana albums were released, and since his death there have been six outtake collections or live albums. Most estimates put total sales of those ten releases at somewhere between thirty million and sixty million copies. Sales of *Nevermind* by itself are twenty million worldwide by conservative estimates, and perhaps as high as thirty-five million according to more generous estimates. With those figures, *Nevermind* would rank as the twenty-fifth best-selling album of all time.

*Nevermind* was a remarkable album by any standard. But while most of the world probably heard the album fully for the first time on compact disc, maybe in their living rooms, I heard it initially in my car on a crappy cassette tape. Furthermore, my cassette was missing the first six seconds of "Smells Like Teen Spirit." My tape started in the middle of Dave Grohl's first drum crash. It was abrupt, but a lot about *Nevermind* was abrupt.

I first heard the album in late August 1991 in the parking lot of the Seattle Tower Records store. It was hot, my windows were down, and I was cranking *Nevermind* loud enough that it drew attention. I didn't want attention. My copy was an illicit bootleg advance that had snuck out the back door, so I didn't speak. I rolled my windows up and sweated in the rare Seattle heat, made steamier by the power of the music.

My copy of the album had come from a friend who worked at Tower, and I had just picked it up before putting it into my car cassette deck. The original source of our leaked copy had dubbed it incorrectly, cutting off the start. All my close friends were music freaks, and we regularly traded with other collectors for live shows, outtakes, and early advance copies. We loved music more than anything in life, and we loved the hunt for unheard tunes, and *Nevermind* was juicy prey. Working in the press, I always got advance copies of albums, and in fact my official advance of *Nevermind* would arrive a week later. But that August, I couldn't wait.

There was much anticipation for *Nevermind*. The band's 1989 debut, *Bleach*, had established Nirvana as a band to watch. *Bleach* had sold around thirty thousand copies, which made it a decent college radio hit, but it wasn't enough to earn the group riches or major fame. But Nirvana's live shows had gotten better and better, making them stars in Seattle. Their 1990 "Sliver" single had convinced me that Kurt's songwriting had taken a major leap forward from *Bleach*. When they signed to DGC/Geffen Records in early 1991, it was a huge local story because few Sub Pop bands had made the move up the ladder to a major label. At *The Rocket* we had been touting the Seattle music scene for years, but no local band had broken wide nationally since Heart. Nirvana seemed like our best bet.

When I got the tape back to my office at *The Rocket* I began dubbing cassettes of *Nevermind* for my friends. This was certainly illegal, but I justified that decision knowing that all my friends would buy the album when it officially came out on September 24. That was almost a month away, and it would have been torture to wait. My advance cassette with the clipped "Teen Spirit" spread through

Seattle like a fast-moving storm, and by week's end there were hundreds, if not thousands, of dubs.

Sometime around 2004, after Kurt had been dead for a decade, I was with a friend at an open house in Tacoma, thirty miles south of Seattle. The house owner had a homemade cassette of *Nevermind* on the shelf, and it looked like my handwriting on the insert. When the listing agent wasn't looking, I put it into the stereo, hit play, and heard the telltale clipped "Teen Spirit." My early advance tape had flown south.

So much of the story of *Nevermind*, and of Kurt Cobain, has become apocryphal over the years, as his shadow has become bigger than life. Many pundits today suggest they knew in advance that *Nevermind* was going to be a monster hit. But none could have truly predicted the success it had. I certainly didn't have a clue. Listening to it that first time in the parking lot of Tower Records, I loved it, but I thought it too loud, too raw, and too edgy to be a mainstream smash. "Teen Spirit" blew me away, but I couldn't imagine, given where music had been the previous decade, that mainstream radio would play it. To my ears, "Lithium" was the hit on the album, and I thought that "Teen Spirit" would serve only as a kind of advance clarion. I was wrong, of course, but so was DGC/Geffen Records. The label pressed only 46,251 copies of *Nevermind* initially, and that entire first pressing sold out by October. If Geffen had any idea the album was going to be the success it became, they would have made more, since the economy of scale would have lowered their per-disc costs significantly.

A week before *Nevermind* was officially released, a record-release party was held at a Seattle bar. At that party, I put forth the outrageous prediction that the album could sell one hundred thousand copies. That figure was so fantastic, and so outside of what seemed like the realm of possibility at the time, that it earned a quizzical eyebrow raise from Kurt Cobain and the other members of the band. It wasn't the only one forecasting wild success: the guys from Sub Pop Records, who owned a minority interest in *Nevermind*, were touting the same figures. That one-hundred-thousand mark, which was what Sonic Youth's *Goo* had sold in 1990, was considered the upper threshold of the possible for any band playing what we had just begun to call "alternative rock." Though the term "alternative" was loosely applied to any band that didn't fit into mainstream rock—Tom Waits could end up on an alternative radio chart right next to the Cure, though their music had little in common—the name stuck for Nirvana, who were certainly not mainstream.

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" changed alternative rock, and changed even the very definition of what mainstream music could encompass. "Teen Spirit" first became an MTV video hit, then a radio smash, and it continued to gain extraordinary momentum. One of Geffen's top executives said that even the label brass were surprised at how fast it climbed the sales charts. All the label had to do, he said, was "get out of the way." The single eventually sold more than a million copies, and that was in a pre-download world where music could only be purchased as a physical item, from a store. On radio, the song topped airplay charts. *Billboard* didn't begin to break down "alternative rock" radio play as a separate category until just after *Nevermind*, but applying their sales-to-airplay chart computation to "Smells Like Teen Spirit" puts that particular song as the most-played alternative rock track ever. Even on mainstream Top 40 radio, where R&B usually dominated, the song went to No. 6.

After that initial pressing of *Nevermind* sold out, it took Geffen time to get more copies printed and delivered to stores. For one of the first times in the modern record business, there was an actual shortage of an album, and *Nevermind* became, for a couple of weeks, impossible to find. The album had debuted at No. 144 on *Billboard*'s chart, so despite its ultimate success, it was not an out-of-the-box smash. The album didn't hit No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 200 sales charts for four months. It would

ultimately spend 253 consecutive weeks on the charts, though.

Kurt did not immediately become rich off the album. I examined his 1991 federal tax return, and in that year, with a hit album and a sold-out tour, he earned just \$29,541, mostly from concert fees. That's evidence of how slow record labels are to pay royalties, but also illustrates how poor Kurt was prior to *Nevermind's* success. Kurt's paltry income in a banner year also explains why even as success he was fearful he would be penniless again. He only became rich during the last two years of his life, which is why his fear of scarcity and poverty were ever present. Having been poor for so long, he felt any money he did earn would disappear. Those fears would play a big role in his desire to run away from the world and, ultimately, in his death.

Record sales and airplay are two ways to quantify success in the music business, but those numbers aren't the only measure. Nirvana also changed the music industry because they were an organic runaway success in an era when hit bands were usually heavily shaped, promoted, and marketed by record labels. Before *Nevermind*, it was not uncommon for label brass to pick the songs that would go on a rock album, or to bring in outside musicians to supplement the band in the studio. And while that practice continued in pop, in alternative rock Nirvana, at least temporarily, shifted that. Nirvana's triumph transferred power from the labels to the individual artists, who in the post-Nirvana era had more creative control (for the most part, within rock music). Because of Nirvana, the industry had to rethink where the next rock stars might come from. Labels began to look for talent outside of New York and Los Angeles. Kurt Cobain's success was a breakthrough for bands in Portland, Chapel Hill, Omaha, and countless other places that had been off the radar of the industry. The underdogs were now running the show.

Brian Eno is often credited with saying that the first Velvet Underground album sold only ten thousand copies, "but everyone who bought it formed a band." Listening to rock radio now, two decades after Kurt's death, it sometimes feels as if Eno's paradigm could be far truer for millions of copy-selling Nirvana, who possibly spawned a million bands. A wide array of acts, famous and unknown, bring the sound of Nirvana to mind, or at the very least their use of loud/soft dynamics within one song. Major-label bands who it could be argued were influenced by Nirvana include Bush, Weezer, Stone Temple Pilots, Green Day, Feeder, Blink 182, Matchbox 20, Linkin Park, Creed, the White Stripes, Three Days Grace, Puddle of Mudd, Cage the Elephant, Rise Against, A Perfect Circle, Thirty Seconds to Mars, OK Go, System of a Down, Nickelback, Muse, Evanescence, Jet, Three Doors Down, Fuel, Breaking Benjamin, and, of course, Dave Grohl's own Foo Fighters. And these are just the obvious ones, leaving out the hundreds of bands with an obvious Nirvana influence successful enough to have landed record deals, but who aren't as known.

*Nevermind* transformed rock radio entirely, often making the alternative station the highest rated in a given market. In Los Angeles that was KROQ; in Seattle KNDD; in Atlanta 99X; and in Boston there were two alternative powerhouses, WFNX and WBCN, both of which played Nirvana what seemed like hourly. "Kurt had, and has, the single biggest influence on alternative rock, and certainly on alternative rock radio, of any artist of the past two decades," Marco Collins told me. Collins should know: as a DJ at Seattle station KNDD, he was one of the first to champion "Teen Spirit," helping break the song. "Alternative radio grew to become an actual format because of Kurt's influence. Most of the younger bands getting airplay today went to the school of Kurt and Nirvana. You almost can't overstate his influence. It is, in many ways, even bigger today than it was in the fall of 1991. The sound is everywhere."

To understand *Nevermind*'s impact, and Kurt's, you have to first remember what music was popular in the decade prior. Rock in the eighties had gone in a highly formulaic direction, dominated by soft rock ballads in which style was often put before substance. Almost every hit eighties song was about girls, cars, romance, heartbreak, and partying. Among the top ten singles of that decade were "Physical" by Olivia Newton-John, "Call Me" by Blondie, "Lady" by Kenny Rogers, "Centerfold" by the J. Geils Band, "Flashdance" by Irene Cara, "Endless Love" by Diana Ross, and "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor. Those well-known chestnuts now sound like they came from an entirely different planet than "Teen Spirit."

Even looking just at the rock genre, the field was dominated by "soft" metal bands who topped the radio charts and MTV play lists from the eighties through the early nineties. Poison, Bon Jovi, Mötley Crüe, Winger, Loverboy, Twisted Sister, Guns N' Roses, and Van Halen all could "rock," and consistently filled arenas with screaming teenage girls, but they often scored their biggest hits with ballads made into sexed-up videos. They were called "hair bands" because of their giant hairstyles generally far bigger than the scope of their talent or critical success. Their videos became more important than their songs. Mainstream rock music was so bad in the eighties and early nineties, and so driven by image over substance, that Nirvana enjoyed what was fortuitous timing: they had something to rebel against.

Nirvana recorded *Nevermind* at Sound City Studios in Van Nuys, California, in the spring of 1992, and the band that preceded them in the studio, with a couple days' overlap mixing in a smaller room, was perhaps the most maligned hair-metal band of all, Warrant. Warrant were best known for their cheesy, highly sexualized "Cherry Pie" video, which dominated MTV for a few months in 1990. Kurt grabbed the studio's in-house address system during the days the bands overlapped and belted the song's chorus over the studio's speakers: "She's my cherry pie!" While he was poking fun, Kurt was also putting Warrant on notice that music was shifting. *Rolling Stone* once declared that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" managed a nearly impossible task and "wiped the lingering jive of the Eighties off the pop map overnight." It was hello Nirvana, good-bye Warrant.

Even to those who weren't fans of Nirvana, one aspect of Kurt's impact is simply that his band shifted entirely what music was on the radio or on MTV. "For those turned off by the saccharine pop and hair-metal excess topping the music charts, 'Teen Spirit' was a godsend," Jacob McMurray of Seattle's Experience Music Project museum told me. "Kurt's primal screams, nonlinear prose, and general disdain for the 'meaning' behind his lyrics mirrored an angst-driven pushback." Kurt changed the sound—and the culture—of music.

There was still manufactured pop music after Nirvana, but when Kurt sang about angst and anger with lyrics that included "an albino, a mosquito, my libido," he changed preconceptions about what topics a song on the radio could cover. A wider—and darker—emotional spectrum opened. Sonically, musical styles that had previously been found only in punk rock, at rock's fringes, became the dominant force. Much has been made about how Nirvana took punk rock to the masses, but Krist Novoselic told me in 1999 that that's not exactly what happened. "We didn't bring punk to the mainstream," Krist said, "we brought the mainstream to punk." Nirvana was not just a flash-in-the-pan band with one hit song that crossed over. Instead, the influence of the band was so great, they opened the minds and ears of the unexpected fan, and indeed the masses.

By the mid-nineties, even Warrant had shifted their music to try to sound like Nirvana.

Legacies in music are preserved not just by sales charts or radio plays but also by articles, essays, and

endless lists of the “best” music compiled by critics for magazines, television shows, and websites. Within rock ‘n’ roll, that critical zeitgeist plays an oversized role in how a band stands in history. For example, take Big Star, who never were commercially successful, but whose critical reputation kept them touring, their albums in print, and in 2013 spawned a documentary film. Usually critics’ darlings never sell well, but Nirvana are the rare case of a band that enjoyed high standing with critics and simultaneous runaway commercial success.

Nirvana, Kurt Cobain, and usually *Nevermind* appear on the upper reaches of virtually every critic’s best-of list of the past twenty years. Both *Spin* and *Rolling Stone* named *Nevermind* the top album of the nineties. A 2000 list compiled by *Rolling Stone* and MTV of the one hundred best pop songs of all time ranked “Smells Like Teen Spirit” third, behind “Yesterday” by the Beatles and “(Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” by the Rolling Stones. In *Rolling Stone*’s 2004 list of the “500 Greatest Songs of All Time,” with a slightly different set of voting critics than in 2000, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” came in ninth, and it was the only song in the top ten that came out after 1971.

Critics and fans in the United Kingdom have always held Kurt in even higher esteem. “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was picked by *Q* magazine’s contributors as the third-best song of all time, behind only U2’s “One” and Aretha Franklin’s “I Say a Little Prayer” (and, surprisingly, ahead of the Beatles’ “A Day in the Life,” the usual UK top choice). In 2002, *New Musical Express* ranked “Smells Like Teen Spirit” the second-greatest song ever, after only Joy Division’s “Love Will Tear Us Apart.” The video for “Teen Spirit” almost always shows up in the upper reaches of any critic’s list, and it was VH1’s pick for the best video of the nineties. *Nevermind* gets the love from not just music magazines: *Entertainment Weekly* named the album the tenth best of all time in 2013.

These accolades go on and on, and they put Kurt and Nirvana in rarefied air. And as time goes by, the band’s standing doesn’t diminish, which is often the case as new talent and fresh recordings dilute the potential pool of great albums. *Nevermind* now competes with not just albums by the Beatles and Led Zeppelin, but also Adele. In several more recent polls, Nirvana have ranked higher than they did a decade ago, and significantly higher than when *Nevermind* came out in 1991.

When *Nevermind* was first released, it earned mixed reviews. Most of them were positive, but only a few were raves. *The Rocket* published one of those raves, calling the album “the kind of music that you fell in love with.” The *Boston Globe* review was on the other end of the spectrum, criticizing it as “generic pop-punk that’s been done better by countless acts,” with lyrics that were “morose ramblings by singer-lyricist Cobain, who has an idiotic tendency to sound like the Rod McKuen of hard rock.” *Rolling Stone*’s review, written by former *Trouser Press* editor Ira Robbins, was favorable but far from glowing. “*Nevermind* boasts an adrenalized pop heart and incomparably superior material [to *Bleach*],” Robbins wrote.

*Rolling Stone* gave *Nevermind* only three out of five stars, which translates in their rating guide as an “average” album. The review section editor assigns star ratings in *Rolling Stone*, with input from the writer. In a bit of revisionist history, the magazine has since reassigned *Nevermind* a four-star rating in its archived online copy of that original review. In other words, the same album with the same review was later assigned another star by the editors. That’s the equivalent of the Michelin Guide changing the historical star rating of a restaurant from two to three stars, not for the current food but retroactively for a course served twenty years prior.

Music critics and editors, like baseball umpires, are known to blow a call (this writer included). But *Nevermind*’s critical rise has gone well beyond that one additional star. In 2003 *Rolling Stone* critics and editors ranked it as the seventeenth-greatest album “of all time,” ahead of anything by Led Zeppelin, Chuck Berry, Van Morrison, Bruce Springsteen, U2, Stevie Wonder, Fleetwood Mac, the

Who, or James Brown. The CD of *Nevermind* that was reviewed in 1991 plays the same music as it did in 2003, and it plays the same music today (though the 2011 reissue has slightly improved sound quality due to remastering). The music on the album didn't change, but in the passing years somehow got better, or at least the perception of the music shifted, and the importance of the record looms larger.

And *Rolling Stone's* poll is just one of many where *Nevermind* has improved with age. *Spin* magazine's 1991 year-end list had Teenage Fanclub's *Bandwagonesque* as the top album, R.E.M.'s *Out of Time* as second, and *Nevermind* third. Nine years later *Spin* would name *Nevermind* the best album of the decade. *Rolling Stone's* 1991 year-end list also rated *Nevermind* third, after R.E.M. and U2.

Those jumps—from being a three-star album upon release, to the third best at the end of 1991, to a four-star album online by the late nineties, to the best of the decade by 1999, before vaulting to seventh-best album of *all time* a dozen years after it was first released—are the absolute proof of Kurt Cobain's enduring legacy. Those leaps in critical standings also prove that Kurt's artistic work grew in perceived significance after his death, even as the music itself didn't change. Some of that is common in rock 'n' roll and happened as well to some rock stars who died young—including Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and even, recently, Amy Winehouse. Their short lives magnified their relatively small bodies of work, and they are revered in death beyond their fame in life. But even those music legends—all but Winehouse are now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—didn't enjoy the rise in reputation Kurt has experienced. Part of that is simply where Kurt appears on the continuum of rock. Kurt *followed* Jimi Hendrix, and thus Hendrix had to, at least posthumously, compete with Kurt, just as *Nevermind* now competes with Adele's *21*, in critic poll lists. There have been talented rock stars in the last twenty years, including Adele, but so far, in my opinion, none of them would win a critical cage match with Kurt if you compared their full catalog of songs. So he sits at the end of the line, for the moment.

At *The Rocket*, we too did an All Time Greatest Albums list in 1995. *Nevermind* topped that poll as well. I wrote the little piece that talked about the impact of that album back then, just a few years after it had come out. I wrote, "Though we've only had this in our lives for four short years, it has aged well. I can't imagine a time when this pure vision won't rock."

We set the article in the same font as Nirvana's logo, and, of course, it came from the same typesetting machine. Only a graphic designer with a good eye would have noticed, or cared.

The critical standing of any piece of artistic creation rarely remains static, and Kurt's rise over the past two decades has several factors. One is the sad truth that he is dead, so no more Nirvana music is forthcoming. I've heard a lot of what is in the vaults, though not all of it. There are a few little gems here and there, and some interesting Kurt solo jams, but there is no fully conceived masterpiece I'm privy to. The rehearsal tapes are fascinating, though, and I'm sure one day there will be an album just of those recordings. Kurt's songs usually came together in little snippets, with a lyric yelled over rehearsal, or a melody worked out in a rehearsal jam. But that work in process didn't always yield a finished, finely honed song. "You Know You're Right," which came out on the *Nirvana* album in 2002, is the only posthumous band song I heard in the vaults that I'd rank as great. The 2013 *In Utero* box set had a dozen outtakes and rehearsals, but the quality of that material didn't rank with Kurt's best work, at least to my ears. There are Kurt solo songs in the vaults, and some of that will also one day probably appear on an album, but there is no full-band Nirvana Holy Grail recording waiting to be

released that I know of.

Without the possibility of another “lost album,” the albums that exist now become more important. The Nirvana catalog is also permanently frozen at three studio albums during Kurt’s lifetime. The compact nature of that shelf magnifies the importance of what the shelf contains. That makes *Nevermind* a much more significant album than if Kurt had lived as long as Neil Young has, for example, and had produced dozens of albums. Geffen Records, Neil Young’s (and Nirvana’s) label, ended up suing Neil over his *Trans* album because they felt it was intentionally bad (their legal filings said Neil was “unrepresentative of himself”). Kurt never got the chance to have a midlife music crisis, which many would argue is what was happening with Neil Young in the mid-eighties. That would surely have been interesting to watch, but the upside is that the three albums he supervised and crafted are what will forever be used to judge his musical legacy. And they are gems.

Kurt’s premature death meant the end of Nirvana; the band never considered re-forming with a different singer. It was grief that the fans were left with, and grief that afflicted the band members too, who felt they had more to say. Dave Grohl told *Mojo* recently, about *In Utero*, “overall it kind of breaks my heart that [it] was the last album we made, because I think there were more [albums] in us. I think Nirvana had more albums in them as well, but we lost those when we lost Kurt.

Critics, music buyers, and musicians don’t operate in a vacuum. Success begets success, and some of *Nevermind*’s rise in reputation comes from what neurobiologists call “the winner effect,” which is the reward that comes from making a selection you already think will satisfy you, or that your friends have said satisfied them. *Nevermind* built upon itself with record buyers. At the end of the calendar year 1991, *Nevermind* had sold several hundred thousand copies, but by the end of 1992 it had sold several million. It would keep selling millions over the next several years. The album stayed on the *Billboard* charts for a full five years.

Kurt had no idea that *Nevermind* would sell as well as it did, but he did understand the concept that if you reached a certain level of saturation with press, radio, and video, a monster hit could be had. His original title for *Nevermind* was *Sheep*, a term he was sarcastically applying to the American consumer. Would so many “sheep” have bought the album if it were titled *Sheep*? Probably not, but one element of *Nevermind*’s success was both its catchy title and striking cover. The nude baby provoked just enough controversy to get the album stickered in some uptight chains, but not enough to get it banned. Nirvana’s label mates on Sub Pop, Tad, also had several controversial album cover choices, but their career was damaged by three different record sleeves that had issues that affected their distribution (controversy is one thing, but if your album is completely unavailable for a time, it dampens sales). Kurt thought about doing something as outrageous as doctoring Pepsi’s logo (as Tad had done), but he was far too practical to put his future at risk.

“The winner effect” doesn’t usually apply with rock critics, who pride themselves on the contrarian views in print and online. Critical thought usually moves counter to commercial sales. *Nevermind* was not initially an album championed by the press the way, say, the works of Arcade Fire have been; the album’s critical weight grew over time. Often when an album rises to the top of the charts without being selected first by critics, the critics will try to take its reputation down because they can’t claim ownership of that success. But Nirvana never suffered a significant critical backlash. The band’s standing with critics today is near perfect. The catalog is considered nearly flawless.

None of this discourse even brings up the point that *Nevermind*, the seventh-greatest album of all time according to *Rolling Stone*, isn’t even Nirvana’s best, in my opinion: *In Utero* is. That’s why

both Krist Novoselic and Dave Grohl also told me over the years, and it's what Kurt said in interviews. But success in the commercial marketplace also plays a role in how an album is remembered, and *In Utero* sold a tenth the number of copies as *Nevermind*. As Nirvana's breakthrough and most successful album, *Nevermind* is always going to be their classic. Still, if I could take only one Nirvana album to a desert island, it would be *In Utero*. Kurt's songwriting had improved, his lyrical focus was razor sharp ("Teenage angst has paid off well"), and most of the songs were about his own internal process, which made them deep. I would rank "Heart-Shaped Box," "All Apologies," "Serve the Servants," and "Rape Me" as some of Kurt's most significant lyrics. The music was equally dazzling. His hooks in the choruses were brilliantly conceived. Still, even the remastered *In Utero* in 2013 failed to gain the same critical attention, or sales, as the *Nevermind* reissue.

There is one other explanation for the enduring status of *Nevermind* with critics and fans. The final theory fits neatly into Occam's razor, which is the scientific principle that the simplest answer to any question is most likely the correct one.

Applying Occam's razor to *Nevermind*'s place in history would work like this: *Nevermind* is consistently ranked among the greatest albums of all time because it is.

Nirvana remains an influence on all subsections of rock, from alternative to metal, but Kurt Cobain, bizarrely, also shows up frequently in modern hip-hop. It is one of the oddest elements of his legacy, but one that also shows how wide his cultural swath has been in arenas outside the genre of music he worked in. In the summer of 2013, Jay-Z sampled some of "Teen Spirit" for his hit song "Holy Grail (feat. Justin Timberlake)." The first verse ends with Jay-Z rapping, "I know nobody to blame, Kurt Cobain, I did it to myself." The chorus, sung by superstar Justin Timberlake, also includes lyrics adapted from "Teen Spirit": "We're stupid and contagious, and we all just entertainers."

It was interesting to see two of the biggest stars of music in the 2000s, Jay-Z and Timberlake, sing about Kurt, but the social-media response showed another aspect of Kurt's impact. All over the Internet, the idea of Jay-Z summoning Kurt was called "sacrilegious" and "beyond triple corny," as one Twitter commentator wrote. Those types of remarks come up often whenever Kurt's name or likeness is used outside of Nirvana's music. It suggests that with many people Kurt has more sanctity or punk authenticity, than other musicians.

"Holy Grail" also caused some observers to revisit the themes of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" a few years later, and whether Kurt should be co-opted. Jay-Z "got the sentiment entirely backwards," *LA Weekly* and *Village Voice* hip-hop critic Chaz Kangas wrote. "'Smells Like Teen Spirit' decried—or at the very least mocked—corporate intrusions into youth culture, and to make it part of an album released as a promotional tie-in for a phone company (strictly for the artist's profit) is dopey at best." Samsung had purchased a million copies of Jay-Z's *Holy Grail* album and gave them away with new phones, meaning, in a roundabout way, that the lyric to "Teen Spirit," as sung by Justin Timberlake, became part of the premium for buying a new phone.

But Kangas pointed out to me that Jay-Z's song is just one of at least a dozen times "Teen Spirit" has shown up in hip-hop or dance music, used by well-known bands (the Prodigy; Tony! Toni! Toné; Timbaland), and obscure ones (Texas MC Trae tha Truth, DJ Balloon, Credit to the Nation). Kangas says it was a full decade after Kurt's death before he became "the archetype" that hip-hop acts turned to when they wanted to reference rock or a white rock star. One example was when rapper Davo Banner had a meltdown during a New York showcase and ripped down his own posters around the stage as "Teen Spirit" was played. Banner made devil horns with his fingers and screamed "Rock

The hip-hop-loving crowd went crazy. “I think his message was that major labels make so much money off hip-hop, but you have to channel a rock artist to get their respect,” Kangas says. “But the fact that he chose to go with ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’ as his way of making an ‘anti-marketing’ effort says much about that song’s stature.”

Banner played the song frequently during his 2008 tour. When he performed it at a concert at Seattle’s Showbox Theater, the crowd went bananas. I think it wasn’t simply “Teen Spirit”—which was played regularly at sports events to rile up the crowd—that made the Seattle hip-hop audience go nuts, but instead its contextualization: the very idea that Seattle’s most famous song had a place at a hip-hop show.

And if Kurt Cobain is cool within the confines of hip-hop, then the mostly white crowd knew that Kurt Cobain were cool, too.

It isn’t just “Teen Spirit” that hip-hop has embraced; many songs in Nirvana’s catalog show up in hip-hop as musical riffs and samples, or as lyrical nods. Some of the best Nirvana samples include Kurt Cobain’s guitar riff from “Heart-Shaped Box” (3MG), the chorus of “Lithium” (Slug), and even a sample of Kurt’s guitar in a cover of the Meat Puppets’ “Plateau” (Plan B). The obscure Nirvana track “Moi Vagina” was sampled by Yelawolf, one of Eminem’s protégés. The website Whosampled.com lists fifty-five different songs by hip-hop acts that have sampled Nirvana. *Flavorwire* recently ran a story titled “Why is Hip-Hop (and the Rest of Pop Culture) Still So Obsessed with Kurt Cobain?” The answer, writer Tom Hawking suggested, was in part that Kurt died young and is seen as a martyr in the hip-hop community. In a culture where premature, violent death is a dominant theme, Kurt fits in thematically.

Kurt, as a historical figure, also often appears in hip-hop lyrics. His name is evoked to refer to suicide or violence. The Game sang “take me away, like a bullet from Kurt Cobain.” In 1994, 2Pac rapped about a choice to “blow my brains out like Kurt Cobain.” Xzibit rapped, “I lent my shotgun to Kurt Cobain, and the motherfucker never brought it back.” DJ Kay Slay rapped, “They want my name next to Kurt Cobain, but I don’t sniff cocaine.” There are dozens more examples of this motif, including the enduring image Vinnie Paz rapped in “When You Need Me”: “My death wish is to die on the Soul Plane, next to Chuck D., Coltrane, and Cobain.”

Hip-hop is a music form that makes use of real-life headlines, so Kurt’s appearance isn’t surprising, even if its frequency is. Some of Kurt’s continuing appeal comes from demographics: hip-hop acts skew young, with most artists under forty. Kurt was a major historical figure in the lives of many musicians’ childhoods, even if Nirvana’s music has little externally to do with hip-hop. (Kurt did own Public Enemy’s *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, his only hip-hop record but a cornerstone of the genre.) Yet Kurt remains an influence on young hip-hop singers. Kangas points out that the pivotal year wasn’t as much 1991 as it was 1999: “There were so many recap shows on music television counting down the ‘best of the nineties,’ and Nirvana topped all those lists, and hip-hop acts saw that, and Kurt became so ubiquitous you can’t help but know him.” Once everyone knew Kurt’s name, his insertion into the music of the moment, which happened to be hip-hop, was inevitable.

There is at least one great truth here that many young hip-hop artists, children in 1991, will miss. But it is a fact not lost on forty-four-year-old Jay-Z. Hip-hop’s first foray into the mainstream sales charts began in the eighties, just prior to Nirvana’s ascension, and Kurt, for a moment, overshadowed every other music form. “It was weird because hip-hop was becoming this force, then Grunge music stopped it for one second, ya know?” Jay-Z told Pharrell Williams in his 2012 book *Pharrell: Places*

*and Spaces I've Been.* “Those ‘hair bands’ were too easy for us to take out; when Kurt Cobain came with that statement it was like, ‘We gotta wait awhile.’”

---

## LAMESTAIN ON MY WACK SLACKS

### Grunge & Culture

As 1992 started, *Nevermind* became the best-selling album in the United States, knocking Michael Jackson out of the No. 1 slot on the *Billboard* charts. But during much of 1992, as the album continued to sell, Kurt essentially went missing. Courtney was pregnant (she had Frances that August), and Kurt was descending into drug addiction at exactly the same moment he was becoming the biggest star in the world. Nirvana played only a few tour dates during 1992, their biggest commercial year in terms of album sales.

But even Kurt's disappearing act couldn't stop the cultural shift *Nevermind* had wrought. As the Seattle music scene continued to gain worldwide attention and other Seattle bands followed Nirvana to the top of the charts, 1992 became the Year of Grunge. Grunge was a media-created label that had both everything to do with Kurt—it wouldn't have existed without him, or without *Nevermind*'s success—and at the same time almost nothing to do with him.

If the image of Kurt in the "Smells Like Teen Spirit" video clip, with hair in his face and a striped T-shirt on, had been the indelible vision of 1991 on MTV, 1992 looked like a rocker in cutoff jeans, shorts, a flannel shirt, and a pair of Doc Martens. This is exactly the outfit that actor Matt Dillon wears in Cameron Crowe's movie *Singles*, which came out in 1992. The film was a worldwide success, spawned a hit soundtrack album, and forever wedded Seattle to Grunge.

*Singles* detailed the lives of a handful of Seattle twentysomethings as they found romance, started bands, and generally walked about the rainy city making pithy observations. The film had been completed in 1991, but the studio sat on it for a while. When *Nevermind* became a hit, it was quickly released, and wisely marketed as if it were a new Seattle band. And in a way it was: former music journalist Crowe had the prescience to include cameos by a handful of musicians—including Soundgarden's Chris Cornell and Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder. By the time the movie came out, they had become major stars. In one scene in the film, a group of these musicians sit around reading a copy of *The Rocket*. At the request of the filmmakers, we had mocked up a fake copy for the film, and the fake band (Eddie Vedder, Jeff Ament, Stone Gossard, and actor Matt Dillon) sat around doing what they did in real life, reading *The Rocket* to see their reviews. After reading the fake review, Eddie Vedder tells Matt Dillon, "A compliment for us is a compliment for you." This was not acting.

It was odd seeing a copy of my magazine in a film, but it was even odder to watch how much impact *Singles* had on how outsiders perceived Seattle. The cutoff-jeans outfit that Matt Dillon wore in the film became what many thought of as the de facto uniform of Seattle music. These were not Kurt Cobain's clothes, or his look, but Kurt got stuck with the image nonetheless. One of the odder things about *Singles* is that Nirvana isn't on the soundtrack, or in the movie, and yet Nirvana, and Kurt, are forever linked to it in public perception. In 1992, a Montreal television reporter asked the three members of Nirvana why they didn't appear in *Singles*. "Are you part of it at all?" the reporter asked. "Definitely not," Kurt said emphatically. Later in that same interview, Krist Novoselic said they weren't asked to participate, but Kurt corrected him, saying they were solicited but he wanted no

part of *Singles*. “I said ‘no,’ before even asking you guys,” Kurt told his bandmates. “That’s because I’m the leader of the band.”

---

By 1992, Kurt, the leader of Nirvana, could say “no,” but he and his band were still going to be part of *Singles* in the public’s perception, whether they were in the film or not. The phenomenon of Grunge had become a monster that overtook everything in its path, including Kurt Cobain. It could not be corralled.

The word “grunge” first appeared in *The Rocket* in the late eighties as an adjective to describe certain sonic musical style, a raw and unpolished sound, with distortion, but usually without any other added studio audio effects. Grunge, pre-capitalization, was almost always applied to a Sub Pop band and almost always applied to a band produced by Jack Endino. In that context, it meant a mix of garage rock and slowed-down punk. Sub Pop did most of their albums at a low-rent studio named Reciprocal. That studio’s acoustics, combined with Endino’s production aesthetics, created true capital-G Grunge albums by bands like Mudhoney, Tad, Blood Circus, and a dozen other groups whose names have now been lost to history.

While I’d classify some of Nirvana’s early tracks as Grunge, their music always had more pop elements than, say, the output of Mudhoney, who were absolutely a band that played Grunge. In music-critic hair-splitting, the term didn’t really fit most of Nirvana’s music, or Kurt’s Beatles-influenced melodies. Nirvana’s Krist Novoselic also doesn’t believe that Grunge, adjective or noun, fits much of Nirvana: he once told me that “School,” off *Bleach*, was their Grunge moment. “Kurt bought that riff in,” Novoselic told me, “and I said, Oh my God, that is the most Seattle fucking riff I’d heard in my life . . . That was the quintessential Grunge song.”

The word “Grunge,” as an adjective and not a noun, had been kicked around in rock ‘n’ roll for decades before it came to describe a generation. Lester Bangs used it in an October 1972 record review of a metal band in *Creem*. Before that, it appeared in liner notes to a reissue of a 1957 Johnny Burnette Trio album, where the rockabilly guitar playing was described as “grungy.” Mark Arm of Mudhoney is often credited with coining the term, but he says he heard it from friends in Australia, where edgy singer-songwriter Tex Perkins was dubbed “the high priest of grunge.” The first print use of “Grunge” in the Northwest can be traced to a letter to the editor by Mark Arm that appeared in the Seattle fanzine *Desperate Times* in 1981. In it, Arm complained about the band Mr. Epp and the Calculations: “Pure grunge! Pure noise! Pure shit!” Arm just so happened to be the lead singer for Mr. Epp.

Sub Pop Records first used the word in promotional materials describing Green River, a group that included Arm—plus Jeff Ament and Stone Gossard, who later formed Pearl Jam. “Ultra-loose GRUNGE that destroyed the morals of a generation,” the release read.

That Green River record was produced by Jack Endino, who could have trademarked the Grunge sound as well as the name. Kurt hired Endino to produce early demos in 1988. The result of that first demo tape, and a few other lucky breaks, caused Sub Pop to sign Nirvana. With that deal in hand, Nirvana recorded their debut, *Bleach*, at Reciprocal, with Endino producing. Most of that album would qualify as Grunge, yet “About a Girl” was “pure pop,” in Endino’s words. Kurt told Endino he had listened to *Meet the Beatles* for three hours straight before writing that song.

The sessions for the entire *Bleach* album cost just \$600, an indication of both how basic the studio was and Endino’s low rates. Sub Pop was so poor they couldn’t front that small sum, and Kurt didn’t have it either, of course. Kurt had to borrow the money to pay the studio from Jason Everman, who

played bass in Nirvana briefly. Everman told me Kurt never paid him back. But *Bleach* would earn Nirvana mostly positive reviews and garner them airplay on college radio stations. It was a start.

By 1989, Sub Pop bands were generating a lot of attention in Europe, and specifically in the UK. There were several competing weekly music publications in England that were always searching for the next big thing, and it was there where “grunge” became a term to describe a movement, instead of one style of music. In a British newspaper, Mark Arm described the streets of Seattle being “paved with grunge.” Almost overnight, “grunge” became “Grunge,” as the British music press began using the name in headlines. Looking for something to write about now that punk had faded, they grabbed hold of Seattle bands, and “Grunge” appeared in nearly every headline. Mark Arm hated that he’d started the trend, but he couldn’t stop it. “It seemed a way to pigeonhole every band from Seattle,” Arm said. “These bands didn’t sound alike, but suddenly, what had been an adjective became a noun.”

The media in the US also needed a way to describe the fashion, music, and lifestyle shifts that were embodied by youth in Seattle, and so “Grunge” made its way back home. As with every cyclical youth-cultural trend—from greasers to hippies to punks—there was a shred of truth to the trend, but also much projection, exaggeration, and amplification in how the press reported it. If the eighties had been an era personified by yuppies, blue-collar no-nonsense Seattle was the antidote. Seattle was a city of bookstores and coffee shops that helped support a lifestyle that was contemplative. All those espresso shops needed baristas—the job Matt Dillon’s character had in *Singles*—and those positions were perfect for musicians. Still, the only person I knew in Seattle in 1991 who dressed like Matt Dillon in *Singles* was Pearl Jam’s Jeff Ament. That should come as no surprise, as Dillon wore many of Ament’s clothes in the movie.

But the media has always fed on trends and movements, and when a handful of Seattle bands gained international attention—and when one of those bands (Nirvana) sold thirty-five million albums—something had to be made of it in the press. As these Grunge “trend” stories began to appear in magazines and newspapers over the world, there was the inevitable backlash in Seattle where many, including Kurt Cobain, felt that a varied and diverse music scene with hundreds of bands had been condensed to one word. Kurt was a good enough music critic—he had once imagined himself as a fanzine editor—to know that there were major differences between the sounds of Nirvana and the more metal-leaning Soundgarden, but both were now classified as Grunge. In nearly every interview Kurt or Nirvana did henceforth with radio or television, they were asked about Grunge. While Kurt was happy to have his music influence other bands, and to also be able to wear a T-shirt adorned with the logo of his favorite indie band when he was on television, he didn’t want to be seen as the leader of a youth movement. He usually refused to answer questions about Grunge, or responded with sarcasm. He never specifically addressed why he hated the term so much, but many other Seattle musicians told me why they disliked it—because it diminished their individual artistry and turned their art into a commodified and marketed trend.

Evidence of the Seattle backlash toward the use of the word “Grunge” came with one of the most delicious spoofs ever pulled on a major newspaper. In 1992, New York-based magazines had begun to regularly send writers to Seattle to document “the scene” and capture the essence of Grunge. They would fly into town, hang in local clubs, try to catch the “flavor” of “the scene,” and look for juicy quotes. As a result, locals, particularly musicians, became resentful when asked about Grunge by out-of-towners.

Sub Pop was ground zero for anything related to Grunge, at least in the media's mind, and reporters were desperate to try to break a Grunge exclusive. In November 1992, a *New York Times* reporter was assigned to write about "Grunge culture." The writer phoned Sub Pop, and Megan Jasper answered the phone. When the reporter asked her if fans of Grunge had a lingo, Jasper informed him sarcastically, that there was a secret "Seattle Grunge language." The writer took the bait. On the spot, Jasper made up several nonsense sayings, telling the reporter they were Grunge code words known only within Seattle culture.

The list was titled "Grunge Speak" when it was published in *The New York Times* the next day. "Lamestain" was what a Grunge musician would call an "uncool person" and a derogatory term, the *Times* reported. "Wack slacks" was the name for now-fashionable ripped jeans like Kurt's. When rockers in Seattle said they were "swingin' on the flippity-flop," it meant they were hanging out. "Bound-and-hagged" was staying home on a weekend night. What made "Grunge Speak" even more strange was that in the same article, Sub Pop's Jonathan Poneman was quoted on how people in Seattle resented the intrusion of media attention: "All things Grunge are treated with the utmost cynicism and amusement . . . because the whole thing is a fabricated movement, and always has been," he said.

Seattle howled at the "Grunge Speak" piece, including Kurt Cobain. This was truly the funniest thing that had ever happened in the Seattle music scene, but it also illustrated the insanity of the phenomenon of Grunge. Seattle was being treated as if it were some newly discovered tribe, with its own customs, dress, and language. *Entertainment Weekly* wrote the next year, in a true moment of hyperbole, "There hasn't been this kind of exploitation of a subculture since the media first discovered hippies in the sixties."

While everyone in Seattle laughed at the *New York Times* story, and we even wrote about it in *The Rocket*, several weeks passed before the rest of the country caught on. Finally, the Chicago magazine *The Baffler* reported that *The New York Times* had been had. Rather than admit they erred, the *Times* declared it was actually *The Baffler* who had been hoaxed, and that the "Grunge Speak" list was real. The *Times* went so far as to demand *The Baffler* apologize. They didn't, of course, but it is worth mentioning that *The New York Times* has never run a correction, and twenty years later "Grunge Speak" is still posted on the newspaper's website without any indication that it's a hoax. Either someone at that paper truly believes that people in Seattle used (or still use) the term "bloated, big bloated" to describe a drunk, or Grunge is responsible for the longest-running prank ever pulled off on *The New York Times*.

Around the time of "Grunge Speak," I hit my own apex of how crazy Grunge had become when another gullible out-of-town reporter phoned *The Rocket*. He was from an eastern Canadian newspaper and claimed a story had just come over the Canadian wire services about how officials were concerned Seattle would be overrun with teenagers. Public-safety leaders, this guy said, were quoted predicting that a million youth were headed for Seattle, like the influx San Francisco saw during the 1967 Summer of Love. This reporter claimed his wire story said Seattle police had already installed barricades to control crowds. I laughed and told him he'd been had.

But this tenacious reporter wouldn't let go. He kept calling back, thinking he was on to a big exclusive, and that I could help him confirm it. He insisted I "look out my window" to make sure the army of flannel-clad teens hadn't already arrived. For a half second I wondered if I was the one getting hoaxed. But things had been so crazy that year, and so beyond what I'd ever imagined, I decided to look out the window. There was, of course, no mass of teenage runaways filling the streets of Seattle.

If I was living with this kind of nonsense, imagine Kurt, as the supposed "leader" of a nonexistent "movement," and the amount of absurdity he was dealing with. He was pestered by reporters

everywhere he went. When he was asked about the “Seattle scene” by a journalist, Kurt said, “All scenes are relevant, but they all phase into nothing, or go away. . . . They are claiming we finally put Seattle on ‘the map.’ What map?”

That silly Canadian wire-service report about the masses of kids did contain a tiny bit of foreshadowing, however. Out my same window, seven years later, there actually were hordes of kids, thousands instead of millions, fighting police behind barricades. Clouds of tear gas drifted up into my office during one wild week in November 1999. That month Seattle’s streets were filled with angry youth for protests that would be known as the Battle in Seattle, the WTO riots.

If during the Summer of Grunge reporters were looking everywhere to land the ultimate Seattle story, Kurt was the biggest game of them all, and they hunted him in every nook of the Pacific Northwest. He wisely chose to spend that summer living in Los Angeles awaiting his daughter Frances’s birth and did not return to Seattle until the fall. He couldn’t hide completely, however. The September issue of *Vanity Fair* captured both Courtney and Kurt. It was the single most controversial article ever written about them. The headline read: STRANGE LOVE: ARE COURTNEY LOVE, LEAD DIVA OF THE POSTPUNK BAND HOLE, AND HER HUSBAND, NIRVANA HEARTTHROB KURT COBAIN, THE GRUNGE JOHN AND YOKO? OR THE NEXT SID AND NANCY? The story contained allegations of drug use, of Frances being born in poor health, with Courtney described as a “train-wreck personality.” When Los Angeles County’s child protective services stepped in to threaten to take Frances away, Kurt was beside himself. Just a day after Courtney gave birth, Kurt went to the delivery room with a loaded pistol, intending for the two of them to commit suicide together. He was talked down by Courtney, and Eric Erlandson of Hootie & the Blowfish helpfully whisked away the gun, but the incident shows how on the edge Kurt was. Guns and suicide were already established parts of his world, even with a one-day-old daughter next to him.

But something also shifted with Kurt in the season of Grunge, and the change ultimately affected his legacy for the better. Kurt had always been liberal, and Nirvana had played several antiwar benefit shows before they became famous. But by 1992, Kurt was motivated to speak out on social issues he felt important. Perhaps he thought that if he was going to be asked the same questions about Grunge over and over in every interview, he’d better shift the control and use these opportunities to affect change. He chose to discuss feminism, bigotry, racism, and intolerance, topics he spoke about in every interview he did for the rest of his life.

The transformation was, in some ways, remarkable. Kurt Cobain, who previously had spent most of his spare time watching inane television or playing with his Evel Knievel action figures, became the most outspoken man in rock ’n’ roll. His pro-feminist stance and his support of gay rights became almost crusades for him at this point. If Grunge gave Kurt a soapbox, he was going to use it for good.

The most obvious example of Kurt’s new outspokenness came in his liner notes to the B-side collection *Incesticide*, which was released at the end of 1992. The notes are unlike any other liner notes ever penned by a rock star. They are more of an open letter to fans, and the public, than a description of the music on the album. In them, Kurt urges “homophobes” to no longer buy his albums. He wrote: “If any of you, in any way, hate homosexuals, people of a different color, or women, please do this one favor for us—leave us the fuck alone. Don’t come to our shows and don’t buy our records.”

With this battle cry, Kurt was trying to do something during the mad year of Grunge that was unheard of in the marketplace of pop culture: he was attempting to self-select who bought his records. Nirvana’s initial fan base was made of their peers, progressive fans who came out to tiny clubs

watch a band touring in a van. But as *Nevermind* broke massive, Nirvana no longer had one type fan. That bothered a control freak like Kurt, particularly as Grunge became a label he was saddled with, and particularly when Nirvana's audiences began to grow.

And when his music was co-opted, Kurt became enraged. In those same liner notes Kurt wrote about a real-life incident of two men in Reno raping a girl while they sang lyrics to the song "Polly" from *Nevermind*. Kurt said they were "two wastes of sperm and eggs." Hinting at his own suicide, or at least retirement, he added, "I have a hard time carrying on knowing there are plankton like that in our audience." Kurt was particularly upset that "Polly," a song he wrote about a newspaper account he read of the torture and rape of a fourteen-year-old girl, would then later be used as a soundtrack to another horrific crime. The song had displayed his extraordinary creative mind, written from the view of the attacker in the deplorable crime, but it was set into a catchy pop song. Oddly, Kurt wrote three separate songs over the course of his career about rape, one on every album Nirvana put out: "Floyd the Barber," "Polly," and, obviously, "Rape Me."

After Kurt wrote "Rape Me," he felt he had to explain himself to the media. He told *Spin*, "It's like she's saying, 'Rape me, go ahead, rape me, beat me. You'll never kill me. I'll survive this and I'm gonna fucking rape you one of these days, and you won't even know it.'" In the same interview Kurt said he hoped *In Utero* would shift some of rock's "misogyny." "Maybe it will inspire women to pick up guitars, and start bands—because it's the only future of rock 'n' roll."

Rape became just one of many social issues Kurt often spoke out against, and Nirvana performed several benefit concerts for anti-rape groups. They also played benefits for anti-hate groups, against racism, and for gay rights. The more mainstream Kurt's music became and the more *Nevermind* sold the more he felt the need to try to control his agenda. Nirvana played mostly loud, raucous guitar rock and that style of music—be it Grunge or heavy metal—primarily attracted a young male demographic that oftentimes felt concerts were a place to work off aggression or party. That stereotype had fit Kurt at one point in his youth, but once he saw his own countenance reflected back at him from his concert crowds, he tried to shift that vibe. He tried to pick bands who were less mainstream to open concerts for Nirvana. Mirroring his comments on women being the future, he also gave opportunities to female-fronted bands like L7 and Shonen Knife.

In some ways, Kurt was successful in gaining back some control. Grunge became a much more finely nuanced musical movement than heavy metal, and there were opportunities for females that hadn't really existed within hard rock before. Courtney's band, Hole, inspired a generation of young women as well, and so did Babes in Toyland, the Breeders, Veruca Salt, and Seattle's own Seven Year Bitch.

Kurt promoted these groups whenever he did an interview and wore T-shirts with their names on them, and that was one of the reasons he was often cited as being a feminist. He was comfortable with that title, and both he and Courtney used it to describe him. "No one ever talks about how many of these rock guys were just sexist, asshole jocks who used alternative rock to maintain the same misogynistic power they had in high school," Courtney Love once told me. Kurt, she said, was different. And I think she was right.

Kurt's feminism has inspired several academic studies. Cortney Alexander wrote her master's thesis on gender identity in Grunge, focusing primarily on Kurt. She titled it after one of Kurt's quotes: "*I'm Not Like Them, but I Can Pretend*": *A Feminist Analysis of Kurt Cobain's Gender Performance*. The blog *Gender Across Borders* has written, "Cobain often identified himself with

- [\*\*download 75 Down Blocks Refining Karate Technique: A Systematic Approach to Elevating Your Skills \(Tuttle Martial Arts\) book\*\*](#)
- [read The Power of Coincidence: How Life Shows Us What We Need to Know for free](#)
- [\*\*download Mind-Travelling and Voyage Drama in Early Modern England \(Early Modern Literature in History\) pdf\*\*](#)
- [download Miami Requiem: A Crime Thriller \(Deborah Jones, Book 1\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [\*\*read online Information Doesn't Want to Be Free: Laws for the Internet Age\*\*](#)
  
- <http://kamallubana.com/?library/Carina-Contini-s-Kitchen-Garden-Cookbook--A-Year-of-Italian-Scots-Recipes.pdf>
- <http://redbuffalodesign.com/ebooks/Tiny-Titan---One-Small-Gift--Journey-of-Hope.pdf>
- <http://twilightblogs.com/library/Icons-Of-England.pdf>
- <http://test1.batsinbelfries.com/ebooks/The-Bible-of-Options-Strategies--The-Definitive-Guide-for-Practical-Trading-Strategies.pdf>
- <http://www.rap-wallpapers.com/?library/Censorship--A-Beginner-s-Guide--Beginner-s-Guides-.pdf>