
Mr. Christensen

English 11

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Kurt Cobain

“All my life, my dream has been to be a big rock star-just may as well abuse it while I can.” (Cross 66) Kurt Cobain was the lead singer and founded of Nirvana, whose punk rock album *Nevermind* was the first of its kind to gain popularity with mainstream listeners (“Cobain, Kurt”). Unfortunately, Cobain was found dead in his home when he was just twenty seven years old (“Kurt Cobain: Biography”). Kurt Cobain was a musical visionary, and his premature death changed mainstream music forever.

Though there were struggles in Kurt’s childhood, they would eventually lead up to and contribute to his success. He was very artistic as a child and had a very musical family. Kurt was always very interested in music. His first instrument was a drum set, and he later experimented with the piano. His sister once reminisced about it. “He was able to artistically put whatever he thought onto paper or into music” (Cross 10, 15). Years later, problems started occurring. First, his doctor prescribed him Ritalin for hyperactivity. Little did the doctor know, the medication would not only bring down his energy level, but it would bring down his mood as well (Cross 17). At nine years old, his parents got divorced, which he still wrote about in his journals over fifteen years later (Cross 18). Also, when Kurt was in eighth grade, he and two

friends encountered the body of a teenage boy hanging from a tree. Kurt knew the victim, who was the brother of his friend. The boy had committed suicide.

It was only after Kurt had observed for quite some time that an adult finally shooed him away, thinking that maybe the ghoulish visage was not one a young man should have witnessed. But the damage was already done; Kurt talked about the suicide obsessively, and it became one of the defining moments in his young life. (Cross 19)

Around that same time, Kurt told his friend, “I’m going to be a superstar musician, kill myself, and go out in a flame of glory” (Cross 19). Kurt didn’t know at the time that this comment would later become eerily accurate.

It was fate when, for his fourteenth birthday, Kurt got an electric guitar. He worked for months to learn how to play and he carried the guitar everywhere. He spent his time playing his guitar, creating art, reading music magazines, and drawing band logos in the margins of his notebooks while doing homework (Cross 22). Although Kurt now had a creative outlet, family problems led him to have to move in with relatives, and he ended up moving around between family members and at one point was without a home (Ronson). As a result of moving so often, his grades suffered. He was discouraged by this and started using drugs and alcohol (Cross 24). It was around this time that Kurt met another misfit from his town, Krist Novoselic (Ronson). Kurt and Krist, who played the bass, tried forming many bands, but none of them lasted long (Cross 37). Only after Kurt moved to Olympia did they form Nirvana, although they couldn’t find a consistent drummer (Cross 40). With temporary drummer Chad Channing, Nirvana recorded their first album, *Bleach*, and released it on June 15, 1989 (Cross 46). It wasn’t until 1990 that Nirvana found Dave Grohl, who was their drummer permanently. It was on the night

that they met Dave that they had their first show as a headlining band. After that, dozens of labels wanted to sign Nirvana (Cross 66).

Nirvana received a lot of recognition and in 1991 their contract was bought out by Geffen, they signed to the mega-label, the first non-mainstream band to do so. Two and a half years after Nirvana's first C.D. *Bleach* was released, they released *Nevermind*, a series of different, crunching, screaming songs that along with its first single “Smells Like Teen Spirit” would propel Nirvana to mainstream stardom (Ronson).

Nevermind was released on September 24, 1991. “It debuted in *Billboard* at Number 34, impressive for a major-label debut, but not as high as Mudhoney’s last album had placed. It would take almost three months before the album would top the charts in a slow and steady rise” (Cross 76). Surprisingly, before the year was done, the album had gone gold and then platinum. Kurt seemed overwhelmed (Cross 79). Nirvana toured, did interviews, and sold out clubs. When Rolling Stone asked about Kurt, Dave told them, “I lived with Kurt for eight months. When I first got there, he had just broken up with a girl and was totally heartbroken. We would sit in this tiny, shoebox apartment for eight hours at a time without saying a word. For week and weeks this happened. Finally, one night, we were driving back in the van, and Kurt said, ‘You know, I’m not always like this’” (Cross 80). It seemed that Nirvana success was cause Kurt to spiral downward.

As Nirvana’s grew more and more successful, Kurt seemed to get more and more depressed. His dreams had come true, but now he was feeling startled because of his new expectations and responsibilities. To cope with the stress, Kurt started using heroin. He had used drugs as a teenager, but not to the point of addiction. “He admitted his decision to use

heroin as a ‘choice’” (Cross 83). On January 12, 1992, the night Nirvana played on SNL, Kurt overdosed for the first time. “He was revived at the last moment-a pattern that would become common” (Cross 86). It was around the same time that Kurt started doing heroin that he met Courtney Love. “She jokingly told one reporter that it was ‘pharmaceuticals’ that brought them together, and on one date that was true-both took swings from a bottle of codeine cough syrup” (Cross 86). Kurt and Courtney bonded over their imperfect childhoods and drug problems (Cross 89). Not long after they started dating, Courtney got pregnant. In February of 1992, they married in Hawaii and moved in together in California (Cross 92). Despite the fact that Kurt was offered over a million dollars to go on tour again, Kurt refused. Only a month after her got married, he checked into rehab, but it didn’t work (Cross 105). On August 18, 1992, Kurt and Courtney had daughter, who they named Frances Bean Cobain.

Kurt, at least, was still struggling with drugs and, in what seemed like an almost comic twist, he was detoxing in the same hospital where Courtney was giving birth. She literally dragged him from his room, hauling him and his IV to the delivery center for the birth. It was less comical the next day, however, when he escaped the hospital detox, went out, bought drugs, and returned with a pistol. He was so afraid that their child would be taken from them, he attempted to convince Courtney to join him in a suicide pact. She grabbed the gun, and he fell weeping to the floor (Cross 106).

The state decided to take legal custody from Kurt and Courtney because they were considered unfit parents. The couples got around this decision by simply having a relative take temporary custody of their daughter and stay at their house (106). At one point, Kurt said “‘Holding my baby is the best drug in the world’” (Cross 109). After Frances was born, Kurt’s depression seemed to be lifted (Cross 112). Finally, on May 25, 1993, Kurt and Courtney got custody of

their daughter back (123). Nirvana released their third album, *In Utero*, in September of 1993. It debuted in *Billboard* at Number 1. In order to sell the record at some stores, the back cover art and the name of a son had to be changed. In regards to this, Kurt said, ““When I was a kid, I could only go to Wal-Mart. I want the kids to be able to get this record. I’ll do what they want”” (128). Yet again, his successes seemed to be bringing him down. His drug problems were getting worse, and he had multiple overdoses in 1993, including one that required the paramedics. Because of the drugs, Kurt was arrested for domestic violence that year.

When he was a teenager, Kurt held the belief that drugs helped fuel creativity, but by 1991, he had grown to question that conviction. As his addiction became debilitating, it took him away from his family, his band, and his art. By the fall of 1993, he attempted few creative projects, only composed a handful of songs, and rarely wrote in his journal. Of the few journal entries he penned, many were about how hard it was to quit drugs and what a hell they had caused his life to be. “The psychological factors have set in and are as damaging as the physical effects,” he wrote in one treatise. “Every time you kick, as time goes by, it gets more uncomfortable. Even the most needle-phobic person can crave the relief of putting a syringe in their arm” (Cross 131).

Kurt was being pressured to tours by his band, his label, his wife, and many others to go on tour. After refusing for quite a while, Kurt finally agreed. When asked why he agreed, he said “We’re not nearly as rich as everyone thinks we are” (Cross 132). After being told that cancelling tour dates would hurt him financially, Kurt asked whether death would be a legitimate cause for cancellation of the rest of the tour. Two days later, Kurt tried to kill himself. His suicide note read, “Like Hamlet, I have to choose between life and death. I’m choosing death” (Cross 144). Kurt was rushed to the hospital and was in a coma for a day. Kurt’s management decided to

cover up the suicide attempt by calling it an accidental overdose and even Krist didn't find out what really happened until later. "By March 1994, Kurt had stopped thinking about any kind of future with the band, and he was no longer writing songs or planning another album." (Cross 145). Nirvana was over.

Kurt was not just quitting Nirvana, he was quitting his life. After threatening to shoot himself, the police took his guns and brought him to jail, but he was out within hours (148). He fired his band mates, and when Courtney told him she didn't want him doing drugs in the house anymore, he left (149). Krist tried to get him help, saying that they could go away, get Kurt a doctor, and not go back, but Kurt wouldn't agree to it. On March 30, 1994, Kurt agreed to go into another rehab. Less than forty-eight hours later, he jumped a wall and escaped. On the day he had decided to go to treatment, he had bought a twenty-gauge shotgun and had hidden in his home (Cross 151, 152). A few days later, he snuck back into the empty house and wrote a suicide note. He was later found in his greenhouse, dead of a self-inflicted shotgun wound to the head (Cross 153). Kurt died on April 5 of 1994 (Cobain, Kurt).

Kurt Cobain and his unique musical style changed many people's lives and after him, mainstream music was never the same. Nirvana did something unprecedented; they were the first grunge band to make it in the mainstream (Cobain, Kurt). Fourteen years after his death, in 2008, Kurt was named number 45 on Rolling Stone's 100 Greatest Singers of All Time (Cobain, Kurt).

Cobain was mourned in the days after his suicide by fans, fellow musicians and his wife, and his ashes were scattered into Washington's Wishkah River. He had left behind a powerful musical legacy and some of the era's most enduring songs including "Lithium,"

"In Bloom," "Heart-Shaped Box," "Pennyroyal Tea" and "About a Girl." ("Kurt Cobain: Biography").

Because of Nirvana, other underground rock bands were able to push into the mainstream. They defined grunge and allowed other grunge bands to get contracts with major labels. It wasn't unheard of anymore (Hughes).

"The divorce, the violence, the drugs, the diminished opportunities for an entire generation, that is so crucial to the sound of their music and the success of their music," biographer Azerrad said recently. "The band translated that pain and anger and confusion into musical sound waves very directly that hit a nerve among a large amount of kids who had a similar experience" (Hughes).

Kurt Cobain and Nirvana still inspire people to this day. "The stance, the outpouring of emotion that he was brave enough to give us, I think it's still relevant. As long as there are blond-haired boys in ratty T-shirts mumbling their hearts out, then Cobain will have a legacy" (Stout). No matter how long it's been since the lyrics were written, they will always be relatable; Nirvana will always be popular.

Kurt Cobain changed music forever. His life was dysfunctional and he had problems, but that's what made his music so excellent. Despite his death, he still inspires. It was fate when he was given a guitar. "'Part of what was so captivating about Nirvana's music was not so much its stunning originality, but its remarkable fusion of so many different strands of influence,' said Sub Pop co-founder Jonathan Poneman" (Stout). Kurt once said he was going to go out in a flame of glory, and he was right (Cross 19). He may be gone, but his legacy lives on.

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