

Abstract

Abstract: This project evaluates the rise of the Grunge movement through Nirvana's *Nevermind* album as a unique burst of culture through the city of Seattle. Culturally, in the late 20th century, Seattle found its identity in the area around it, though other American cities overshadowed its significance. Through music, figures such as Jack Endino and the iconic Kurt Cobain gave Seattle an unfathomable uplift within global culture. This project argues that grunge culture emerged as a distinct facet of Seattleite identity, with elements such as flannel clothing and thrifting playing pivotal roles in shaping the city's recognizable and esteemed cultural landscape. It also discusses how progressive issues such as feminism and gay rights contributed to the area's identity. This project demonstrates the significance of the movement to the locals through personal testimonies as to how grunge developed in the late 1980s and affected Seattle during the "grunge explosion" in the early 1990s. It analyses the messaging behind popular grunge songs and how these releases fared in mainstream music. The "Seattle sound" is globally recognized, though many would not understand what that term truly means. Grunge music encapsulated the dreary, disillusioned, and depressive aura of Seattle and helped identify the city through its critical and fanatic recognition.

Introduction and Research Question

Culturally and societally ambiguous, Seattle has established itself as a reclusive and backwater town in a corner of the country. The area was settled in the late 19th century by Scandinavian immigrants and began rising as a metropolis due to its role in the Klondike Goldrush and the Boeing Boom (during WWII). After 1960, Seattle faced a substantial decline for twenty years, making the area irrelevant and unimportant. During the 1980s, a musical movement called "grunge" (a mixture of hardcore punk and metal) began gaining prominence within the Seattle area and the musical underground. Through the promotion of Sub Pop records, Nirvana, headed by the influential Kurt Cobain, released their famed *Nevermind* album in 1991. Its unexpected success brought grunge out of the underground, establishing it as the next big cultural boom in the world. Seattle was seen as the "next Liverpool," with other local bands such as Alice In Chains, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden topped the charts during the early 1990s. The movement declined and evolved in the latter half of the decade due to the death of Cobain.

Most scholars have looked at the outward aspects of the movement, such as how social issues and alternative rock evolved into mainstream culture. I wanted to examine the movement's inward effects on Seattle's culture and identity.

Methods

I was born and raised in Tacoma, Washington, and immersed in the local culture and identity. I contacted individuals involved in the movement for quotes (Bruce Pavitt and Charles Peterson). I used a series of primary sources such as interviews, autobiographies, fashion catalogs, and even albums, among other forms. Some from Jerry Falwell Library-affiliated databases such as ProQuest. Secondary sources came primarily from journal articles gathered through JSTOR.

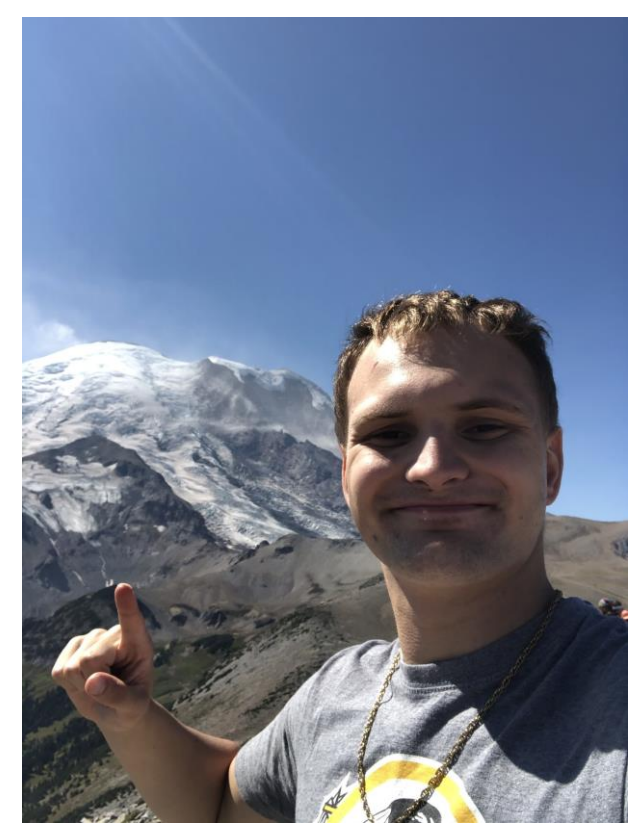


Figure 6. Mt. Rainier (Photo by Colin Wood)



Figure 1. "Sub Pop" Digital Image. *Sub Pop Records*. 1986. Public Domain.



Figure 3. "Kurt Cobain, Commodore Ballroom, Vancouver, B.C., 1991"- Charles Peterson (permission granted by Peterson).

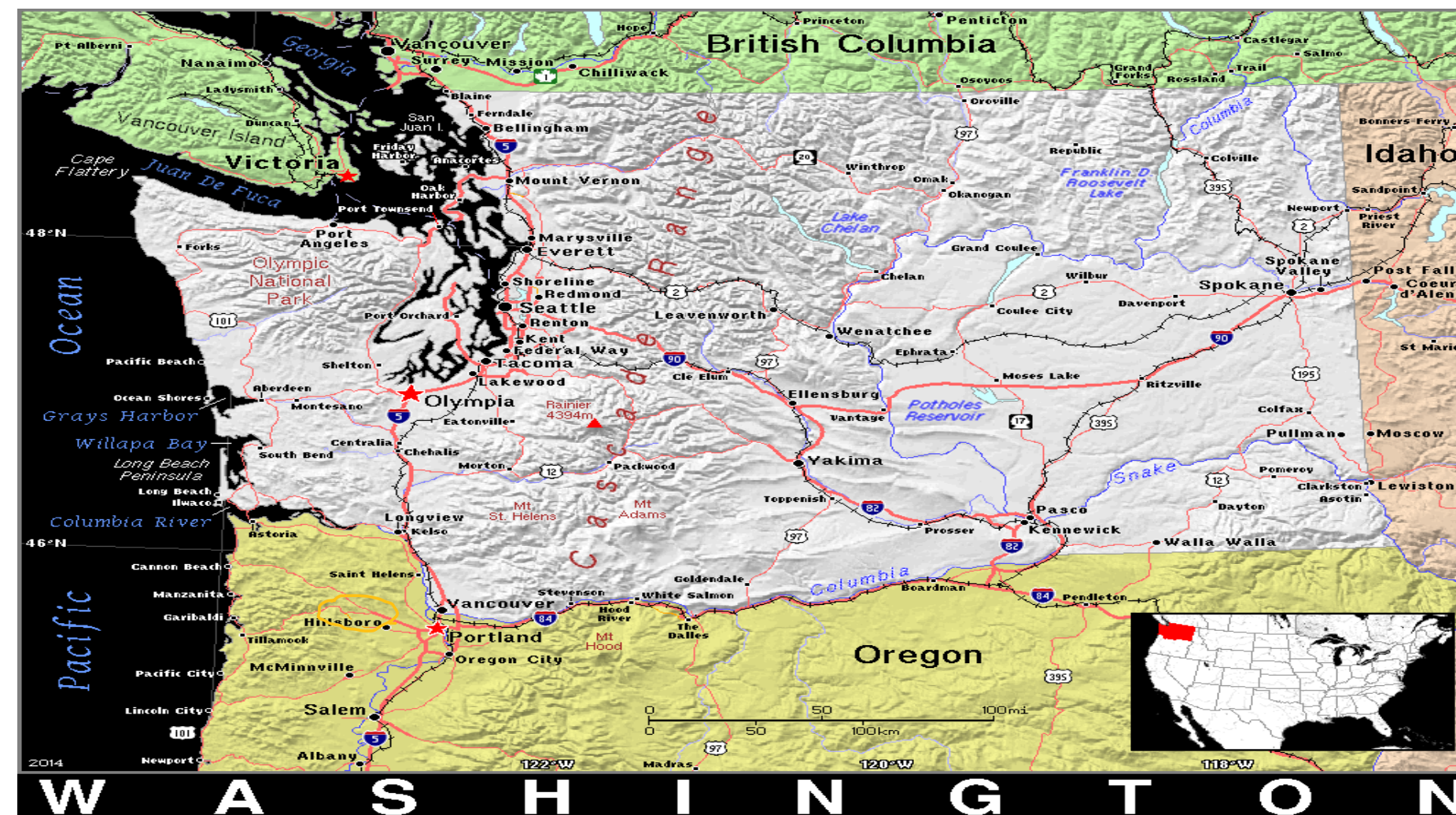


Figure 4. "Map of Washington State." PAT OpenSource Atlas. Public Domain.

Grunge encompassed the whole Pacific Northwest, with Seattle being the nucleus of the movement. Areas such as Bellingham, Tacoma, and Olympia had their pockets of the scene. The Melvins, one of the first grunge bands to "leave" Seattle, came from the small town of Montesano, and Nirvana came from Aberdeen, adjacent to it. Grunge even stretched across the Cascades to Ellensburg with Screaming Trees.

"Pre-internet, the Seattle Grunge scene had time to incubate and develop its own culture or "vibe". This culture included the unique documentary photography of Charles Peterson (helped create the look) and the raw, live-in-the-studio production of Jack Endino... The Grunge scene, at the beginning was very DIY (do it yourself) and was very resourceful. The clothing was inexpensive (thrift store, work clothes), and instruments (often purchased at pawn shops) were inexpensive as well. This low budget resourcefulness had a lot to do with the independent spirit of the Seattle scene in the mid 80's up to the early 90's." - Bruce Pavitt, Founder of Sub Pop Records (via email)

Founded in 1986 by Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman, Sub Pop Records was the first label to exploit what was referred to as the "Seattle sound." Bands like Nirvana, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam started their careers with Sub Pop. Sub Pop's story is complicated when looking at its influences. Its promotions were crucial to the movement's success but not specific to the overall triumph. Today, Sub Pop is an influential label for musical artists across genres such as Father John Misty and Weyes Blood.



Figure 2. "Nirvana stage diver, UW Hub Ballroom, Seattle, 1990" - Charles Peterson (permission granted by Peterson).

Released on September 25, 1991, Nirvana's sophomore album *Nevermind* steadily rose to the top charts globally in early 1992. The album cover depicts a baby reaching for a dollar bill, symbolizing American materialist ethos. Its popularization came from MTV's constant airing of the song "Smells Like Teen Spirit." *Nevermind* not only blew Nirvana into the mainstream but also the whole of alternative rock, changing music indefinitely. Overall, the album has established itself as one of the most important works in music history.

An April 1992 Rolling Stones article, "Seattle Scene: The New Liverpool," compared the cultural boom in the Pacific Northwest city to that of Liverpool, England, during the British Invasion (through the Beatles). During this period, grunge bands were topping the charts, with Nirvana's sophomore album *Nevermind* leading the charge. Pearl Jam's *Ten*, released in 1992, would end up outselling *Nevermind* in the long run. Soundgarden, spearheaded by Chris Cornell, released *Badmotorfinger* in late 1991 and *Superunknown* in 1994. The last of the popular Seattle bands, Alice in Chains, released *Dirt* in 1992. By popularizing grunge, Seattle became a haven for cultural enthusiasts and businesses alike, with major labels signing Seattle bands left and right (even bands that never played live before) and designer fashion companies such as Ralph Lauren marketing "grunge" clothing based on the dress of Kurt Cobain. Seattle was internationally recognized as a beacon for what was "hip" and "cool" in the early 1990s, with the flannel shirt and thrifting being staples of it in addition to its ideologies of progressivism and acceptance.



Figure 5. Museum of Pop Culture, Seattle, WA. 9/22/2009, Library of Congress.

Conclusion

Conclusion

In the early 1980s, Pacific Northwest culture began to take shape, coinciding with the emergence of the grunge music scene. Local bands in Seattle blended their expression with the region's dreary, gray atmosphere, creating music characterized by raw vocals and gritty instrumentation. What set grunge apart was its organic development, free from the constraints of mainstream success or conformity. Nirvana epitomized these ideals through their music and message, reaching their peak with the release of *Nevermind*, which propelled the movement into the mainstream and brought Seattle's youth culture with it. Grunge culture reflected the region's identity, exploring themes of alienation, isolation, and social ambiguity, while its fashion and progressive ideals further solidified its unique presence. Today, the "Seattle sound" remains a defining aspect of the region's cultural identity, preserved in its distinct auditory form.

Future Work

1. Haight-Ashbury and the Music of the Hippie Movement and Connections with 1960s countercultural issues and the Establishment of the New Left.
2. Implications of the Grunge movement within national policy, including women's and LGBT rights.
3. Being able to interview other influential individuals within the movement, such as Jack Endino (called the "Godfather of Grunge") and Krist Novoselic (Nirvana's bassist).
4. Further research on Grunge's legacy within the musical culture from its emergence to today.

References and/or Acknowledgments

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First, I would like to thank God for allowing me to grow up in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. Special thanks to the History Department, especially the guidance of Dr. Davis, Dr. Snead, Dr. Stowe, and my friends, Maximus Marlowe and Connor Crowe, for supporting me. I want to thank my parents, especially my mom, for letting me choose which radio station to play during our long drives. Finally, I want to give special recognition to 107.7 The End KNDD for getting me into Grunge.