

Come As You Are: The Rise and Fall of The Grunge Movement and Its Implications on The Identity of Seattle

Colin J. Wood
Liberty University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/montview>



Part of the [American Material Culture Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Music Performance Commons](#), [Oral History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wood, Colin J. () "Come As You Are: The Rise and Fall of The Grunge Movement and Its Implications on The Identity of Seattle," *Montview Journal of Research & Scholarship*: Vol. 11, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/montview/vol11/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in Montview Journal of Research & Scholarship by an authorized editor of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu.

“Smells Like Teen Spirit” is one of the most recognizable songs in music history. Composed by the musical group Nirvana, it brought a little-known cultural movement in a declining area to the front page of popular culture. Though the grunge movement was mainly a musical and cultural movement that dominated the early half of the 1990s, it encapsulated the identity of a region. It birthed many trends and social movements that still dominate current culture. The rise and fall of the grunge movement through Nirvana's *Nevermind* album created a unique burst of culture out of the dreary aura of the Pacific Northwest and helped identify the city of Seattle.

Entrenched within a corner of America and under the constant cover of misty rain, Seattle exists as a vacuum for a forgotten yet influential people. Inhabited by the Salish peoples for millennia and settled by the Scandinavian Denny Party in the mid-19th century, Seattle gradually grew to 80,000 people by the turn of the century (notably through its role in the Klondike Gold Rush).¹ As Seattle grew into the city it is seen today, it faced many population spikes and droughts. The most momentous contributor to Seattle's progression and contraction was the “Boeing Boom” during the Second World War. The Boeing manufacturing plant, housed in Everett (just north of Seattle), became a critical component to the United States' dominance in the skies during the war. Seattle became a mecca for manufacturing jobs, where a significant swath of the population worked to build the planes that won the air.² The boom increased the population of Seattle by 60% from 1940-1960, sparking an optimistic perspective on the future for Seattle in its quest to solidify itself as a competitive and influential West Coast city such as San Francisco and Los Angeles.³ In 1962, Seattle hosted the World's Fair and erected the famed Space Needle as a prideful recognition of that futuristic perspective. However, Seattle's population growth halted and began decreasing 12% over the next two decades,⁴ giving the city a negative and bereft perspective across the nation.⁵ Progressing into the 1980s, Seattle was seen as a metropolis whose best days were behind it, though its importance steadily began to grow as the residents increased.

Culturally, Seattle found its identity in the area around it. The damp forests of the Cascades and Olympic Mountains and the frigid, saline Puget Sound defined the lives of the locals. The primary professions of the local Seattleites were either logging or maritime jobs. The Pacific Northwest overall was known

¹ Roger Sale, *Seattle: Past and Present* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 51.

² Ibid., 189.

³ “Seattle, Washington Population History | 1890 - 2019.” n.d. [www.biggestuscities.com](https://www.biggestuscities.com/city/seattle-washington).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sale, *Seattle*, 243.

for rain, folklore and seasonal depression. In many areas, it rained nine months out of the year, creating a bleak and gloomy atmosphere. Moreover, the area became noteworthy for stories of mysterious creatures and dangerous men. Legends of Sasquatch and a two-hundred-foot diameter octopus spread as amusing yet influential tales of the unique logging and maritime culture of the area; furthermore, the term “flying saucer” was coined in Seattle.⁶ Also, “Shanghaiing” was a common practice in the dirty underground of downtown Seattle, the act of kidnapping unfortunate individuals and forcing them into slave labor on ships.⁷ The area also boasted a number of the most notable serial killers in the late 20th century, such as Ted Bundy and Gary Ridgway.

Musically, Seattle has produced some of the most influential figures in the rock genre, such as Jimi Hendrix and Heart. Influences on rock's progression as a more inclusive environment for African American and female stars were born and cultivated in Seattle, pioneering a new wave of music. However, they did not represent Seattle's identity. When Jimi Hendrix gained median success in Seattle, he moved east to New York and then London (until his untimely death at 27), and he is known for the Woodstock and Civil Rights movements, not Seattle's identity (most would be surprised to know he was from Seattle in the first place). Again, Heart, spearheaded by Ann and Nancy Wilson, originated in Seattle in the 1960s as a small band performing in pubs in Seattle's Magnolia district, but their success came when they traveled north to Vancouver, British Columbia, to record and once they gained recognition, they left the Northwest. The hard rock group found its identity as the feminist outlier in a male-dominated genre, which has been a defining staple of the band, not as a native of the Pacific Northwest. Musically and culturally, Seattle has been significant in housing legends in American music, though it has never received the recognition it deserved.

As Seattle entered the 1980s, it began to solidify and understand its place. Pacific Northwest Historian John Findlay asserts that the Pacific Northwest was culturally ambiguous for many decades, looking to the East for its identity, finally settling into its own in the early 1980s.⁸ The area has gone through many phases in its history, via its Indigenous roots, its pioneering and Gold Rush legacy in addition to its role in WWII, its contribution to the world's future, and even with its folklore, but still, it could not pinpoint its identity. Leading into the early stages of the grunge movement, Seattle was beginning to understand who it was.

Although it was unknown who or what started “grunge,” a particular sludgy punk sound began playing in the local clubs and basements around Seattle.

⁶ Erick Lacitis, “Flying saucers’ became a thing 70 years ago Saturday with sighting near Mount Rainier,” *The Seattle Times*, June 24, 2017, B12.

⁷ Richard H. Dillon, *Shanghaiing Days*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1961), 234.

⁸ John M Findlay, “Something in the Soil? Literature and Regional Identity in the 20th-Century Pacific Northwest,” *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (2006): 183.

Grunge musician and producer, known as the “Godfather of Grunge,” Jack Endino explained its artistic origins as due to the constant rain and excessive dreariness; one would simply go into their basements and garages to take their emotions out in music.⁹ It was a reaction to the depressive, lonely, shut-in aura of the Pacific Northwest and the rowdiness of youth enduring it. Grunge critic Dawn Anderson described it as such: “Grunge was an euphemism for extremes, extremes of anything, a lot of people say it’s a throwback to heavy metal, it was one influence, punk rock was an influence. Basically, anything loud, crushing, and extreme was an influence.”¹⁰ The volatile nature of grunge encapsulated the mood of the performers and fans, exercising an enjoyment of noise and angst. Bailey Gomes of Northern Michigan University explained that “Music provides an outlet for aggression. Grunge allowed adolescents to experience a cathartic purging of emotion in a healthy way. In addition to this catharsis, grunge gave adolescents a movement to stand behind.”¹¹ Grunge was a medium for many in the Pacific Northwest to express themselves. The singer may express themselves through their lyrics (complaining about their miserable life and expressing a countercultural narrative), and the guitarist and drummer express themselves through the intensity of their playing (transferring the emotions in their mind into the instruments they play). But the listeners express themselves by moving in a sea of flesh at the clubs and garages across the Seattle area (letting go of the sickening experiences of life). The word “grunge” perfectly describes the noise of the genre: young, raspy vocals complaining about society, accompanied by destructive, rageful rapping on drums and aggressive, repetitive riffs on an electric guitar, complemented with a psychedelic crowd of young men and women moving and roaring in approval.

Culturally, “grunge” went beyond music. The movement embodied a youthful dissent against the clean clique and the conservative reaction from society in the 1980s.¹² Many who felt forgotten in their secluded corner of the continent expressed their angst through song and dance. The Reagan administration’s conservative culture suppressed many issues that young liberal Americans believed were important. Grunge’s progressive purpose brought with it reforms within music and performance, most notably with feminism. The “Riot Grrrl” movement was born out of Washington’s capital, Olympia (60 miles south of Seattle), as a feministic critique of a patriarchal society through song and dance. Todd Kerstetter notes, “These radical feminists opened stage mics at

⁹ *Hype!* directed by Doug Pray (1996; Lionsgate Films), 04:08, YouTube.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24:02.

¹¹ Bailey Gomes, “1990s Grunge and its Effect on Adolescents,” *Conspectus Borealis* 6, no. 1 (Spring, 2020): 4.

¹² Nina Esperanza Serriane, *America in the Nineties* (Syracuse: University of Syracuse Press, 2015), 142.

performances to allow audience members to discuss sexual abuse and asked men and slam dancers to create a safe space for female spectators near the stage.”¹³ Bands such as Bikini Kill and later Sleater-Kinney became icons in the progressive sociopolitical movements that began rising out of pockets of the nation as a result of the conservative reactions in the early 1980s. Pioneering musical feminism, Grunge expressed the need for safety towards the female sex not only in the clubs but also in society.

Early grunge flourished in the nightclubs of Seattle, Tacoma, Bellingham, and other local areas; showing young, horny, transcendental crowds moving in a sea of hallucinatory flesh led by a band in a similar fashion, which began to take notice from critics. Seattle’s musical newsletter, *The Rocket*, started in the early 1980s but covered heavy metal bands exclusively, eventually turning their focus to grunge in the late 1980s as it began to pick up in popularity. A writer for *The Rocket*, Dawn Anderson, began a magazine called *Backlash* from 1987-1991, targeting specifically grunge bands. Grunge’s most recognizable names, such as Screaming Trees, Mudhoney, Alice in Chains, and Nirvana, were first mentioned by *Backlash*.¹⁴ But no publisher or outside force had the influence on the movement that Sub Pop Records possessed. Started by Bruce Pavitt, a writer for *The Rocket*, along with Jonathan Poneman, they worked with local bands on recording and producing music. With assistance from Jack Endino, they began developing what is famously known as the “Seattle sound,” now grunge’s most headlined nickname.¹⁵ They expressed a way to popularize the fledgling movement by giving it an identity. Pavitt and Poneman’s goal was to develop a regional movement and exploit it globally,¹⁶ a phenomenon that has happened before in cities such as Liverpool, San Francisco, and even Athens, Georgia. Solidified within the cultural underground, Sub Pop Records assembled their first contribution to music by recording and releasing works by most notably Seattle bands but also underground icons such as Sonic Youth (a prominent noise rock group from New York which is commended for helping Seattle band Mudhoney gain prominence outside of Seattle in the late 1980s).¹⁷ In July of 1986, Sub Pop released “Sub Pop 100,” a compilation album of primarily grunge bands, being the genesis of major bands such as Soundgarden and Mother Love Bone (who

¹³ Todd M. Kerstetter, “Rock Music and the New West, 1980–2010,” *Western History Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (Spring, 2012): 64.

¹⁴ Dawn Anderson, “Backlash- December 1987 through January 1988,” *Backlash*, February 1988.

¹⁵ *Hype!* 54:21.

¹⁶ Mike Rubin, “Swingin’ on the Flippity Flop with Sub Pop: Our 1995 Feature on the Legendary Seattle Label,” *Spin*, April 2, 2018.

¹⁷ Steve Turner, *Mud Ride: A Messy Trip Through The Grunge Explosion* (San Francisco: Chronicle Prism, 2023), 134.

later became Pearl Jam through the death of vocalist Andrew Wood).¹⁸ Local bands like Green River, L7, and Soundgarden began producing albums out of Sub Pop, and others started recording singles. Kerstetter explains, "Some critics dispute the existence of a "Seattle sound" and argue that the Northwest as a place had little to no influence on grunge; they credit timing, circumstance, and, most importantly, the vigorous promotional activities of Sub Pop Records for bringing fame to Seattle bands in the 1990s."¹⁹ These promotions of Sub Pop and other publications throughout the Northwest validated grunge's identity and began to spread the movement across the United States, though it remained heavily underground throughout this early period.

However, the efforts of Sub Pop never produced reasonable fruit in the late 80s. Success was not expected or even sought out by the groups. Jack Endino explained- "No one was worried about success, because we knew it was Seattle, not LA; no one was going to come and sign us."²⁰ He continued by saying, "The bands that stuck it out was because they really enjoyed playing their music, and that was the only positive reinforcement anyone really got."²¹ Another critic, Susie Tennant, asserted, "You had people who were in bands because they wanted to be in bands. And it grew without any outside force disturbing that."²² Overall, the consensus around grunge leaving Seattle was weak at best. To continue playing was a commitment that many made based on pure passion, for the art of grunge and values associated with it. Bands did not have the funds nor recognition to record more than a few songs or even sign a significant contract. Exclusivity brought with itself a more curated sound; the punkier side of grunge that was clearly recognized in the early 1980s began to quiet down around 1990. The early successes of Sub Pop began to dwindle heading into the next decade.

Entering the 1990s, many believed that the small popularity of grunge would die down and become forgotten history, but quite the opposite happened. Kerstetter notes, "By the late 1980s, the West stood poised to make another far-reaching contribution to American culture that arguably has the strongest link to the region: grunge... where people used the term to describe slow punk played by a band called the Melvins."²³ The Melvins started in 1983 in Montesano, Washington, a small town southwest of Seattle near the Pacific coast. They were on the metal side of grunge and became one of the more successful grunge bands out of the late 1980s. Through the Melvins, Jack Endino got the opportunity to meet a new yet endearing face in the grunge era: Kurt Cobain.

¹⁸ *Sub Pop 100*, Sub Pop Records, 1986, Spotify.

¹⁹ Kerstetter, "Rock Music and the New West, 1980-2010," 63.

²⁰ Hype!, 34:50.

²¹ Ibid., 35:20.

²² Ibid., 38:33.

²³ Kerstetter, "Rock Music and the New West, 1980-2010," 64.

Cobain was born on February 20, 1967, in Aberdeen, Washington, a bleak logging town adjacent to Montesano on the Pacific. Kerstetter asserts, "When Cobain came of age, the town (Aberdeen) had lost about two-thirds of its residents, and high unemployment and alcoholism plagued the city."²⁴ Cobain grew up in a world diseased with poverty, drugs, and misery. His parents divorced when he was nine, and he became homeless due to dropping out of high school and then became hooked on hard drugs. Cobain was a troublemaker in his town; vandalism and contempt for authority were common for the troubled adolescent.²⁵ He found music as an escape from the harsh world around him, writing his most successful songs from traumas in his life, such as witnessing domestic violence with his parents and his homelessness.²⁶ Cobain met his fellow bandmate, Krist Novoselic, in high school and formed a grunge group called Nirvana in 1987.

Nirvana was heavily influenced by the Melvins. The intense and gruff style of grunge Nirvana adopted showcased the most extreme versions of the movement. Dawn Anderson was the first to advertise Nirvana in 1987, "They call themselves Nirvana, a name that signifies both everything and nothing. If you don't understand this, you can either take a course in world religion or you can witness Nirvana incarnate next time they perform in the big city."²⁷ Nirvana began performing in Olympia, and Cobain became extremely established in the Riot Grrrl movement, which influenced him through the rest of his career.²⁸ In 1988, Cobain contacted Endino asking him to come up to Seattle and record a few songs, telling Endino he was a friend of the Melvins. "Nirvana kinda came out of left field. It came from Aberdeen, which was this town out in the middle of nowhere... I thought they were amazing... I believed this band is going to be huge," Endino recalled.²⁹ Their freshman album, *Bleach*, was released on June 15, 1989, under Endino. It received the expected amount of success that a typical grunge album would have, and Nirvana fell back into the drudges of Aberdeen.

However, Nirvana's sophomore album, *Nevermind*, would change music history. Before the recording of the album, Nirvana's drummer, Chad Channing, was replaced by Washington D.C. native Dave Grohl. The band recorded their

²⁴ Ibid., 63.

²⁵ *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*, directed by Brett Morgen (2015; Universal Pictures, 2015), 1:32:00, Amazon Video.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dawn Anderson, *Nirvana: It May Be the Devil and It May Be the Lord... But It Sure As Hell Ain't Human* (Nirvana Information Book).

https://www.livenirvana.com/documents/press/press_kit.pdf.

²⁸ Cobain's activism against rape and homophobia came as a result of his involvement within Riot Grrrl. Culturally speaking, the progressive push in the 1990s could have resulted from Cobain's iconic figure, especially in his openness to these issues.

²⁹ *Hype!*, 36:49.

album in Sound City Studios in Los Angeles, CA, and Smart Studios in Madison, Wisconsin; it was released by DGC Records with heavy support from Sub Pop. The album cover depicts a nude baby in a blue swimming pool reaching out to a dollar bill attached to a fishing line, symbolizing American society's lust for money.³⁰ Many of the songs testified to Cobain's past, such as "Polly," which was about the rape of a teenaged girl in 1987 in Tacoma, WA, a call to the Riot Grrrl movement; "Lithium," a ballad of Cobain's struggle with understanding religion, and "Something in The Way" which is about his homelessness.³¹ The honest, turbulent, and assertive LP was released on September 24, 1991.

The album became an immediate success for the movement. Within weeks, *Nevermind* surpassed all expectations and became the most successful grunge released at the time. In November, Simon Reynolds of the *New York Times* released a review praising the album for its unique sound and message. "It's not so much the album's glossy grunge that's made it such a success, however, but the raw, raging fashion with which Nirvana articulates its feelings of impotence, bewilderment and inertia."³² But the praise of the highest critics was not *Nevermind's* high point. By the new year, *Nevermind* hit the top of the Billboard chart, introducing not only an unknown band and the grunge movement in Seattle but launching the entire genre of alternative rock out from the underground.

Numerous theories arose to explain the success of *Nevermind*, ranging from it being a response to the prevalence of hard rock and 'hair' metal in the 1980s, the infectious riffs of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," to even the opposition to Reaganomics and its impact on the American economy.³³ What is certain, though, is that Nirvana became the biggest band in the world, and Kurt Cobain has become a generational icon practically overnight. Rapidly, Seattle was looked to as the next capital of music and culture. In April, *Rolling Stone* asserted that Seattle is "the new Liverpool."³⁴ Bands that had never been heard of outside the grunge circle became household names. These include Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, and Alice in Chains, which climbed to rival Nirvana in popularity. In the long run, Pearl Jam's freshman album *Ten* (1992) outsold *Nevermind*.³⁵ There were few moments in music history where a single album could impulse an entirely new genre into the mainstream, and Nirvana had just made it.

³⁰ Nirvana, *Nevermind*, Sound City Studios and Smart Studios, September 24, 1991.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Simon Reynolds, "RECORDING VIEW; Boredom + Claustrophobia + Sex = Punk Nirvana," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 1991, 34.

³³ Serrienne, *America in the Nineties*, 142.

³⁴ Michael Azerrad, "Grunge City: The Seattle Scene," *Rolling Stone*, April 16, 1992. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/grunge-city-the-seattle-scene-250071/>.

³⁵ Justin Henderson, *Grunge Seattle* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 2021), 40.

As a result of this trend, previous albums and supergroups³⁶ started to achieve remarkable success. One such supergroup was "Temple of the Dog," which included singer Chris Cornell from Soundgarden, Eddie Vedder from Pearl Jam, and other members of Pearl Jam. They formed this supergroup in memory of Andrew Wood, a grunge singer who tragically passed away from a heroin overdose at the age of 24 in 1990. After the explosion of grunge, the supergroup's self-titled album reached no. 5 on Billboard.³⁷ Alice in Chain's *Dirt* (1992) topped at 6th on the charts,³⁸ and Soundgarden's *Badmotorfinger* (1991) received a Grammy nomination in 1992.³⁹ Also, grunge-influenced bands such as Stone Temple Pilots in San Diego blew up. "Vaguely angry, the Pilots denounce religion, authority and apathy in their lyrics... the band also attacks mass-media entertainment and the "dead and bloated nation of sleepwalkers.""⁴⁰ Pilots were an example of the endless list of alternative groups that gained notoriety, showing the effect that *Nevermind* had on the music industry.

The cultural implications that came from the grunge movement brought with it an explosion of culture out of Seattle. The rowdy and dissenting attitude of grunge caught on with its music, messaging, and fashion. Seattle's unique identity, deeply rooted in its history of logging and the people who settled and cultivated the land, gave rise to a distinct style of dress. The flannel has been a staple of the logger, but as grunge rose, so did the flannel. The flannel quickly became an icon of 1990s streetwear.⁴¹ Thrifting was another staple of grunge fashion. It was cheaper to acquire clothes at a thrift store than at a department store, so many grunge artists thrifted their clothes. Thrifting is still a very hip hobby for many at the current time. For example, the military boot was heavily thrifted because of the presence of the massive Joint Base Lewis-McChord Army and Air Force base south of Seattle; the boot became another must-have for the movement.⁴² The disheveled wardrobes of Seattleites became the newest trend that took the world by storm. Major designers in New York, such as Christian Francis Roth and

³⁶ A supergroup is a band temporarily assembled by members of other bands or independent artists to create musical projects; the most prominent example of this is Cream in the 1960s.

³⁷ Gillian Gaar, *World Domination: The Sub Pop Records Story* (Chicago: BMG Books, 2018), 125.

³⁸ Alice in Chains: Chart History. <https://www.billboard.com/artist/alice-in-chains/chart-history/tlp/>.

³⁹ Soundgarden News. <https://www.grammy.com/artists/soundgarden/15924>.

⁴⁰ Mark Jenkins, "Stone Temple Pilots On Familiar Ground," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 1992, N18.

⁴¹ Cathy Horyn, "Fashion: Grunge, Wearing Out Its Welcome In New York, More Attic Inspiration," *The Washington Post*, November 5, 1992, D1.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Ralph Lauren, started designing and producing grunge-influenced clothes,⁴³ and mall department stores opened “grunge” sections.⁴⁴ Many of the traits of grunge fashion, such as flannels and thrifted/vintage clothes, stuck and still dominate modern streetwear.

Moreover, the characters in the movement became idols to many. Young people across the world loved individuals like Kurt Cobain, who stirred the pot of seriousness and the needful urge to rebel against the current system.⁴⁵ The edginess and mannerisms of the movement, along with the topics of feminism and LGBT+ rights, were adopted by many youths globally. Cobain was seen as a voice for a generation; a man who experienced the worst that society and life could throw and who was not afraid to be vocal about what he believed in and acted as he wanted to. "Nirvana's music reflects the fact that the band did not come from a West of sun, fun, and opportunity."⁴⁶ Seattle was even beginning to be considered a “ghost town” by residents.⁴⁷ The city was a capsule for those who felt forgotten, a dreary place that was a symbol of decline; many felt their identity in Seattle.

The final aspect of grunge’s influence came from its popularity. Due to the maximal success of Nirvana many flocked to Seattle to sign the next big band. Susie Tennant explains: "When these bands started to get popular, all of a sudden, everyone wanted to find the next Nirvana, everyone wanted to sign the next Pearl Jam. All of a sudden bands that have never played live before are getting huge advances."⁴⁸ At its core, grunge was never about success or money but about the enjoyment of its art. It was the culture of a unique place and people. Paul Safford of Tarleton State University asserts that "The grunge movement of the early 1990s emerged out of musical friendships content to be on their own, on the outside, reflecting a sense of isolation and alienation in the music they made."⁴⁹ It would be hard to imagine how the world of the Seattleites and musicians was being flipped upside down. For the past 30 years, their city was left unnoticed by the critics and producers of larger and more prominent cities across the nation; now that it was being thrust into the center of the pop culture world, it was shocking. In an interview with Krist Novoselic in April of 1992, he stated, "So

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Hype!, 59:35.

⁴⁵ Serianne, *America In The Nineties*, 142.

⁴⁶ Kerstetter, “Rock Music and the New West, 1980–2010,” 65.

⁴⁷ Eric Scigliano, “Seattle in the ’80s: Big Tech and Boomtown Economics Arrive,” *Seattle Weekly*, March 30, 2016.

⁴⁸ Hype!, 41:28.

⁴⁹ Paul Edgerton Stafford, “The Grunge Effect: Music, Fashion, and the Media During the Rise of Grunge Culture In The Early 1990s,” *M/C Journal* 21, no. 5, (2018): culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/1471.

much has happened to me in the past year, it's like winning the lottery. Go buy a house, indulge in materialistic acquisitions... But, if I was the anti-materialist that I claim to be, I'd be happy living in a wood hut in the woods."⁵⁰ They believed the embodiment of their ethos was being stripped from them, for years, they preached anti-materialism, isolation, and alienation, but when they received the boon of money and attention, their philosophy was being threatened. Though grunge was what a generation of teens and punk rockers needed to suffice their angst, its attention by those who became closest to the locals and artists (critics, producers, and the media) began to cause the decline of the movement.

The overnight success brought with it an iniquitous demon: fame. Men like the members of Nirvana and Pearl Jam were nameless and unknown to the public eye; and then, within weeks, they were on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, their songs were being played on MTV; and their managers were flooded with interview requests by major newscasters. They went from normal individuals going about life to being worshiped as idols by the masses. "Suddenly your life as a private individual is over and that's a heavy thing to deal with," Jack Endino pointed out.⁵¹ That burden was extremely hard to bear for most of those who suffered under the attention of humanity. Krist Novoselic exclaimed in an interview in 2015, "It was traumatizing to be famous all of the sudden, especially coming from complete obscurity to becoming the number one band in the world."⁵² He continued by saying that he used alcohol as a means of escape, and Cobain became evermore hooked on heroin.⁵³ The odyssey of Kurt Cobain's downfall was a strict result of the movement. He remained ever unchanged on the outside as a personality, embodying the adolescent character of grunge. In a letter to the *Advocate* in 1993, Cobain said, "Stay gay all the way, and wipe your ass with USA Today. I love you."⁵⁴ His sufferings came from that isolating notion of success, a blow more crushing than the isolation of homelessness. On April 5, 1994, he died in his Seattle mansion. "Fueled by depression and a heroin addiction, Cobain's death signaled an end to grunge's collective appeal while shining a spotlight on one of the more dangerous aspects of its ethos."⁵⁵ In retrospect, Cobain's death brought a hammer of stoppage to the madness that engulfed Seattle from 1992-1994. Steve Turner, musician of Mudhoney, put the impact of his death best: "Kurt Cobain's death cast a pall on the entire country,

⁵⁰ Nirvana Guitarist Krist Novoselic, interview by Cyrus Aman, Olympia, WA, May 15, 1992. <https://www.livenirvana.com/interviews/9204ca/index.php#Transcript2&gsc.tab=0>.

⁵¹ Hype! 1:04:54.

⁵² *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*, 1:32:00.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Kurt Cobain to *Advocate* Reader, January 25, 1994, *Live Nirvana*.
<https://www.livenirvana.com/documents/images/letter-the-advocate-jan-25-1994.png>.

⁵⁵ Stafford, "The Grunge Effect," 2018.

and maybe even the world. It also felt like it has irreparably altered grunge's meteoric ascendancy. When grunge escaped Seattle and went international, it was revolutionary.... But when Kurt died, it was... the beginning of the end for Seattle's musical supremacy."⁵⁶ Cobain's death symbolizes the suicide of grunge, a movement that never wanted success which gained it, nevertheless.

The Seattleite's role in the cultural definition of American (and global) society cannot be overlooked. A land defined by its people, ignored by the rest of the nation, finally became noticed. The grunge movement brought forth some of the most recognizable songs and fashion trends that still endure thirty years later. But overall, the lost identity of Seattle was finally found and solidified. But above all, with that newfound identity, Seattle was able to contribute to not only national culture but also world culture through the birth of the grunge movement. A movement that would risk suicide as a means of securing its identity. Men like Kurt Cobain, Krist Novoselic, along with Jack Endino and Bruce Pavitt of Sub Pop Records did not only define a genre or generation, but they defined a whole city.

⁵⁶ Steve Turner, *Mud Ride: A Messy Trip Through The Grunge Explosion* (San Francisco: Chronicle Prism, 2023), 200.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Anderson Dawn. "Backlash- December 1987 through January 1988." *Backlash*, February, 1988.
- Anderson, Dawn. *Nirvana: It May Be the Devil and It May Be the Lord... But It Sure As Hell Ain't Human*. Nirvana Information Book. 1987.
- Azerrad, Michael. "Grunge City: The Seattle Scene," *Rolling Stone*, April 16, 1992. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/grunge-city-the-seattle-scene-250071/>.
- Brett Morgen, director. *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*. 2015; Universal Pictures. 1 hr, 32 min. Amazon Video.
- Cobain, Kurt. *Letter to Advocate Reader, Breeder Reader*. Live Nirvana. <https://www.livenirvana.com/documents/images/letter-the-advocate-jan-25-1994.png>
- Horyn, Cathy. "Fashion: Grunge, Wearing Out Its Welcome In New York, More Attic Inspiration," *The Washington Post*, November 5, 1992, D1.
- Jenkins, Mark. "Stone Temple Pilots On Familiar Ground." *The Washington Post*, October 30, 1992, N18.
- Marin, Rick. "Grunge: A Success Story." *The New York Times*, November 15, 1992, VI.
- Nirvana. *Nevermind*, Studios City and Smart Records with contributions from Sub Pop Records, 1991.
- Novoselic, Krist, guitarist for Nirvana. Interviewed by Cyrus Aman, Olympia, WA. May 15, 1992.
- Pray, Doug director. *Hype!* Lionsgate Films, 1996. 1 hr. 24 min., YouTube.
- Reynolds, Simon. "RECORDING VIEW; Boredom + Claustrophobia + Sex = Punk Nirvana." *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 1991, 34.
- Touch, Paul. "The Next Next Seattle: With grunge fading, it's a mad -- and merciless -- race to create the newest music capital." *The New York Times*, December 19, 1993, SM52.
- Turner, Steve. *Mud Ride: A Messy Trip Through The Grunge Explosion*. San Francisco: Chronicle Prism Publishing, 2023.
- Various Artists, *Sub Pop 100*, Sub Pop Records, 1986. Spotify.

Secondary Sources

- Dillon, Richard H. *Shanghaiing Days*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1961.
- Findlay, John M. "Something in the Soil? Literature and Regional Identity in the 20th-Century Pacific Northwest." *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (2006): 179–89.

- Gaar, Gillian G. *World Domination : The Sub Pop Records Story*. Chicago: BMG Books, 2018.
- Gomes, Bailey. 2020. "1990s Grunge and its Effect on Adolescents." *Conspectus Borealis* 6, no. 1 (Spring, 2020).
https://commons.nmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1139&context=conspectus_borealis.
- Henderson, Justin. *Grunge Seattle*. Chicago: Arcadia Publishing Inc., 2021
- Huq, Rupa. *Beyond Subculture : Pop, Youth and Identity in a Postcolonial World*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Lacitis, Erik. "'Flying saucers' became a thing 70 years ago Saturday with sighting near Mount Rainier." *The Seattle Times*, June 24, 2017, B12.
- Kahn, Seth. "Kurt Cobain, Martyrdom, and the Problem of Agency." *Studies in Popular Culture* 22, no. 3 (2000): 83–96.
- Kerstetter, Todd M. "Rock Music and the New West, 1980–2010." *Western Historical Quarterly* Vol 43, No. 1 (Spring, 2012): 53-71.
- Mazullo, Mark. "The Man Whom the World Sold: Kurt Cobain, Rock's Progressive Aesthetic, and the Challenges of Authenticity." *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol 84, No. 4 (Winter 2000): 713-749.
- Rubin, Mike. "'Swingin' on the Flippity Flop with Sub Pop: Our 1995 Feature on the Legendary Seattle Label." *Spin*, April 2, 2018.
- Sale, Roger. *Seattle: Past to Present*. 1st ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019.
- Scigliano, Eric. "Seattle in the '80s: Big Tech and Boomtown Economics Arrive." *Seattle Weekly*, March 30, 2016.
- Serrienne, Nina Esperanza. "Pop Culture." *In America in the Nineties*, 141–71. Syracuse University Press, 2015.
- Stafford, Paul Edgerton. "The Grunge Effect: Music, Fashion, and the Media During the Rise of Grunge Culture In the Early 1990s". *M/C Journal* 21, no 5 (2018).