

KURT COBAIN and me
(for a ruthless criticism of everything existing⁰)

by andycox@T WCDC.com, 1997



**just because you're paranoid
don't mean they're not after you**

Kurt Cobain
Territorial Pissings, Nevermind, 1991¹

At first I disliked Kurt. He was a pounding on the ceiling at 328 Shotwell Street, San Francisco, CA 94110.

Shotwell and 17th. Syringes littered the gutters. A family of junkies lived in a broken down car that they pushed around the corner every week to avoid a ticket for impeding street cleaning. The only other time they got out of it was to shit on the pavement and by the smell of it they often didn't even bother for that. Black youth on some steps smoking crack from glass pipes, falling back in ecstasy -- almost flattering that they didn't seem troubled as I passed.

Across the street the assumed drug dealers (they had frequent quick visits from people who rarely stayed long enough to enter). The red Porsche 924 parked outside seemed a stark contrast to the junky's car, but on closer inspection it was just as shabby. And next to them the young punks proudly displaying the jolly roger: setting sail on voyages of mayhem.

Upstairs: smells like cheap spirit and stale cigarettes with Nirvana on repeat -
hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello, hello.
(Smells Like Teen Spirit, *Nevermind*, 1991). **Nevermind** is the album with the cover picture of the baby in the swimming pool with the dollar bill and the big hook. There's no way out. Kurt screamed for a way out. He wanted someone (his mother? Courtney Love?) to throw down their umbilical noose, so he could climb right back (Heart Shaped Box, *In Utero*). Perhaps heroin simulates the anesthetic comfort of the womb (it made me feel like I was in hospital). Suicide is another way to unbirth yourself. The doctor who performed the autopsy on Kurt's body described his suicide (overdose of heroin, shotgun in the mouth) as *the act of someone who wanted to obliterate himself, to literally become nothing*².

Upstairs: Light my candles in a daze 'cause I found god.

Yeah! (Lithium, *Nevermind*, 1991). **But isn't god dead? Didn't Nietzsche and Marx say that? Nietzsche: God is dead and we have killed him. Marx: man makes religion, religion does not make man.....It is the opium of the people**³. **You can argue (with some justification) that Marx got a lot of things wrong: there was no world-wide proletarian socialist revolution, everyone would amass personal wealth given the chance, the difference between the base and the superstructure was a myth, and the workplace is not the only site of domination**⁴. **But Marx got at least one thing right: All the things we wish we could be were externalized in an abstract being. Where are they now, the things we wished we could be?**

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*⁵.

Fine sentiments into which however the crafty forefathers planted a get-out clause. Its the Creator god who bestows the *unalienable rights* not men [sic]. Our god is the creator that is capitalism and our rights are articulated within its dynamic. Images and capital are the only universal truths. One nation under god. All the things we wished we could be are now on TV. TV is the heroin of the masses.

Upstairs: cadging cigarettes and bud. Hanging out with the grunge addicts, fending off the noise: Here we are now, entertain us! (Smells Like Teen Spirit, *Nevermind*). **I still didn't like Kurt then but, like him, I also had very bad posture** (Pennyroyal Tea, *In Utero*) **caused by intense back pain. When I got home on Friday evenings from cleaning up some toxic waste dump on the Peninsula, I used to pop two Vicadans, have a few hits of "medical" marijuana and head down the Uptown with my wife and housemates for a few pints of Red Hook. falling into strangers and its only just eleven, staring like a child and someone slips me heaven**⁶. **(The Cure, Open from the album Wish), give me back my alcohol, give me back my alcohol** (Kurt).

Upstairs and downstairs: eleven housemates, including my wife. We used to joke how it was like a compacted Melrose Place, which we used to watch religiously every Wednesday night along with Beverly Hills 90210. What was a well paid 30-year old respectable, competent, engineering professional doing in such a situation, and on the edge of a grunge fetish? God only knows. *These scribbled notes will one day be all that remains to tell the tale* as Captain Scott wrote (or something like that) while freezing to death only 11 miles from the next supply dump on his way back from the South Pole⁷. The poor bastard, Amudsen had beaten him there by only a few days - it was the huskies that did it apparently (Scott had taken shetland ponies). Oates had just gone out for a *short walk*, never to return to give his comrades a better chance of survival with their remaining supplies. You could be my hero (Dive, *Incesticide*, 1992) I read and reread the Ladybird library of heroes when I was a kid: Scott of the Antarctic, Henry V, Henry VIII, Alexander the Great, Oliver Cromwell. I loved you all, but now I think you all suck, and I want to cry. *What ever happened to all the heroes ? What ever happened to Leon Trotsky ? He got an ice pick that made his ears burn*⁸.

A feeling that *everything is meaningless* has haunted me since I can remember, but you can't just write something like that and have it mean anything. *But the limits of my language are the limits of my world*⁹. Kurt could say it better without resorting to "theory" or even words, whatever - the wails on the introduction to the live album *From the Muddy Banks of the Wishkah* say it all. Like Artaud, tried to do:

*o kaya
o kaya pontoura
o ponoura
a peni
poni*¹⁰

A wailing of the ego that wants to be lost: *To die as egos and be born again in the swarm. Not separate and self-hypnotized, but individual yet united*¹¹. To rid ourselves of the hierarchical philosophy and sturcture imposed by the state apparatus, and in particular to rid ourselves of the Oedipus complex. Kurt tried hard to have a father, but still he had a dad. (*Serve the Servants, In Utero*) Doesn't all this talk of Oedipus, about desiring our mothers and killing our fathers just reinforce the notion that the notion even exists? Isn't it just another discourse we've invented to dominate ourselves? well, whatever, nevermind.... (*Smells Like `Teem Spirit, Nevermind*)

I didn't know, and I could have cared less even if I had, that Kurt was in intensive care somewhere in Italy after overdosing on tranquilizers washed down with champagne, and I didn't even care (as much as I should have) when he died. It wasn't until a year after his death that I needed Kurt, in a dingy apartment on Haight and Steiner, alone, then I needed that pounding beat, but I didn't even own a Nirvana record. I couldn't stand the alien sounds and the smell of piss in the stairwell, and I couldn't unpack my life there. I stuffed a sleeping bag into my backpack and went back to the more than completely empty apartment on Duboce to sleep on the floor smelling of Pine Sol, hanging on to the only optimistic thought I had: it couldn't get any worse - it was time to go to art school. The next day I called *Dan The Man With The Van* to re-move from Haight and Webster to Fillmore and Haight into a studio arranged hastily. I couldn't unpack there either and my stuff stayed in boxes for several weeks - too many ghosts. I had been in San Francisco for more than 3 years but it seemed that I had just arrived and everything was alien. Confession: I like to put myself into situations that will make me feel rejected, to relive some repressed childhood fear - thank you Freud.

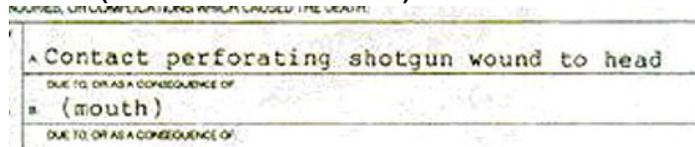
I bought my first Nirvana album, *Nevermind*, soon after in June 1994, two months after Kurt died. The music that had pounded on the ceiling at 328 Shotwell Street now pounded on somebody else's ceiling at 349 Fillmore Street (artistic license: I lived on the first floor of an apartment building with no basement). The first track *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, a.k.a. underarm deodorant, a.k.a. the *anthem of Generation X*. It's fun to lose and to pretend (*Smells Like Teen Spirit, Nevermind*)

1961, I just scraped in didn't I? Or did I just miss Generation X, stranded in limbo somewhere between X and baby boomer. X, the first generation to be worse off than their parents (see Coupland's book - relief, he was also born in 1961). Worse off in what respect? More ideals and less money, more money and less ideals, or just less of everything. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* of London about the book alt.culture¹²: *Today you will find alternative music, drugs, stars, cults, fashions, footwear, information systems, foods, religions and art movements but you will find no alternative to capitalism*¹³. **Plenty of alternatives but no single alternative. People seem to think you're joking when you talk about socialism, but I agree with Robert Heilbroner: Even the collapse of the Soviet Union, everywhere hailed as a victory for human freedom, has not yet been fully assessed as the defeat it has been for human aspirations**¹⁴.

Upstairs: Slippery pessimist hypocrite master

Conservative communist apocalyptic bastard. (Downer, Bleach, 1989). **We all cheered when Clinton was elected president: We didn't expect a whole lot from Bill Clinton. But we didn't expect the sort of massive abandonment of any basic progressive ideals that has characterized his administration**¹⁵. **Perhaps at heart, Clinton is a good guy, but we all know America is run by corporations, and by megalomaniacs like Bill Gates. Most people don't care anymore, or can't afford to. The economy has changed from a Fordist based production line model to flexible accumulation**¹⁶, characterized by contract labor, dispersed workforces, rapidly changing technology, with most people too busy changing jobs and learning new career skills in order to survive to be concerned with big picture questions like: *what the fuck is going on here?* While the economy apparently grows, the gap between rich and poor widens. GNP was \$3,052 billion in 1981 and \$6,000 billion in 1993, yet during the '80s the average real income of the top 5 percent rose from \$120,253 to \$148,438 while the corresponding income of the bottom 20 percent fell from \$9,990 to \$9,431¹⁷. Thus for most people the boom decade was a silent depression. A depression that hit the Pacific coast town of Aberdeen where Kurt grew up particularly hard. Why aren't we all screaming?!!

Recently I tried to find Kurt on the World Wide Web and I found traces: the complete lyrics, pictures, movie clips, and tour dates. San Francisco: 22 June 1989 - Covered Wagon; unknown date in 1990 - Kennel Club; 31 December 1991 - Cow Palace; 9 April 1993 - Cow Palace (I could have been there). I found his death certificate:



pictures of the scene of death above the garage in Seattle, his suicide note:

1987. See in particular the *plateau* of *November 28, 1947: How Do You Make Yourself A Body Without Organs?* for references to Artaud and ego-loss, etc.

¹² Steven Daly and Nathaniel Wise, *alt.culture*, Fourth Estate, 1996.

¹³ *Square Turns Cool Cat*, in *The Daily Telegraph*, London, January 6, 1996.

¹⁴ Robert Heilbroner, *21st Century Capitalism*, Norton, 1993.

¹⁵ *The Lesser of 4 Evils* in the *Bay Guardian*, October 30, 1996.

¹⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwell, 1994.

¹⁷ Robert Heilbroner and Lester Thurow, *Economics Explained*, Touchstone, 1994.

Images

Photograph of Kurt Cobain by Mark Seliger, copied from the cover of *Cobain by the Editors of Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone Press, 1994.

Photograph of Kurt Cobain lying dead at his Seattle home, *Seattle Times*, 8 April, 1994.
Downloaded from the internet.

Copy of part of the *Nevermind* album cover, copyright DGC, 1991.

Citybank advertisement with central image of Kurt Cobain in 1972, aged 5. The same photograph was given to mourners at Kurt's funeral, 22 years later.