

# Smells Like Teen Spirit: The Life of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana

by Taylor Townley  
for [Advanced Composition, ETSU, Fall 2016](#)

Taylor Townley is a sophomore English major at East Tennessee State University. Growing up, her father listened to alternative, punk, and grunge rock. One of his favorite bands was Nirvana—so obviously Taylor learned to love Nirvana, too. As Taylor got older, she became infatuated with Kurt Cobain, his life and music, and his death.

*“And I do, God, how I do love playing live, it's the most primal form of energy release you can share with other people besides having sex or taking drugs. So if you see a good live show on drugs and then later that evening have sex, you've basically covered all the bases of energy release, and we all need to let off steam. It's easier and safer than protesting abortion clinics or praising God or wanting to hurt your brother; so go to a show, dance around a bit and copulate.”- Kurt Cobain*

Kurt Donald Cobain was a natural-born American musician, best known as the lead singer, guitarist, and primary songwriter of the rock band Nirvana. Cobain formed Nirvana with Krist Novoselic in Aberdeen, Washington, in 1987 and established it as part of the Seattle music scene and grunge genre.

## **F’ed Up Childhood (1967-1979)**

On February 20, 1967, Donald Leland Cobain and Wendy Elizabeth Fradenburg had their first child, a son, Kurt. His parents then had a daughter, Kimberly Cobain; however, Kurt also has a half- brother, Chad Cobain, from his father’s second marriage and a half-sister, Breanne O’Conner. As a child, he was of a happy, go lucky temperament, fascinated by art. His artistic ability was recognized as early as kindergarten and only improved with age. He also learned to play piano by ear and thoroughly enjoyed a drum set he received as a child.

In 1971, when Kurt was nine years old, his parents divorced. After the divorce, Kurt watched his mother suffer at the hands of an abusive boyfriend while his father remarried and moved into a home with his new wife and her two children.

His parent's actions led to a nasty custody battle that heavily affected Cobain. It was finally decided that Kurt would spend weekends with his mother but stayed with his father much of the time. Seeing this separation at such a tender age caused his temperament to change immensely; Kurt became withdrawn, introverted and even rebellious at times. On June 28, 1979, Kurt's mother granted full custody to his father, and before Kurt knew it, his life had changed completely (Ronson 1).

### **Troubled Teenage Years (1980-1986)**

After Kurt began living with his father in Montesano, Washington, full time in 1979, he became a bona fide rebel. Cobain's defiant acts were overwhelming for his father, so then Kurt was once again shuffled into another new home, this time with a family friend.

During this time, between 1980 and 1985, Cobain was exposed to Christianity through his friend Jesse Reed who was a Christian. He eventually became a devout Christian and was attending regular church service. Later, though, Cobain renounced his faith and began engaging in anti-Christian rants (Ronson 1). His band, Nirvana, released a song, "Lithium" (1991), that described his time with the Reed family—specifically how a man turns to religion to resolve his suicidal thoughts. Religion, however, did remain an important part of his personal life and beliefs.

Although highly uninterested in sports, Cobain was enrolled in Aberdeen High School in 1983 and became a member of the wrestling and baseball team. Although Kurt resented the transfer to Aberdeen High, one positive thing did occur—Kurt met Krist Novoselic. Novoselic would soon become a close friend of Cobain's and musical partner (Ronson 2).

In 1985, during his sophomore year of high school, Cobain began living with his mother in Aberdeen, Washington.

Two weeks prior to graduation, he dropped out of Aberdeen High School, upon realizing that he did not have enough credits to graduate. His mother gave him an ultimatum: find employment or leave. After one week, Cobain found his clothes and other belongings packed away in boxes. Feeling banished from his own mother's home, Cobain stayed with friends, occasionally sneaking back into his mother's basement. It has been reported that during periods of homelessness, he lived under a bridge over the Wishkah River in Aberdeen, WA. This homeless experience inspired Nirvana's song *Something in the Way*; however, Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic later said in an interview, "He [Kurt] hung out there, but you couldn't live on those muddy banks, with the tides coming up and down. That was his own revisionism" (Cosgrove 1).

In 1986, Kurt Cobain moved into his first apartment. He paid his rent by working at The Polynesian Resort, a coastal resort approximately 20 miles north of Aberdeen (Ronson 3). During this time, Cobain was traveling frequently to Olympia, Washington to attend various rock concerts. His visits to Olympia resulted in him meeting Tracy Marander. The two had a strong, very close relationship, but it was often strained with financial difficulties and Cobain's absence when he was on tour (Ronson 3). Marander supported the couple by working at the cafeteria of the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, often stealing food for her and Kurt. The couple spent time together sleeping in the late afternoons, watching television, or focusing on any number of art projects they had begun. Marander insisted that Cobain find work, and her constant nagging instigated arguments that led to another Nirvana hit, *About a Girl*, featured on their album, *Bleach*.

## **Personal Life**

Kurt Cobain's post teenage years were plagued with drug abuse and addiction. The very same year Cobain moved into his first apartment (1986), he tried heroin for the first time and began what would be a long, drawn-out addiction for the rest of his life.

Throughout his life, Kurt suffered with terrible stomach aches and some believe this is one of the reasons he turned to drugs. It was in 1993 that Cobain's stomach pains were determined to have been caused by a pinched nerve (Kurt Cobain1). After this discovery, the pinched nerve was treated; however, he continued to use drugs. By 1990, Kurt Cobain was shooting up at least four hundred dollars of heroin per day. That amounts to two thousand eight dollars a week spent by Cobain to satisfy his craving of the highly potent, expensive, black tar heroin. Cobain believed being high on heroin made him more social and less unnerved all the time (Kurt Cobain 2).

However bad he wanted the heroin, his family and friends wanted him to get clean much more. By the winter of 1990, his addiction had become a seven day a week ordeal and was spiraling out of control. As a result, friends talked with him, expressed their concerns, and ultimately he became incredibly isolated and lost touch with many who were close to him.

When Kurt Cobain first met Courtney Love, their chemistry was very apparent, but so was their shared destructive behaviors. On January 12, 1990, Kurt Cobain met Courtney Love in the Portland, Oregon nightclub, Satyricon. It was here in the club Satyricon in 1990 that Courtney Love would start making advances towards Cobain; minutes before Nirvana was to appear on the nightclub stage, Courtney saw Kurt walk by, and she made a snarky remark—"You look like Dave Pirner (the lead singer of Soul Asylum)" (Cross 1). Whether she was being genuine or simply throwing out some kind of pick up line, it worked.

When Kurt heard Courtney's comment, he proceeded to playfully wrestle her to the ground because wrestling was a sexual fetish of Cobain's. There was an instant spark between the two, quite possibly a spark ignited by sexual attraction, but there was a problem. Kurt Cobain was still involved with Tracy Marander. Their relationship eventually ended and left Cobain free to pursue Courtney Love. Cobain had become aware of Courtney Love after her role in the 1987 film *Straight to Hell*. In late 1991, Love and Cobain were often spotted together and the couple bonded through one another's drug use (Kurt Cobain 1).

Kurt and Courtney met a second time in May 1991 during an L7 concert in Los Angeles, California. Kurt was backstage drinking cough syrup straight from the bottle, and when Courtney noticed what he was doing, she removed her own, much stronger bottle of cough syrup from her purse. The pair wrestled to the ground for a second time, with the same sexual vibe as their first encounter. When Kurt let Courtney up off the ground, they immediately got lost in conversation about music. Love was quick to brag about her band, *Hole*, whom had just finished recording their first album, *Pretty on the Inside* (Kurt Cobain 1); Kurt talked about his own album, which was still being produced. Usually, Cobain would have been more reserved and less outgoing, but he was desperate to impress a musically savvy Courtney Love. He pulled out and talked of every name and credential he could in an effort to one up all of her successes; however, he soon discovered he would never be to gain a verbal advantage over her. Love knew far more about music and the music business than Kurt did, but all the while, both *Hole* and *Nirvana* were climbing the success ladder.

On February 24, 1992, Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love tied the knot only days after the conclusion of Nirvana's "Pacific Rim Tour" (Ronson 2). The pair married on Waikiki beach in Hawaii; Love donned a satin lace dress while Cobain chose a Guatemalan purse and green

pajamas. Only eight people attended their wedding, most being friends of the couple.

### **Nirvana (1987-1994)**

Nirvana started in Aberdeen, Washington in 1987 when singer Kurt Cobain and the bassist Krist Novoselic met and decided to form a band. The band had 5 different drummers until they found Dave Grohl. They released their first studio album, *Bleach*, in 1989, with Chad Channing playing drums

During high school, Cobain rarely found anyone with whom he could play music. While hanging out at the Melvin's' (a Washington based rock band formed in 1983) practice space, he met Novoselic, a fellow die-hard fan of punk rock. Novoselic's mother owned a hair salon, and Kurt and Krist would often practice in the upstairs room of the salon. A few years later, Cobain tried to convince Novoselic to form a band with him by lending him a copy of a home demo recorded by Cobain's earlier band, Fecal Matter. After months of asking, Novoselic finally agreed to join Cobain; this friendship and future musical partnership was where one of the staples of the grunge music scene began

Eventually, the band settled on Chad Channing, with whom Nirvana recorded the album *Bleach*, released on Sub Pop Records in 1989. Cobain, however, became dissatisfied with Channing's style, leading the band to find a new drummer, and they eventually settled on Grohl. With Grohl, the band found their greatest success through their 1991 major-label debut, *Nevermind*.

*Nevermind* and its lead single, "Smells Like Teen Spirit" sent Nirvana mainstream. They were officially in the alternative rock scene—now regarded as *grunge*.

## **Death**

The death of Nirvana's lead singer and front man on the grunge scene left a nation disheveled, confused, and wondering why. On April 5, 1994, in the guest house behind his Seattle home, a 27-year-old Cobain apparently ended his life with a shotgun. Cobain placed a shotgun in his mouth and fired, killing himself instantly. Cobain, though, was not found until three days later on April 8, 1994 in his Seattle, Washington home. He left a lengthy suicide note in which he addressed his many fans as well as his wife and young daughter (Grant 1).

Kurt Donald Cobain, of Aberdeen Washington, was a natural-born American musician, best known as the lead singer, guitarist, and primary songwriter of the rock band Nirvana. Cobain formed Nirvana with Krist Novoselic in 1987 and soon surfaced on the mainstream grunge scene in Seattle. Throughout his life, Cobain struggled with depression, drugs and much else, but his escape and confidant was music. The impact Cobain and his music had on the world was astounding. His music gave insight into alternative (grunge) rock and opened a portal for people, like himself, to express their musical abilities.

Although Cobain's life was often an up and down rollercoaster ride with no intentions of slowing down, he lived for his music, his fans, and his daughter. Much of his life was also highly controversial and sometimes ridiculed, but as Cobain once said, "I'd rather be hated for who I am than loved for who I'm not" (Kurt Cobain 1).

## Works Cited

- Cosgrove, B. (2014, March 20). Kurt Cobain: The Reluctant Rock Star. Retrieved November 30, 2016, from <http://time.com/3879429/kurt-cobain-nirvana-remembering-a-reluctant-rock-star/>
- Cross, C. R. (2014, April 5). The Moment Kurt Cobain Met Courtney Love. Retrieved November 24, 2016, from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/03/04/the-moment-kurt-cobain-met-courtney-love.html>
- Grant, T. (n.d.). Summary of Events. Retrieved November 07, 2016, from <http://www.cobaincase.com/events.htm>
- Kurt Cobain. (n.d.). Retrieved November 22, 2016, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt\\_Cobain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_Cobain)
- Kurt Cobain. (2001). Retrieved November 6, 2016, from [http://www.heroinhelper.com/bored/celebrities/Kurt\\_Cobain.shtml](http://www.heroinhelper.com/bored/celebrities/Kurt_Cobain.shtml)
- Ronson, M. (1996). Time Line of Kurt Cobain's Life. Retrieved November 08, 2016, from <http://www.burntout.com/kurt/timeline/>