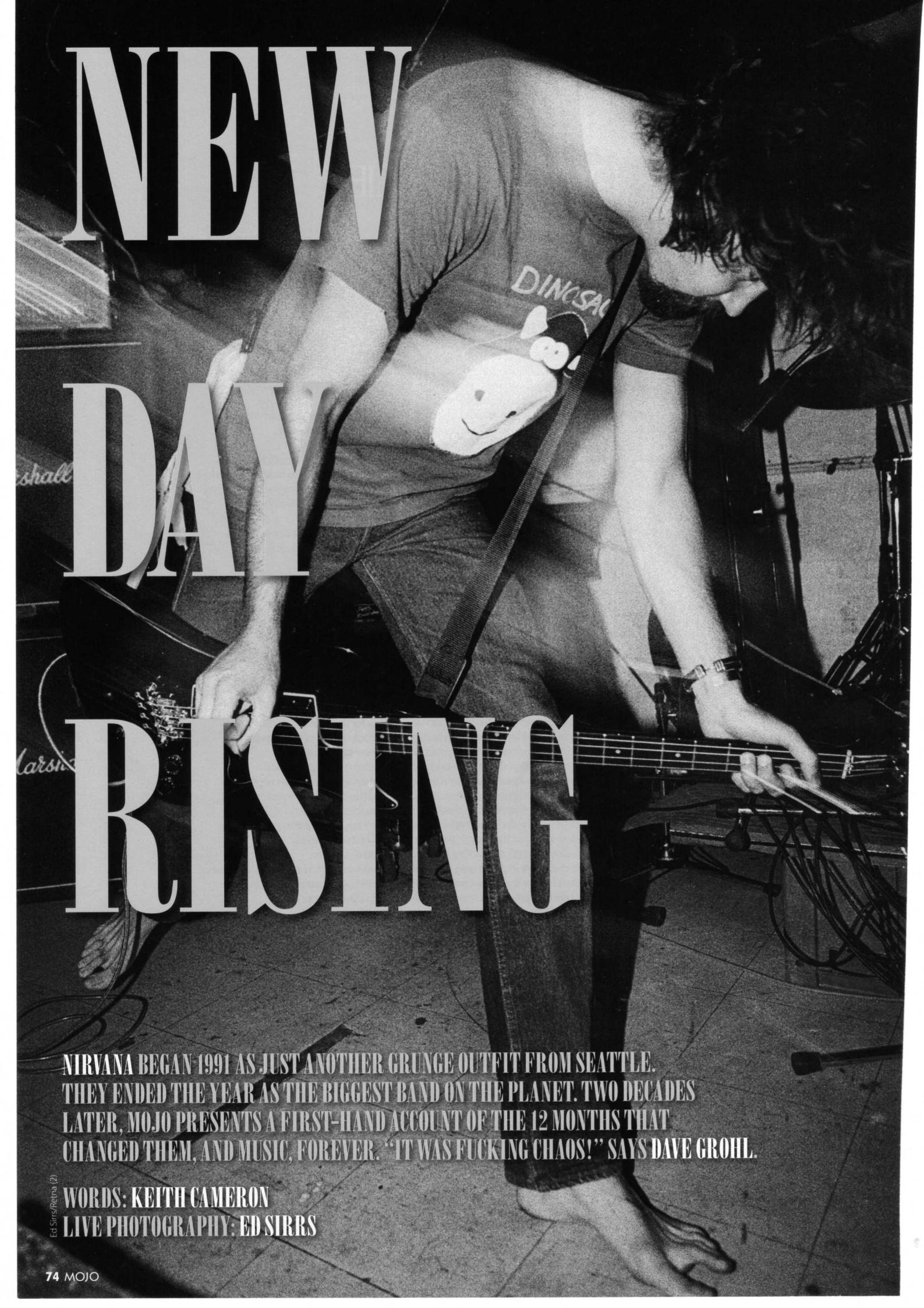
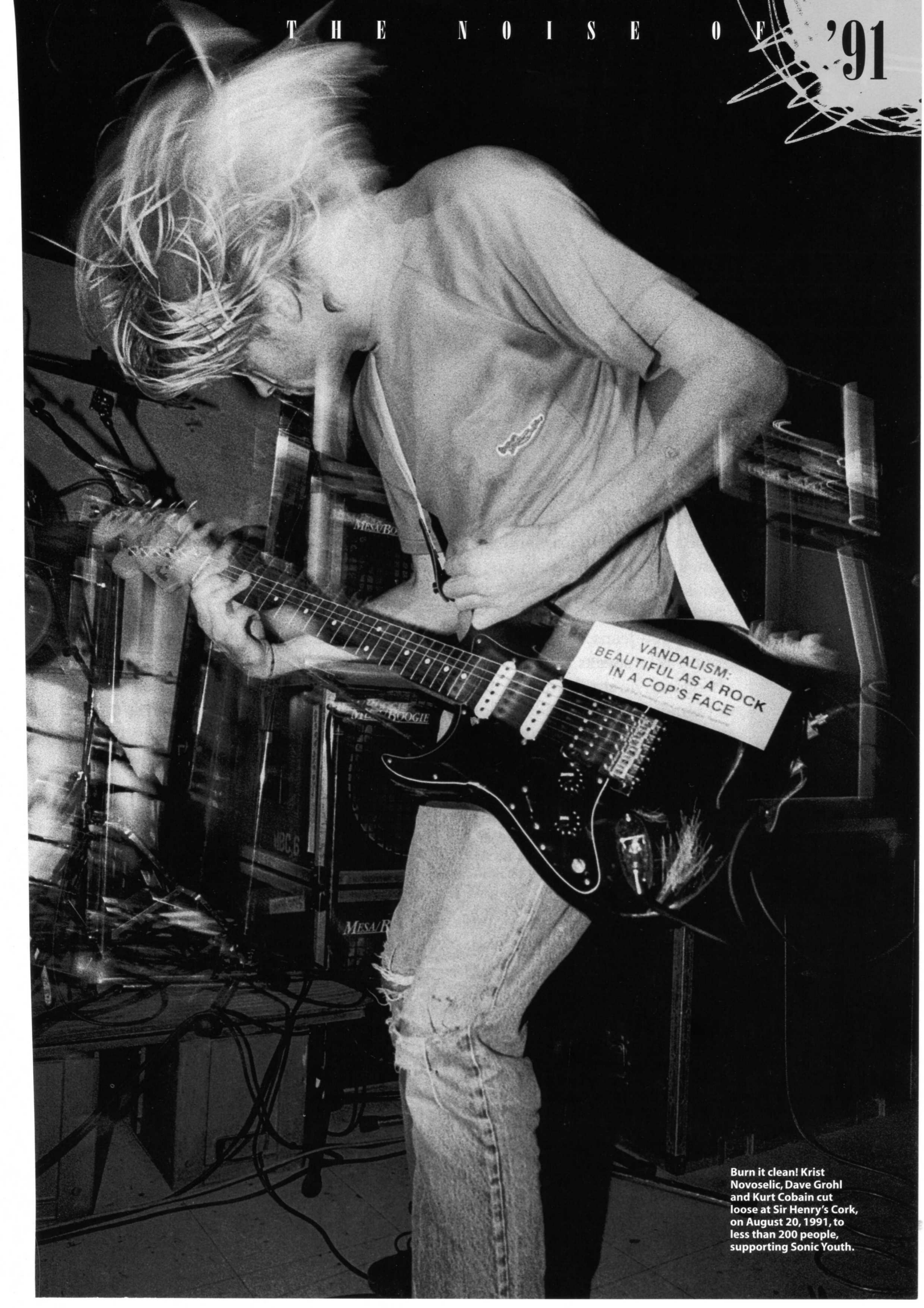
NEW DAY RISING



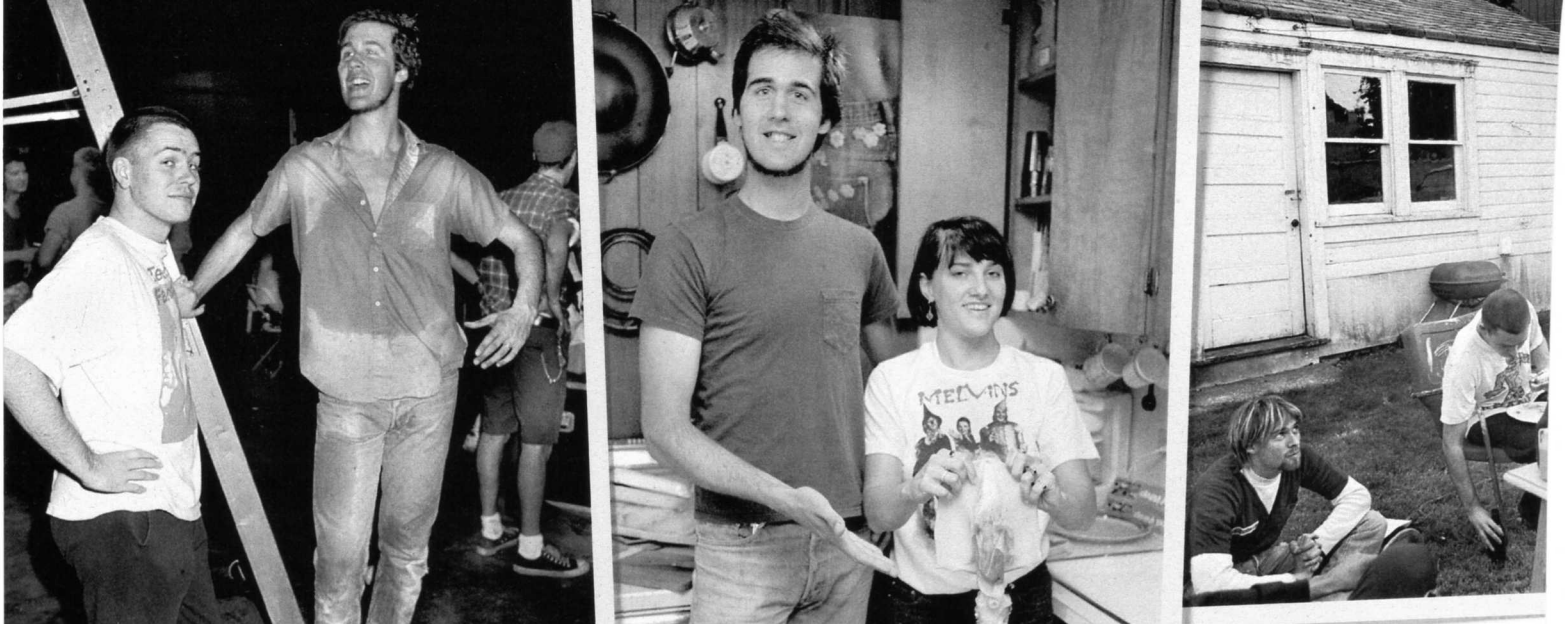
NIRVANA BEGAN 1991 AS JUST ANOTHER GRUNGE OUTFIT FROM SEATTLE. THEY ENDED THE YEAR AS THE BIGGEST BAND ON THE PLANET. TWO DECADES LATER, MOJO PRESENTS A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF THE 12 MONTHS THAT CHANGED THEM, AND MUSIC, FOREVER. "IT WAS FUCKING CHAOS!" SAYS DAVE GROHL.

WORDS: **KEITH CAMERON**
LIVE PHOTOGRAPHY: **ED SIRRS**

Ed Sirrs/Retna (2)



Burn it clean! Krist Novoselic, Dave Grohl and Kurt Cobain cut loose at Sir Henry's Cork, on August 20, 1991, to less than 200 people, supporting Sonic Youth.



Seattle scenes, September 1990: (from left) MOJO's Keith Cameron and Krist Novoselic after Nirvana's Motorsports International Garage show; Krist and then-wife Shelli, squids in; Nirvana BBQ Chez Krist with photographer Ian Tilton at the tongs.

ON THE MORNING OF AUGUST 21, 1991, KRIST NOVOSELIC WALKS INTO THE lobby of a hotel in Ireland and waves his credit card in the air. Not that the piece of rectangular plastic is actually his; according to the embossed lettering, it belongs to an organisation called 'NIRVANA INC'.

Novoselic does not conventionally resemble a corporate player. At six foot seven, with ripped jeans, unkempt beard and flyaway hair, his elongated frame wobbling around as he speaks, he looks more like a scarecrow directing the traffic. Bemoaning a hangover, he sits down and turns his attention to the tumultuous events in the Soviet Union, where President Gorbachev has been placed under house arrest amid an attempted coup by a group of Kremlin hardliners alarmed that Gorbachev's reforms will bring about the collapse of the USSR. "I've just been on the phone to Boris Yeltsin," Krist declares. "He asked me to come over and help him sort things out, and I said, Sure, but he'd have to wait 'til after Reading. Sorry!"

Just as he isn't the typical holder of a company credit card, nor does Novoselic fit the mould of a world current affairs expert. He is, after all, the bass player in an American rock band. But of course, as the world would soon discover, his is no ordinary rock band: in six months' time, NIRVANA INC will usurp Michael Jackson at the top of the US album chart.

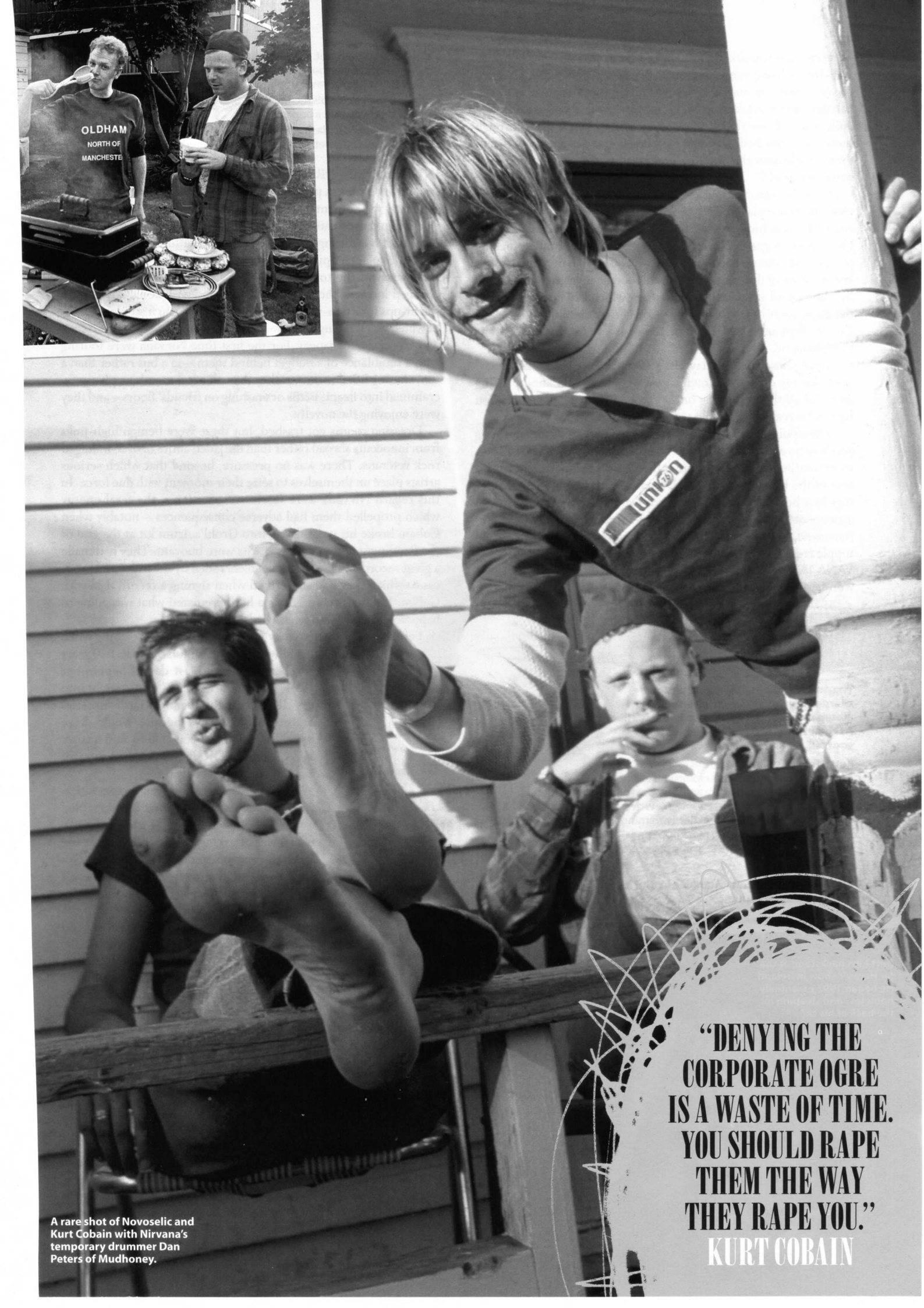
THE PREVIOUS EVENING, NIRVANA HAD PLAYED SIR Henry's, a small club on South Main Street in Cork, as the support act to Sonic Youth. There couldn't have been more than 200 people in the audience, and none of them were sufficiently bothered about Nirvana to rush down to the front. I was there with photographer Ed Sirrs to put together a feature article for NME. Later that day, we'd drive with the band to the Dublin seaside suburb of Dun Laoghaire for a gig at the Top Hat club. Then Nirvana would cross the Irish Sea for their first ever UK festival appearance, taking up a mid-Friday afternoon slot at Reading. As Krist started muttering about the KGB, I asked him about that credit card and he laughed again; he couldn't take it seriously.

The facts stated he was in a band which had signed a record deal with a major label founded by legendary music mogul David Geffen, and yet his material circumstances were just as they had been 12 months earlier. He still lived with his wife Shelli in a one-bedroom house in Tacoma, a blue collar satellite town equidistant between Olympia, the Washington state capital, and Seattle, the state's largest city. Krist and Shelli had little space but were always generous hosts. In September 1990, I travelled there with photographer Ian Tilton to write a cover story on Nirvana for the UK music weekly Sounds. We saw Nirvana headline their biggest show yet in Seattle, at the 1,500-capacity Motorsports International Garage, and were privileged to witness the band's one and only performance with Mudhoney's Dan Peters on drums. In lieu of a hotel to stay in, the Novoselics threw a mattress onto the living room floor. We awoke the next morning to the smell of a cooked breakfast and Krist serenading us with Black Flag songs.

During the summer of 1991, his bandmates' domestic arrangements were equally modest. Dave Grohl, the latest in a long succession of Nirvana drummers, had just begun sharing an apartment in West Seattle, having grown tired of living on a couch in a squalid apartment on Pear Street, just outside the centre of Olympia. Grohl's roommate in Pear Street was Kurt Cobain, who had lived there since moving in with his girlfriend Tracy Marander in 1987. After the couple broke up in 1990, Grohl quit squatting with the Novoselics and took up residence with Cobain.

"The kitchen was absolutely destroyed, it was so disgusting," remembered Grohl when we met in 2006. "There was mould everywhere. There was never anything in the refrigerator – I'm not ➢

Ian Tilton (4)



A rare shot of Novoselic and Kurt Cobain with Nirvana's temporary drummer Dan Peters of Mudhoney.

"DENYING THE CORPORATE OGRE IS A WASTE OF TIME. YOU SHOULD RAPE THEM THE WAY THEY RAPE YOU."
KURT COBAIN

≺ even sure it worked. You walked from this tiny kitchen into a 12-by-12 living room that had a TV that didn't work, a record player – there was maybe 12 records – a lamp and a couch, and then half the room was taken up by this massive turtle aquarium Kurt had built that had two dying, smelly turtles in it. You walked through there into a tiny bedroom that Kurt had painted black (*laughs*), and then a bathroom the size of a fucking airplane bathroom. That's where we lived."

As the Nirvana tourbus made its way from Cork to Dublin, the video machine played This Is Spinal Tap. Chuckling at the scene where the one-time 'world's loudest band' gather disconsolately at Elvis Presley's grave, Novoselic suggested that "too much fucking perspective" was no bad thing. The son of Croatian migrants, he felt keenly aware of the tumult that would soon be unleashed in his family's homeland as the chains of ideology which had bound together the disparate tribes of eastern Europe began crumbling. While Kurt Cobain slept and Dave Grohl played with a yo-yo, Krist Novoselic thought aloud.

"I just joke around all day, just say stupid things as much as possible, for my own amusement. I mean, what's that about? Being aware of all this shit going on, it can be pretty heart-aching. You have to be realistic – people are so stupid."

At this point Cobain woke up and joined the discussion. Sleeping rough in a vehicle was situation normal for him in August 1991. A month earlier, he arrived home at the Pear Street apartment from a tour of the US west coast with Dinosaur Jr, to find his few belongings in a box outside. He had been evicted from the Pear Street apartment for non-payment of rent. A month before the release of *Nevermind*, his band's second album, a Number 1 record that would topple rock's old school aristocracy, the creative epicentre of NIRVANA INC was homeless, kipping in the back seat of his car. No wonder they couldn't take anything seriously.

NIRVANA'S TOURBUS, CORK TO DUBLIN: AUGUST 21, 1991

The punk fundamentalists are already sharpening the knives for when your new album comes out, regardless of what it's like. As something of a punk fundamentalist yourself, what do you think of it?

Kurt: I think it's a fine mixture of radio-friendly accessible crap and still reminding you of what our *Bleach* album sounds like and what we sound like live. It's still heavy. In every interview over the last two years we've been practically warning everyone that we're writing more pop songs, so I don't think it'll be a surprise to anyone when they hear it.

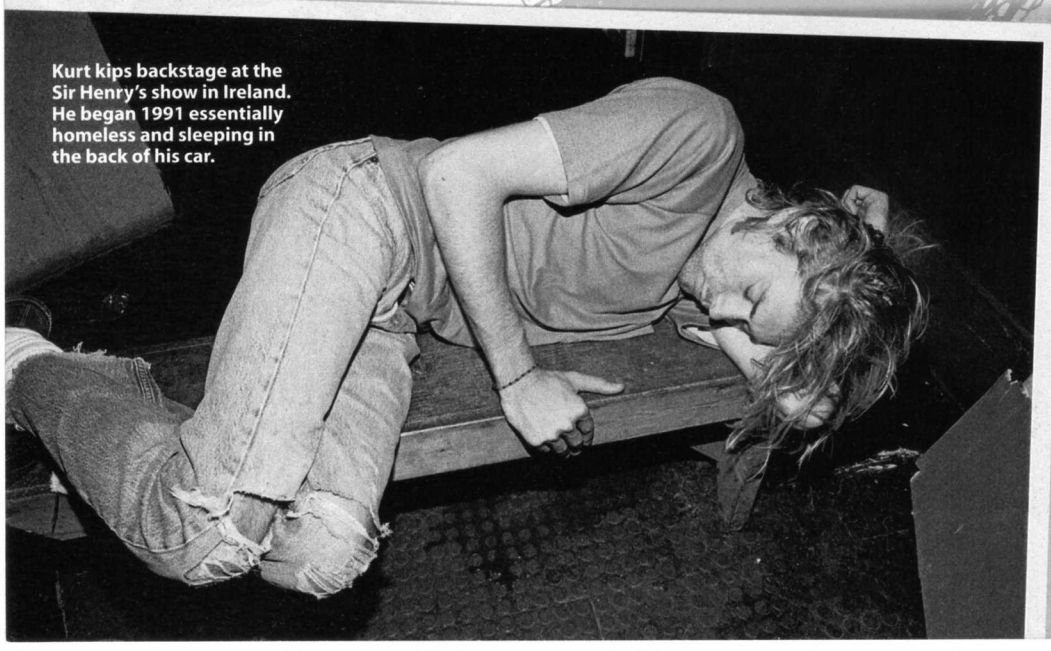
You presumably don't regard 'pop song' as a term of disgrace, then?

Kurt: Oh, absolutely not. All my favourite songs are pop songs. The Butthole Surfers have pop songs. Pop just means simple, and that's what punk rock has been forever until it turned into hardcore.

Krist: Like the Sex Pistols record, those are all pop songs. It's a great record. The Clash were a pop band.

Kurt: I think the best Clash album is *Combat Rock*. I fucking love that record. It's definitely better than *Sandinista!* (*laughs*)

"I COULD LIVE WITH OR WITHOUT ANYTHING. I'VE BUILT UP DEFENCES TO BE ABLE TO HANDLE ANYTHING."
KURT COBAIN



Kurt kips backstage at the Sir Henry's show in Ireland. He began 1991 essentially homeless and sleeping in the back of his car.

IN OUR DOZEN OR SO ENCOUNTERS, I SAW KURT COBAIN smile many times. A proper laugh, however, was unusual, and consequently you remembered it when it came. But if there was a period when laughs came readily to Kurt and the other members of Nirvana it was during the late summer and autumn of 1991, before Smells Like Teen Spirit annexed MTV, before *Nevermind* knocked *Dangerous* off the top of the Billboard charts, before their lives changed forever. The two shows in Ireland with Sonic Youth were warm-ups for a two-week jaunt around European festivals, the first of which was Reading. Hanging out with peers and heroes, this tour was an excuse for japery. For the first time Nirvana were touring with a semblance of a budget behind them – in a bus rather than a van; sharing hotel rooms, rather than all band members plus crew crammed into fleapit B&Bs or crashing on friends' floors – and they were enjoying the novelty.

Dressing rooms got trashed, but these were benign high-jinks from innocents abroad rather than the jaded antics of over-indulged rock veterans. There was no pressure, beyond that which serious artists place on themselves to seize their moment with due force. In this regard Nirvana were fearless. Sometimes, the feral energy which propelled them had adverse consequences – notably when Cobain broke his wrist diving into Grohl's drum kit at the end of the Reading set – but mostly spirits were buoyant. They had made a great record and hadn't yet been corroded by the industrial process to which they had subscribed when signing a record deal with Geffen. But how could Nirvana have predicted what was going to happen to them? No one else had a clue either.

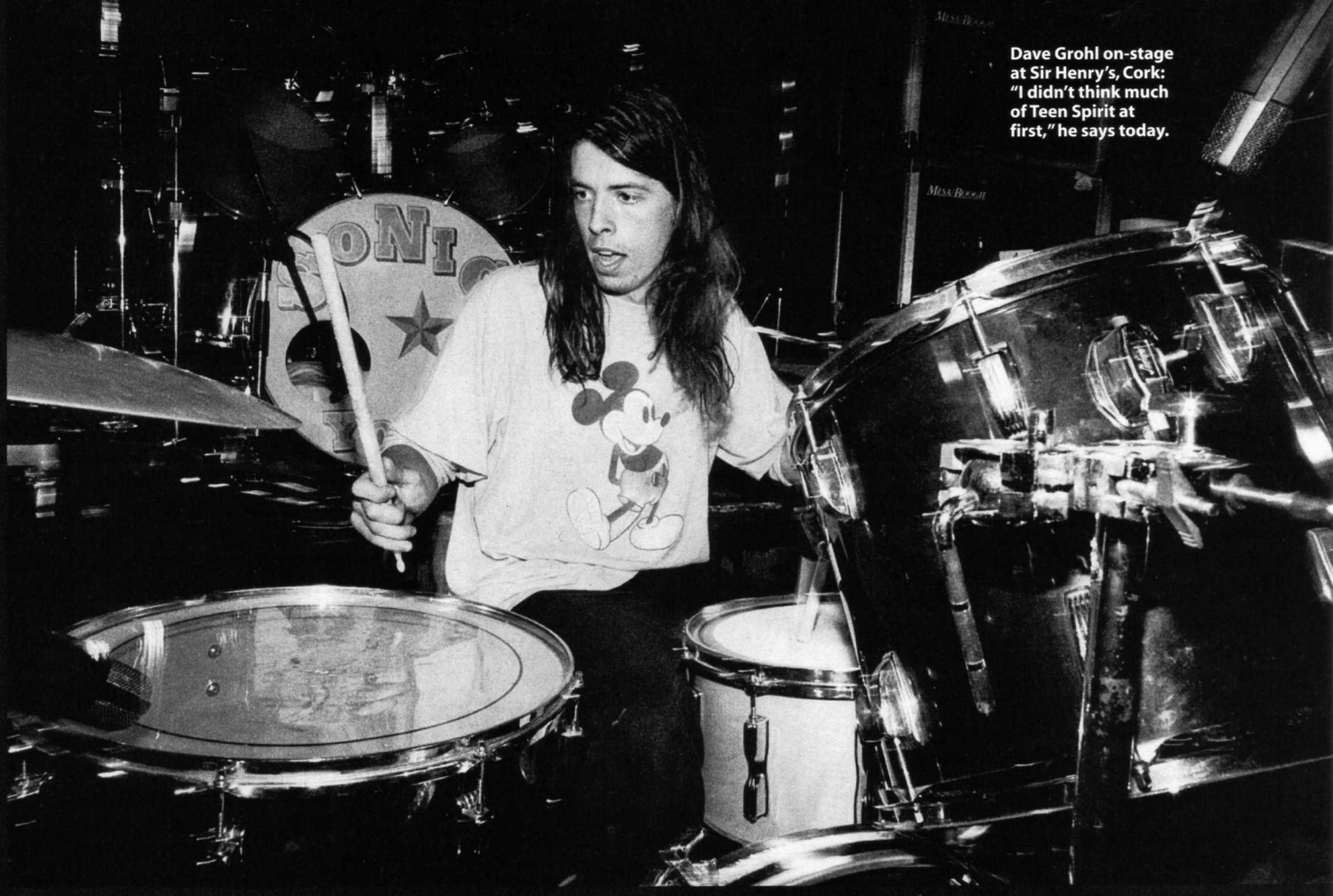
Few remember where they were or what they were doing when the most influential rock album of the last 20 years was released. On the last day of September 1991, Nirvana's *Nevermind* shot straight into the UK chart at Number 36. Hardly the stuff of revolution. More people would have bought it had they been able to find a copy. MCA, Geffen's UK distributor, had thought it sufficient to press only 6,000.

"There was a gulf between expectation and achievement," says Anton Brookes, Nirvana's UK publicist, drily. "I had the band's management asking me, 'Can't you get the label to press some more?' The label say, 'No, we'll be fine.' Two days in, boom! There's none left. I'd be lying if I said I knew *Nevermind* was going to change everything. I thought, This is a really good record and in a couple of years' time they'll be able to headline Brixton Academy if we've got a good support bill, and then maybe in five years' time we might be able to get near the top of the bill at Reading."

It was a similar story in the US, where Geffen shipped just 45,000 copies. "I'm sure that if we had done even that number or 50,000, for the rest of the year it would have been considered successful," says Mark Kates, then Geffen's director of alternative promotion.

But Geffen had other priorities. *Use Your Illusion*, Guns N'Roses' tortuously created, feverishly anticipated and colossally expensive two-volume follow-up to *Appetite For Destruction*, was released the week before *Nevermind*. "Also, within ➢

Edd Sirrs Retna (2)



Dave Grohl on-stage at Sir Henry's, Cork: "I didn't think much of Teen Spirit at first," he says today.

"OUR WORLD WAS TURNING UPSIDE DOWN..."

Dave Grohl relives *Nevermind*, Teen Spirit and the '91 revolution...

"WE WROTE Smells Like Teen Spirit in January or February of 1991. We'd been rehearsing in this shed behind someone's house in Tacoma, Washington. The guy who owned it played in a covers band, a bar band, and he rented out this rehearsal space with a home-made 8-track studio and we rehearsed there for three or four months and that's where a lot of *Nevermind* was written.

"We'd always start rehearsals with a jam, an open, free-form jam, and a lot of the songs came from that: songs like Drain You and Teen Spirit. At the time we were really experimenting with dynamic, with the quiet verse/loud chorus thing: a lot of it was derivative of Pixies and Sonic Youth, but you just knew when the chorus was supposed to get bigger, and you just knew the point of the song where just when you think you can't take it any higher, you *do* take it one step higher.

"I didn't really think much of Teen Spirit at first. I thought it was just another one of the jams that we were doing: we had so many jams like that, that we'd record onto a boombox tape and then lose the cassette and lose the song forever. But Teen Spirit was one we kept coming back to because the simple guitar lines were so memorable.

"We played a show in Seattle [at the OK Hotel, on April 17, 1991] to get gas money to go down to Los Angeles to record the record. We set it up at the last minute, it was an afternoon gig and we played that song for the first time and the audience went nuts. I don't know if it was the rhythm or the melody but people got caught on it pretty quick.

"With *Nevermind* I thought In Bloom was going to be the 'smash hit' off the record, or Lithium. I thought Smells Like Teen Spirit was just another album cut. We recorded it pretty quickly, and I think it was one of [producer] Butch Vig's favourites, and it soon became pretty clear that it would be the special song on the record. But, of course, at that point we didn't think anything was going to happen with the record. It was like releasing a Jesus Lizard record or something, there was no world domination ambition, because that just couldn't happen, that wasn't *allowed* to happen.

"I thought Teen Spirit might get on [MTV's] 120 Minutes and allow us to tour with Sonic Youth, but no one thought it was a hit single because [that] was just unimaginable. I mean the funniest part was seeing the video on MTV. We were touring America just as the album came out in September of '91, playing places that held maybe 200-300 people, and we'd go back to the hotel and turn on the TV and see our video and go, That's so funny, we're on TV, and we've just played [legendary 'DC hardcore venue] the 9:30 Club, or whatever! Then with the video came more people and the clubs got bigger and bigger."

"The [proper] tour started in Toronto at the Opera House and it seemed like a fairly typical Nirvana gig: there were maybe 500 or 600 people there. To me you have to remember that was like making it, going from the 32 people who would usually come to see [Grohl's pre-Nirvana band] Scream in every city to, like, 500 people, I considered that to be the greatest success of my entire life! But the capacity of a lot of the gigs that we were playing on that tour were low – we played a place in Portland, Maine or maybe Vermont where the legal capacity was 67, a tiny little living room of a place, it was chaotic. When the video hit MTV it made a big difference. That's when you'd show up to a 500 capacity gig and there were 500 extra people there. We were still in our little bubble – we were in our van, the three of us, *Krist's wife Shelli, our monitor guy Miles, and* Monte Lee Wilkes, our tour manager – and it didn't seem like anything unusual was happening until we'd get to the gig and it was fucking chaos. And we started to notice there were normal people here, what are they doing here? That guy looks like a jock, what the fuck is he doing here? And it was like, Oh, maybe that video thing is attracting some... riff-raff! The only indication that our world was turning upside down would be when you'd get to the venue. Then it would be, Holy shit, these people are nuts!

"Teen Spirit definitely established that quiet/loud dynamic thing that we fell back on a lot of the time. It did become that one song that personifies the band. But the video was probably the key element in that song becoming a hit. People heard the song on the radio and they thought, 'This is great,' but when kids saw the video on MTV they thought, 'This is cool. These guys are kinda ugly and they're tearing up their fucking high school!' So I think that had a lot to do with what happened with the song. But do I think it's the greatest single of all time? Of course not! I don't even think it's the greatest Nirvana single. And compared to Revolution by The Beatles or God Only Knows by The Beach Boys?! Give me a break! Smells Like Teen Spirit was a great moment in time... but there's better."

As told to Paul Brannigan

Kurt (wearing the Sounds T-shirt given to him by Keith Cameron), Krist and Dave backstage at the Reading Festival, August 23, 1991.

≺ the Geffen building there had been a lot of hype about [LA schlock merchants] The Nymphs," adds Kates. "They were making *the* record, The Nymphs were *the* band. Y'know, [Nymphs singer] Inger Lorre pissed on [A&R man] Tom Zutaut's desk, and all that. Nirvana wasn't very well known. They were a lower level indie band that, as we were about to discover, some people felt were important."

NIRVANA'S TOURBUS, CORK TO DUBLIN: AUGUST 21, 1991

Krist: C'mon man, ask us about the songs on our great new record!

Righto. Tell us all about Territorial Pissings.

Kurt: I really don't have an explanation for that song. A lot of the time I write a song and when someone asks me about it I'll make up an explanation on the spot because a lot of times I write the lyrics in the studio and I have no idea what I'm talking about half the time.

Cheers. How about Smells Like Teen Spirit?

Kurt: Well, it's about, hey brother, especially sister, throw away the fruit and eat all the rind…

Krist: Wow, I can see that, too.

Kurt: No longer is it taboo for the tattooed to take their generational solidarity and shove it up the ass of the Byrds and Herman's Hermits-loving disgraces we call parents…

Krist: That's beautiful, that's really cool.

Kurt: Posing as the enemy to infiltrate the mechanics of the system, to slowly start its rot from the inside. It's an inside job, it starts with the custodians and the cheerleaders.

Krist: That's a good one. That's what that song's about, too.

Kurt: Or not. (*Smirks*)

IN THE UK, *NEVERMIND* ACTUALLY CHARTED two places lower than *Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge*, the new album by Mudhoney, which entered the chart at 34 in the last week of August. Nirvana had supported Mudhoney many times, but this would be the last instance of their peers and former Sub Pop labelmates being above them.

Across a range of criteria, Mudhoney were a demonstrably better band than Nirvana. Whereas Nirvana's shows could teeter on the brink of collapse (and often fell off the edge), Mudhoney delivered consistently. They could be sloppy, but you always felt they were in control of their slop. Having two guitarists – Mark Arm and Steve Turner – helped anchor the Good Ship Distortion, while Nirvana epitomised the magic of the power trio in possessing barely enough elements to sustain what they were trying to do. Mudhoney's drummer, Dan Peters, was a deft, multi-faceted player, capable of both thrash and swing, who had briefly been a member of Nirvana in the summer of 1990 but was passed over in favour of Dave Grohl's monster truck dynamics. In Mark Arm, Mudhoney had a charismatic frontman, capable of haughty rock star élan and seemingly born to sing the punk rock blues. The sardonic Arm was also comfortable with audience banter, while in bassist Matt Lukin Mudhoney had a larger than life comedy totem, renowned for his ability to play bass while simultaneously drinking beer and dropping his trousers.

Nirvana, however, had an intensity that no other band could match, because the fulcrum of that intensity was Kurt Cobain. Every morsel of hurt and pain and anger that he possessed were channelled into his singing and playing. It was an uncomfortable but gripping spectacle to witness this frail young man at the mercy of his inner torments. He seemed to prevail via a constant stream of unironically pretty songs. Add to this Novoselic's at times quite disarmingly funky low-end plus the precision power which came with the recruitment of Grohl, and the compulsive thrill of Nirvana was self-evident.

In September 1991, both Mudhoney and Nirvana were booked on separate tours of the US. The itineraries were due to coincide at the end of October, with two co-headlining shows at the Fox Theatre in Portland and then, on Hallowe'en, at the Paramount Theatre in Seattle. From the beginning of the tour, either via the radio or at each club they played, Mudhoney had been made aware of the gradual omnipresence of Smells Like Teen Spirit. But Nirvana were as shocked as anyone when they were told on arriving in Portland that *Nevermind* had 'gone gold' – ie, it had sold 500,000 copies. They were shocked because their personal circumstances hadn't changed: they were still broke. And especially in the US, the reaction of audiences had very quickly become way beyond anything they had experienced before. This physical affirmation of what they were doing meant more to them than any number of statistics on sales or airplay ever could.

Inevitably, Nirvana headlined both shows.

"They were definitely more excited than appalled by what was happening!" remembers Mark Kates. "They wouldn't have signed with [Geffen] if they didn't want to be successful. As time moved on, Kurt especially took a revisionist point of view on all of this. Not that he didn't want to be successful, but what happens is people realise they've completely lost control over their own lives and they freak out. But I honestly think at the time they found ways to find humour in it and enjoy it."

Six days before the Hallowe'en show in Seattle, Kurt and Krist appeared on MTV's late-night Headbanger's Ball programme, where they were interviewed by host Ricki Rachtman, a paradigm of the big-haired dudester soon to be sucked into a fashion crisis by Nirvana's transformative impact upon the hard rock universe. Cobain wore a yellow dress and said little, while Novoselic gamely held up the band's end of the excruciating culture clash.

Rachtman: "I wanna talk about the new album, which is called *Nevermind*. Is it new? Has it been out for a while and everyone's just getting into it, or is it pretty new?"

Novoselic: "It's been out for about a month now."

Rachtman: "What do you think the reason is that everybody's just gotten into Nirvana so quickly?"

Novoselic: "Hmmm…"

Rachtman: "'Cos it is pretty wild."

Novoselic: "We have our big bandwagon, and we have a bunch of Clydesdale horses, multi-coloured horses pulling it and people are just jumping on. It's kinda like a Ken Kesey acid trip type thing, passing Kool Aid around, and we're like the Merry Pranksters…"

This exchange heralded a succession of mischievous media appearances throughout the next six weeks which revealed Nirvana messing with their rapidly developing star status and having fun. On November 8 there was the appearance on Channel 4's The Word, now infamous for Cobain declaring Courtney Love "the best fuck in the world", but just as noteworthy for the genuinely edgy performance of Smells ➢

TV BLITZ

Nirvana scorch the small screen

1 **Dressed up on MTV's Headbanger's Ball, October 25.**

2 **Swearing on The Word, November 8.**

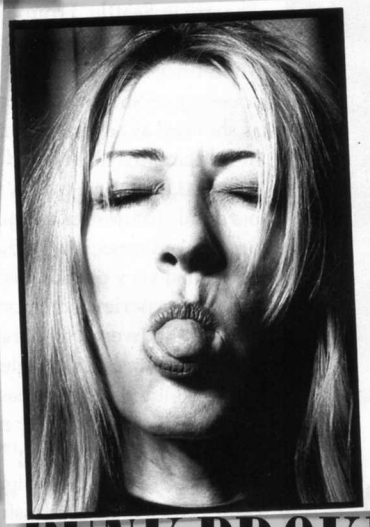
3 **Possessed by Morrissey on Top Of The Pops, November 27.**

4 **Reclining on their 'favourite' TV show Rapido, November 28.**

5 **Territorial Pissings on The Jonathan Ross Show, December 6.**

Ed Sirrs Retna

Sonic Youth spearhead the US noise revolution...



THE YEAR PUNK BROKE

Beyond Teen Spirit! The American noise underground goes overground: a 1991 playlist. By **Phil Alexander**.

SONIC YOUTH

Dirty Boots

(DGC EP)

The standard bearers of the US noise scene, six albums into their career New York four-piece Sonic Youth possessed enough savvy to negotiate a major label deal that left their creative freedom intact. As a result they signed to Geffen subsidiary DGC in 1989, releasing their landmark *Goo* album the following year. Album opener Dirty Boots – a slice of salacious post-Velvets indie-rock that builds to a skewering, guitar-thrashing crescendo – was released as an EP in April '91 and even had a promotional, boy-meets-girl, MTV-friendly video. Symbolically, the female protagonist wears a *Bleach*-era Nirvana shirt, Kurt and co having become SY's DGC labelmates a year earlier.

DINOSAUR JR

The Wagon

(Sire single)

Following 1988's *Bug* (which topped the UK Indie chart), and despite the inter-band strife that saw the departure of bassist Lou Barlow, Massachusetts slackers Dinosaur Jr inked a deal with Warners Bros owned Sire and released *Green Mind*. The band's phased powerchords, jangle-pop undertow, and Mascis's laconic, melodic vocal made album opener The Wagon the perfect single and led to an appearance on the David Letterman TV show. "Here they are, kids! It's Dinosaur Jr!" intoned the host as J, clad in snazzy purple velour jacket and hiding behind his hair curtains, drove the song on, indulging in some impressive guitar-strangling histrionics like indie-rock's answer to Neil Young.

TAD

Jack Pepsi

(Sub Pop single)

One of the heaviest bands to emerge from Seattle, Tad matched the menace and grind of early Swans and Melvins with overt metallic influences to arrive at a scarifying sound that was ably equalled by their lyrics, gargled out by band leader Tad Doyle. This tune – produced by Butch Vig – paints a terrifying portrait of backwoods drink-driving which ends with the protagonist, juiced on a diet of Pepsi and Jack Daniel's, drowning in a lake. When Tad re-worked the Pepsi logo for the single artwork they found themselves faced with an injunction forcing the 12-inch to be re-housed in a more sober sleeve. A year later in the grunge-rush that followed *Nevermind*, they landed a highly unlikely major label deal with the Warners affiliate, Giant Records.

SCREAMING TREES

Bed Of Roses

(Epic single)

Formed in Ellenberg, Washington in '85, the Screaming Trees always had a vested interest in psychedelia and '60s songcraft. In Mark Lanegan – a huge admirer of Leonard Cohen – they also had man who could give full voice to their epic vision. Four albums on Greg Ginn's independent label, SST, saw the band sign to Epic and release *Uncle Anesthesia*, co-produced by Soundgarden singer Chris Cornell. The sweeping indie-rock jangle of Bed Of Roses saw the tune peak at Number 23 in Billboard's Modern Rock chart.

MEAT PUPPETS

Nail It Down

(Forbidden Places album track, London)

Essentially an Americana act before the term was ever invented, Phoenix-based Meat Puppets spent nine years evolving their country-shot sound on SST Records before signing to the London label in 1990. The resultant album, *Forbidden Places*, remains an overlooked gem, the chunky-riff of Nail It Down being a fine example of their ability to fuse blue-collar muscle with indie rock sensibilities.

BABES IN TOYLAND

Handsome And Gretel

(Reprise single)

Having released their debut album, *Spanking Machine*, on Twin Tone in 1990 and pioneered the oh-so-grunge 'kinderwhore' look, Minneapolis trio Babes In Toyland found fans in John Peel and Sonic Youth. The latter's guitarist Lee Ranaldo assisted with the production of *Fontanelle*, their debut album for major label Reprise, which included this track – a subversive pun on the Grimm Fairy tale with choice lyricism and matching stabbing guitars. Precisely what Reprise executives thought when they heard singer Kat Bjelland screech, "My name is Gretel, yeah/I've got a crotch that talks!" has yet to be documented.

PIXIES

Letter To Memphis

(4AD single)

The influence of the Pixies's quiet/loud dynamic on Nirvana has been well documented. By 1991, however, the four-piece of frontman Frank Black, Joey Santiago (guitars), Kim Deal (bass) and David Lovering (drums) had begun fall apart. The album *Trompe Le Monde* proved to be their parting shot but also provided them with this track that became a Stateside hit when it reached Number 6 in the Billboard Modern Rock chart with Black's twisted, lovelorn lyrics pitted against stadium-sized guitar squalls.

SMASHING PUMPKINS

Rhinoceros

(Gish album track, Caroline, USA; Hut, UK)

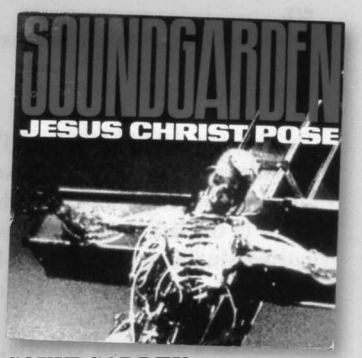
Chicago's Smashing Pumpkins were another band who draw from the Pixies's aesthetic, a point evinced on this kaleidoscopic reverie. Produced by Butch Vig, Rhinoceros – originally on the band's *Gish* debut released in May '91 – became the lead track on the Lull EP and hit Number 27 on Billboard's Modern Rock chart. In the aftermath, the band signed to Virgin and in July '93 released *Siamese Dream*, the album which would become their first multi-million seller.

MUDHONEY

Let It Slide

(Sub Pop single)

It is impossible to overstate the importance of Mudhoney among their peers and within the American noise underground. In many respects they represented the scene's soul, conscience and wit. In terms of their fellow Seattle acts, they also acted as their big brothers, having been the first act to secure the patronage of John Peel and break out into Europe as a result. This typically high-octane single preceded their second album, *Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge*, in June 1991. Less than a year later they had left Sub Pop and signed to Reprise Records.



SOUNDGARDEN

Jesus Christ Pose

(A&M single)

Soundgarden's lead single from their third album, *Badmotorfinger*, attacks the fake deification and martyrdom of celebrity. Musically, the chopped rhythms and 4/4 beats emphasise the track's portentous feel, as does the video directed by Eric Zimmerman which features innumerable crucifixes and an image of a woman crucified on a cross. According to singer Chris Cornell, the latter is meant to signify the age old oppression of women. MTV, however, refused to show the video while radio refused to play the song due to its supposed anti-religious bias. Despite this, *Badmotorfinger*'s sales topped 1.5 million copies in the US alone.

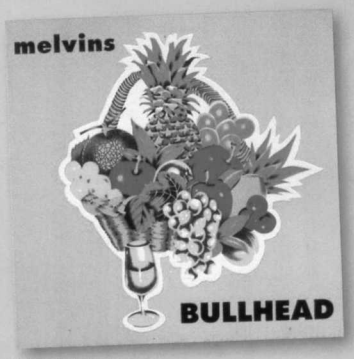
ALICE IN CHAINS

Man In A Box

(Columbia single)

Emerging from the local hard rock scene, Alice In Chains were the first of the so-called grunge outfits to sell a million copies of an album, their debut outing, *Facelift*, being certified gold by the end of 1990. Man In A Box provided the band with their biggest hit to date in the early months of '91, its blend of brooding harmonies, censorship-bait-

ing lyrics and heavy guitars (accentuated by a talkbox thump) reaching Number 18 in the Billboard Album Rock Tracks chart.



MELVINS

Boris

(Bullhead album track, Boner)

Along with Flipper, Melvins are responsible for moving American punk's invective away from biscuit tin thrash and into altogether sludgier territory augmenting monolithic, doom-laden riffs with frontman Buzz Osbourne's growling Beefheartian lyrical menace. Sounding as if Black Sabbath had raided Kiss guitarist Ace Frehley's stash of downers, Boris is a slow-crawling, eight minutes-long track that opens the band's third album, *Bullhead*. Despite Melvins' resolutely anti-commercial stance, Kurt Cobain's patronage of the band would see them signed to Atlantic within 12 months, and the Nirvana frontman went on to co-produce and play on the ensuing album, 1993's *Houdini*.

L7

Fast And Frightening

(Smell The Magic album track, Sub Pop)

Originally released in 1990, L7's second album, *Smell The Magic*, was reissued with three bonus tracks in September 1991 as the noise scene began to develop serious commercial momentum. The air-punching punk of Fast And Frightening typifies the LA foursome's infectious Motörhead-meets-Runaways approach. In a Nirvana-related footnote, footage of L7 performing this track with Dave Grohl on drums on the steps of LA City Hall at a Rock For Choice gig in January 1991 exists on YouTube.

HOLE

Teenage Whore

(Caroline/City Slang single)

Produced by Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon and Gumball's Don Fleming, Hole's third single was taken from the band's debut album *Pretty On The Inside*. Courtney Love's provocative lyrical imagery led to increased notoriety and propelled this track to Number 1 in the UK Indie chart. Love married Kurt Cobain in February 1992 and signed to Geffen. Hole's next album, *Live Through This*, was released in April 1994, four days after Cobain's suicide.

➤ Like Teen Spirit, suggesting Nirvana's taut, combustible sound was a perfect fit for television. Returning to the UK after a fortnight in Europe, they appeared on Top Of The Pops, memorably debunking the show's mimed performance format: as Grohl and Novoselic quickly abandoned any pretence that they might be playing their instruments, Cobain delivered Smells Like Teen Spirit in a mock gothic bass register that he later claimed was a tribute to Morrissey. On the Jonathan Ross Show they blasted Territorial Pissings instead of the scheduled Lithium. Before the multi-channel broadband age irrevocably altered the dynamics of consumer culture, a genuine sense of anticipation turned these episodes into real events.

But the best Nirvana television moment came with their feature on BBC's Rapido. Filmed around the band's gig at the Sheffield Octagon Centre on November 28, it opened with the trio revealing their innermost feelings about the magazine show, hosted by the esteemed French motormouth Antoine de Caunes.

Cobain: "Excited. 'Cos it's one of my favourite television shows whenever we come into the UK. It always seems to be on the night we get into town."

Grohl: "We can't sleep and it's the only thing worth watching."

Novoselic: "We're watching international snooker and then Rapido comes on and we jump up and down! Yeah! Rapido! Rapido!"

Cobain: "It's better than the snooker..."

Amid footage of fans gathering at the venue, the voiceover accurately described the band as: "The only true grass roots phenomenon of the year, they've achieved their star status with virtually no money being spent by their record company on advertising and their reputation being spread by word of mouth. The reason is their music..." Returning to the interview, Cobain was now lounging on the floor, attempting to define his art: "The most common word that comes up in every definition I've read has been 'freedom'. So we like to think of our music as musical freedom...."

Then, we followed the band goofing their way through the venue until they spot a door marked 'Events Office Rock Society', and proceed to materialise on-stage performing Aneurysm. Watching it now, the Rapido footage perfectly encapsulates the mood of naive wonder that surrounded Nirvana during this period. Amid the increasing chaos of their lives, the individuals are engaged as a group: witty, caustic and sincere. It ends with a by now completely horizontal Kurt declaring that Nirvana are part of a mission to correct a decade of misdeeds committed in rock's name. "There have always been good passionate bands in rock'n'roll throughout history, it's just up to fans and people involved in the music industry to make sure it doesn't get as stale and as bad as it has in the last 10 years."

It would not be long before the demands of the same industry encroached upon their lives to a ruinous extent. For Cobain, in particular, both as the songwriter and singer, as well as the band's most physically fragile component, this led to him abstaining from situations where he felt powerless, leaving Grohl and Novoselic to fulfil media duties, a challenge they met stoically. Having witnessed his merciless staring out of a record label employee after the appearance on The Word, it's hard to imagine anyone less well-disposed to the meet-and-greet ritual than Kurt Cobain. But these were acts of self-preservation in environments where Cobain, instead of taking control, decided to opt out. Exhausted from months of touring and a promotional schedule that saw him increasingly pushed and pulled around by management and record label, he simply dug in his heels and finally said: Enough.

A final week of European dates, from December 9-14, were cancelled, which meant the last show of the tour was at the Transmusicales Festival in Rennes. Doubtless relieved that the end was in sight, the band upped their game, delivering an extraordinary performance which opened with a thunderous desecration of The Who's Baba O'Riley and ended with Kurt being carried off-stage in Krist's arms. Yet in situations where he felt comfortable with the individuals or believed there was a mutual respect in terms of motivation, Cobain could be charm itself. Thus, on December 1, amid the maelstrom, Cobain and Grohl played an acoustic set to a few dozen astounded observers at the Southern Bar in Edinburgh, at a benefit for the city's Sick Children's Hospital.

"Being close to Nirvana, you never appreciated the magnitude of what it had become," says Anton Brookes. "You were dealing with the same people and the same problems. The band had not suddenly changed. It never went to their heads. They were just a little bewildered by it all."

NIRVANA'S TOURBUS, CORK TO DUBLIN: AUGUST 21, 1991

What's the most important thing for you about your band?

Kurt: Our songs. It makes us happy. I mean, I could live with or without anything. I've built up enough defences to be able to handle anything. So if we were to break up tomorrow, I'd be really sad about it, but... start another one, do something else. We've all got friends.

Do people take rock'n'roll too seriously?

Kurt: Way too seriously. People have so many expectations of rock'n'roll. They expect it to be used as a tool to be political, and it should be nothing more than the background music.

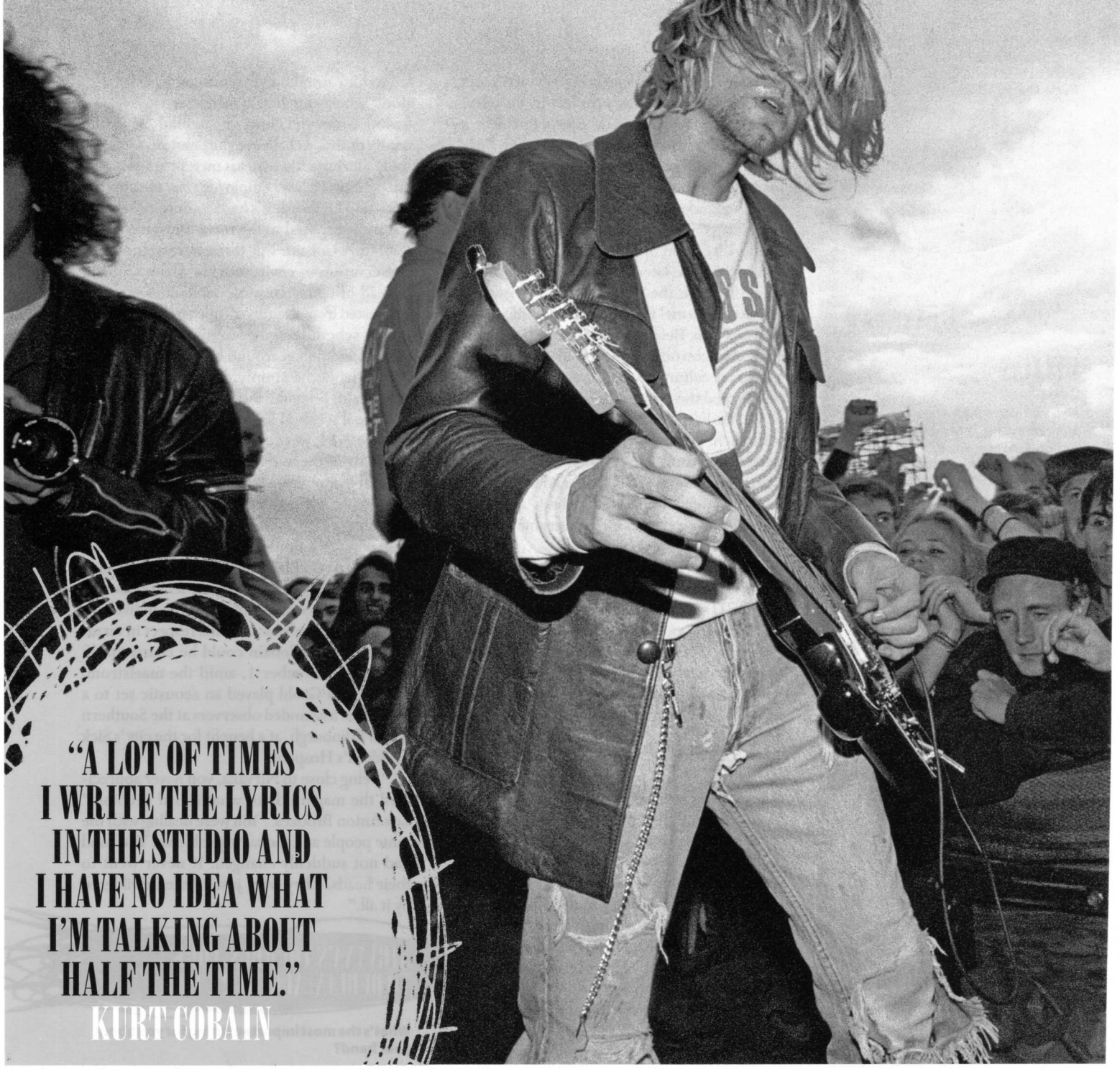
You mean you've never placed that much importance upon it?

Kurt: Oh, music completely changed my life. Punk rock made me so much more aware of things. It finally reminded me that I've had an identity all along. It changed my fucking life when I heard it. So it's a totally important thing. It's just that, (*laughs*) people blow it out of all proportion.

Can you imagine what you'd have done if it had completely passed you by?

Kurt: I'd be more of a depressive person. I would have done something. I wouldn't have just ended up in a garage working on cars, I know that." ➤

Tom Sheehan (4)

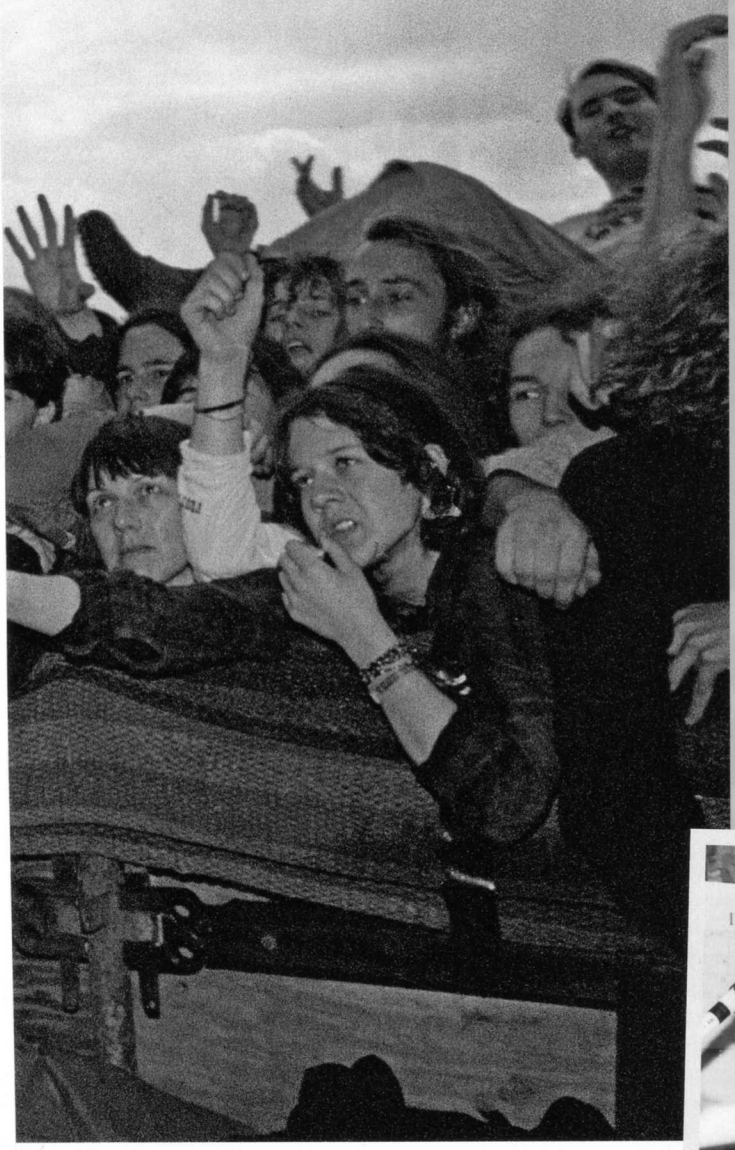


Ed Sirrs/Retna, Photo by Mari Earl

TODAY IT TAKES A PARTICULAR EFFORT TO REMEMBER what Nirvana were like in 1991, because the Nirvana everyone knows now are not the band we knew then. Nirvana today are the subject of serious films and books, of academic discourse, and soon a major exhibit at the Experience Music Project in Seattle. Nirvana are also the stuff of endless flim-flam: of video games, comic books, dolls… and clothing. At the Reading Festival, Kurt Cobain wore a Sounds shirt which I had given him on my September 1990 visit to Seattle. I also gave shirts to Krist Novoselic and Dan Peters, who both treated the gesture as it had been intended – a little bit of a joke – and never wore the garment. Lashed up hurriedly by the magazine's designer, it was hardly a thing of beauty. Kurt, however, was disarmingly grateful – though perhaps simply because of his dire economic circumstances – and he wore it publicly on several occasions. I took this as a mildly subversive gesture of solidarity towards a magazine which had championed his band early and was rewarded for its foresight by being closed down in April 1991. Its last ever issue featured a live review of Nirvana from the Vancouver Commodore Ballroom, with a picture of Cobain in his shirt. No one else had ever considered Sounds cool. Yet now the shirt, like everything else Cobain ever endorsed, has its own cachet of desirability. A replica version was produced in 2009 by clothing company Worn Free, in both original white and liberty-taking powder blue with short sleeves. "An exclusive as worn by Kurt Cobain T-shirt," declares retro web retailer T-Shirt Grill. "Featuring the logo of classic '70/'80/early '90s music magazine Sounds, this is a real find for Nirvana and Cobain fans…"

This encapsulates the Nirvana experience in all its head-shaking madness. Of course, there are more significant matters with regard to this band, most obviously issues of life and death. Yet with *Nevermind*, both aesthetically and commercially, Nirvana altered the sound of rock music by offering a mass audience something not necessarily radical but authentically different. The conservative mainstream was now exposed to an entire substrata of US culture, one with roots in leftist politics and feminism, one that rejected orthodox power structures and was deeply suspicious towards conventional notions of success. At the most basic level, bands as diverse as Bikini Kill and The Jesus Lizard could now reach way beyond their hitherto natural constituency, people connected via the underground network of fanzines, community radio stations and venues: a genuinely alternative lifestyle.

This shift might have happened eventually anyway, though



Kurt goes walkabout at Nirvana's first UK festival appearance. At the end of the set he broke his wrist diving into Dave Grohl's drum kit.

whether the impact would have been so far-reaching is doubtful. Like all insurrections, it got co-opted and commodified almost as soon as the bottle was uncorked. But ultimately, the reason so many people still care about Nirvana is because this is a sound and a voice that speaks to millions who recognise something of themselves within. Heard today, it feels bittersweet, just as it does to know that Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic are playing together on the new Foo Fighters album, or to hear Kathleen Hanna recently explain to a New York audience the events behind her writing "Kurt smells like teen spirit" in marker pen on the wall of Kurt Cobain's Olympia apartment, before singing the song which Nirvana gave to us all. Twenty years on, it's their world now. You have to hope it's what he would have wanted.

NIRVANA'S TOURBUS, CORK TO DUBLIN: AUGUST 21, 1991

Kurt: I asked my little four-year-old sister, "What's the biggest problem in the whole world, Brianne?" And she said, "People need to concentrate more." It was so awesome! She's gonna grow up to be something really great... and it won't be the president (*laughs*). I think denying the corporate ogre is a waste of time. You should use them, rape them the way they rape you."

Great, a world full of rapists...

Kurt: At least you're fighting. I don't believe in closing off options to make your own world seem more important. (*Long pause, then a smile*) I think 'empathy' is a really nice word."

PEARL JAM! "Ed turned into an animal!" Stone Gossard on how 1991 changed him, his band and his singer...

ABOUT A BAND...

New Nirvana exhibition launches in Seattle in April. **Phil Alexander** reports...

"WHEN IT comes to Nirvana, a lot of attention gets paid to Kurt Cobain's story," begins Jacob McMurray, the senior curator at Seattle's Experience Music Project. "So what I wanted to do is to tell the story of the *band* and the wider context in which they operated."

As a result, McMurray has spent the past two years assembling the largest collection of Nirvana and grunge-related memorabilia ever gathered, all of which will make up the Experience Music Project's latest exhibition, Nirvana: Taking Punk To The Masses, which is due to open in mid-April.

"Originally, the idea was to have the 2,000 objects that we have on permanent show at the museum make up the heart of the exhibition," explains McMurray. "But as we spoke people, they offered us more and more stuff. As a result the collection is huge, but what you see is the human story behind the band and you get away from the melodrama of what happened to Kurt and concentrate on the music. And you also see them evolve from this goofy band in 1987 to being huge but in really detailed way."

McMurray has also worked closely with Nirvana bassist Krist Novoselic on the exhibition whose enthusiasm for the project has also seen him provide the forward to an accompanying book (also titled Taking Punk To The Masses: From Nowhere To Nevermind, and published by Fantagraphic), which traces the history of US punk from the '60s onwards in 100 objects.

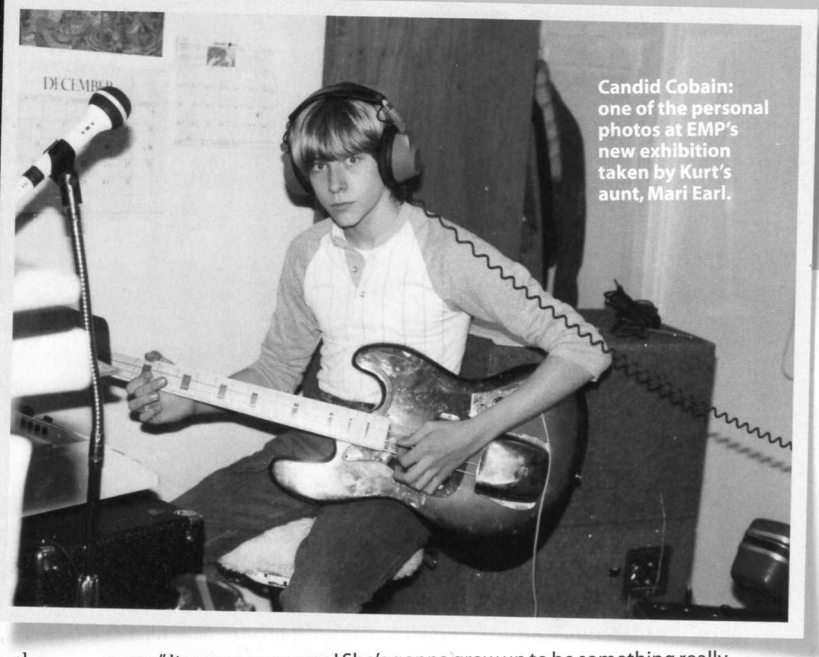
"Krist has been really supportive," says McMurray. "He lives on a 140 acre farm where he raises sheep and chickens and I went down to see him. He brought out some big plastic bins of material where he had kept 100s of photos, posters, passes, Kurt's shirts and incredible stuff. Being able to access that kind of material has made the exhibition really personal.

"Every time I visited Krist I'd also see a load of wood he'd milled from his forest so I asked him whether I could buy some. We bough 1,000 foot of elm from him and we built the cases for the exhibition from that."

Items that will be displayed in these Novoselic-sourced cabinets include Kurt's hand-written lyrics, the first 4-track on which he demoed early material, numerous instruments played by Cobain, Novoselic and Grohl, scores of unseen photographs of the band's early years (included shots of the young Kurt from 1983 published here) and the winged angel stage prop from the In Utero tour. But what is the most unusual exhibit that the public will be treated to?

"That would be Kurt's collection of potted meats," chuckles McMurray. "We're showing his collection which even includes a tin of tuna relating to Flipper [the band]. Obviously the tins are quite old now, so it was quite a sell to the head of collections but I assured her that there were no pest issues."

Nirvana: Taking Punk To The Masses opens at the Experience Music Project in Seattle on April 16, 2011 and runs until April 23, 2013. For more information visit: www.empsfm.org



Candid Cobain: one of the personal photos at EMP's new exhibition taken by Kurt's aunt, Mari Earl.

"WEIRD... INSECURE... TENSE..."

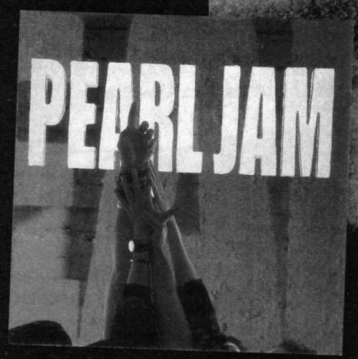
PEARL JAM'S STONE GOSSARD RELIVES THE GRUNGE NIGHTMARE OF 1991 – THE YEAR THAT MADE AND NEARLY BROKE HIS BAND... WORDS: PAUL BRANNIGAN

NO ONE PAID MUCH ATTENTION AT THE TIME, BUT ON JANUARY 11, 1992, the day Nirvana's *Nevermind* album displaced Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* from the top of the Billboard 200, another Seattle band chalked up a modest chart success of their own. For the members of Pearl Jam, having their debut single Alive break into Billboard's Hot Mainstream Rock Tracks chart at Number 32 wasn't a cause for celebration in itself, but it was significant, because it demonstrated that four months on from the release of their slow-burning debut album, *Ten*, they still possessed some kind of forward momentum.

For Stone Gossard, the song's author, Alive was more than just a breakthrough single. Originally written for the guitarist's previous band, Mother Love Bone, and performed with vocalist Andrew Wood's lyrics under the title Dollar Short at a gig at Portland's Satyricon club in August 1989, it had taken on a greater symbolic significance in the wake of Wood's fatal heroin overdose on March 19, 1990.

Gossard tweaked the arrangement in the attic of his parents' house in the summer of 1990 with guitarist Mike McCready, a friend since sixth grade, and fellow ex-Mother Love Bone/Green River alumni Jeff Ament, a Montana-born high school 'jock' turned punk bassist. All at once Alive became a healing song, a promise of rebirth and a declaration of independence.

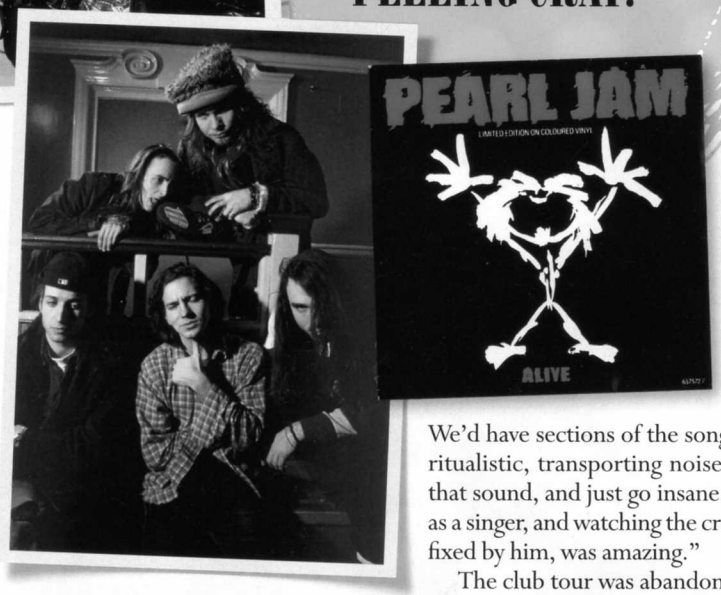
"After Andrew's passing writing songs was cathartic," says Gossard close to 20 years on from the recording sessions that spawned *Ten*. "I was really gung-ho. I didn't know how it was going to work out or what the possibilities were, but I knew that the process was driving me."



IN AUGUST 1990, THE TRIO BORROWED SOUNDGARDEN drummer Matt Cameron to demo 12 instrumental songs with producer Chris Hanzsek at Jack Endino's Reciprocal studio, planning to use the tape to land a singer and drummer for their new project. When auditions at their Galleria Potatohead rehearsal space failed to turn up suitable candidates locally, Gossard looked beyond the Emerald City, asking Mother Love Bone A&R man Michael Goldstone (who'd signed MLB to PolyGram) to pass a five-track edit of the demo to his favourite drummer, Jack Irons, who ➢

Neal Preston/Corbis

Jeff Ament and Eddie Vedder on-stage in Hollywood during the Ten tour, autumn 1991. "Ed would lose himself in sound, and just go insane," reflects guitarist Stone Gossard today.



Mother Love Bone (above, the late Andrew Wood, far left); Pearl Jam on tour in the UK; Alive, the single that eulogised Wood and established PJ as a creative force.

Tony Mottram/Retna, Charles Peterson

"IT WAS WEIRD AND STRESSFUL. THE STRESS CAME FROM BEING HUGE BUT FEELING CRAP."

Vedder had recently quit the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Already committed to his new band, Eleven, Irons declined the invitation to join Gossard's project, but promised to help out.

"I said, Well, if you know any singers, we're looking for one," Gossard recalls. "And he said, In fact, I may know a guy..."

Eddie Vedder was a camping and surfing buddy of Irons', the two having met at a Joe Strummer gig in San Diego in '89. Having previously fronted funk rockers Bad Radio, the earnest, sensitive 25-year-old was on the lookout for another band, and was receptive to hearing the demo his friend passed along after a basketball game one night in September. Listening to the cassette while working a graveyard shift behind the counter of a Chevron petrol station, Vedder was attracted to the spacious dynamics of the instrumental tracks, and began crafting inter-linked lyrics for three of the songs – Dollar Short, Agyptian Crave and Troubled Times. The following day, at his girlfriend Beth's house, he recorded his vocals on a 4-track, dubbed the songs onto a cassette copy of Merle Haggard's *Best Of The '70s & '80s* compilation, titled the cassette Momma-Son, and posted it back to Jeff Ament. When the bassist listened to the tape he saw three new titles – Alive, Once and Footsteps – and heard an unsettling mini-opera, a triptych revolving around family lies, incest, murder and imprisonment: when Gossard listened to the tape he simply heard a voice he could work with.

"My initial impression was, Well, he can sing," Gossard recalls. "He sang low, which I was excited about, because everything else I'd heard were from singers trying to be Andy. Hearing Ed was like, Thank God! So immediately we were like, OK, let's do something. So many people spend their lives rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic, wasting time waiting on the perfect situation: we thought, Don't screw around, let's just start making music."

By the end of April 1991, just seven months after Vedder first arrived in Seattle to meet his prospective bandmates, the quintet (completed by drummer Dave Krusen) had their debut album in the can. Recorded over a three-week period at London Bridge Studios in Seattle with local producer Rick Parashar, *Ten* was defiantly out-of-step with the down-tuned, gleefully gnarled grunge of Pearl Jam's peers Mudhoney, Nirvana and Tad, its meticulously buffed, soaring anthems marking the group's graduation from their punk roots, taking sonic cues instead from Led Zeppelin, The Who, Jimi Hendrix and The Doors. That said, today Stone Gossard hears the album as "over-thought, over-played and over-rocked. I was very anxious and controlling then, trying to make it all perfect, so we'd do 30 takes on a single song."

Gossard's meticulous and methodical approach to recording did little to alter the impact of both the music on *Ten* and, most significantly, the vocals. Delivered in a rich, gravel-deep baritone, Vedder's sombre, existentialist lyrics gave the album an uneasy edge and a gritty, brooding feel all of its own.

FOLLOWING ITS August 27, 1991 release, the album failed to chart, a fact of little concern to the band who, with the mindset of the punk bands who'd fired their earliest musical endeavours, viewed it as a flyer to attract a live audience. The Ten tour kicked off at Harpo's in Victoria, British Columbia on September 25. It was during this initial tour that the guitarist first noticed a transformation in his shy, quiet frontman.

"Basically, Ed turned into an animal!" Gossard laughs. "He started losing his mind. We'd have sections of the songs where it was just this chaotic, ritualistic, transporting noise, and Ed would lose himself in that sound, and just go insane. Watching him discover himself as a singer, and watching the crowd being just completely transfixed by him, was amazing."

The club tour was abandoned in mid-October as Pearl Jam were invited, alongside Smashing Pumpkins, to open a theatre tour for the Red Hot Chili Peppers. In San Diego on December 28, the singer climbed 100 feet above the stage on a lighting rig, as his bandmates and watching members of Nirvana and the Chili Peppers held their breath in genuine terror.

"That was really stupid, beyond ridiculous," Vedder admitted in 2001. "But to be honest, we were playing before Nirvana, you had to do something. Our first record was good, but theirs was better."

Three days later, following a New Year's Eve show at the Cow Palace, outside San Francisco, an industry friend walked onto Pearl Jam's tour bus to inform them that Nirvana's *Nevermind* album was destined for the top of the Billboard chart, laying down a marker for every new rock band in the country.

"From the first notes of the Nirvana record you just knew that it was absolutely going to change... something," hesitates Gossard.

The fact that Kurt Cobain seemed to take issue with Pearl Jam, telling MTV, "I've always hated their band," caused friction between both acts and weighed heavy on Vedder's shoulders. Even the more robust Gossard felt the effects of Cobain's withering slight.

"When our record started to sell too, it was weird and really stressful. For me the stress came from us being huge but feeling like you were kinda crap," he sighs. "We weren't the most fun to hang out with. Everybody was insecure and tense, it was an odd time."

Pearl Jam's anxiety was both visible and audible on their next album, 1993's *Vs*, the album being housed in a sleeve that featured a hemmed-in Montana sheep (a depiction, said Ament, of how the band themselves felt) and including a further set of lyrical ruminations from Vedder, the bile of Rats being particularly evident. A more textured album than its predecessor, *Vs* charted at Number 1 and sold a staggering 950,378 copies in the US in its first week of release, its success ironically providing the band with the creative freedom to operate on their own terms. *Ten*, however, remains the cornerstone on which Pearl Jam's career was built, viewed by most fans as a classic first outing.

"I haven't listened to *Ten* for about 20 years," confesses Gossard. "Now I'll hear a song on the radio and think, That's pretty good, but I'm much too close to it to label it a 'classic'. I guess if we're still talking about it 20 years later, though, we must have done something right."

Pearl Jam's Live On Ten Legs is out on Universal. Win copies at mojo4music.com