

putting ourselves in the hands of film-makers with such deliberate, immaculate, conscious aesthetics, that we open ourselves to violence: both on-screen, and in the way they can control and dictate our experience of the film. But when the filmmaker is conscious of this contract, and trusts the viewer to know the difference between real and represented violence, then a transformation can take place. We can be devastated, yes, but this is the site for change.

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BEEN A SON

Kurt Cobain and His Challenge to the Masculine Ideal

Rebecca Howden

Twenty years ago this April, Kurt Cobain was found lying dead in his home in Seattle, Washington, a gunshot wound to the head. He was twenty-seven years old; he left behind his wife, Courtney Love, his eighteen-month-old daughter, Frances Bean, and hundreds of thousands of flannel shirt-wearing fans, who crowded the streets for days in a sombre vigil. For the previous three years, he and his Nirvana bandmates Krist Novoselic and Dave Grohl had been the biggest rock stars in the world, defining the grunge genre and giving voice to all the angst, disillusionment and boredom of late 80s – early 90s youth. His death marked the end of something and the start of a different kind of legacy. 'I love you, I love you,' his note read.

I was five years old. It was another ten years before the word Nirvana meant anything to me, and then suddenly it meant everything. Listening to Nirvana felt like being a part of something, even if that *something* had happened a decade earlier. I was a quiet, broody 15-year-old in a world of bouncy private schoolgirls, prone to bouts of severe melancholia and a plaguing sense of never really fitting in. But when Kurt sang, 'Our little group has always been / and always will until the end', I felt a kind of belonging in a culture that will always exist; the undercurrent world of young people disenchanted with the suffocating world they feel around them. In Kurt's desperate screams and harrowing melodies I heard everything I had been feeling that I had thought made me a freak. This dirty-haired guy with an angel face and ripped jeans was someone who knew what it was like to feel ugly and displaced.

That's what Nirvana did; that's why they mattered. Despite any other criticism you could throw their way – that their songs weren't complex or advanced musically, that their music wasn't that original, that they *just weren't that that good* – they captured something that all the nerds and outcasts and freaks were feeling, and they gave it a sound. One where punk anger, metal chords and pop melodies melded together into something that felt raw, primal and real.

But there's something else about Kurt Cobain that we should remember when we think about his legacy. He was a deeply flawed guy, but he was a guy who used his time in

the spotlight to challenge cultural ideas about masculinity, advocate for the LGBT community, rage against 'isms' of all kinds, and draw attention to feminist concerns. Through his music, his interviews and his own performance of gender, he offered a different kind of rock archetype: an image of masculinity that was thoughtful, emotional, non-violent and aware of the privileges of white maleness. He didn't always get it right, but there was a sincerity in his efforts to support the feminist cause and critique the male ideal – especially in the face of mockery and conflict. Kurt didn't strive to be any woman's protector or saviour, but instead, their ally and friend. And when we think about what we want from male feminists, that's pretty freaking cool.

The ugly, painful and just plain lonely emotions Kurt expressed through his lyrics was what gave us a feeling of *knowing* him, of having someone to relate to. We can listen to lines like, 'I miss the comfort in being sad', and, 'I'm so tired I can't sleep', or, 'Cut yourself on angel hair and baby's breath', and understand exactly the frustration and agony that was brewing inside his frail body. Kurt felt everything hard, and he wasn't afraid to lay all his emotions bare in a terribly un-masculine way.

At the core of many of Kurt's internal struggles was his disassociation with the masculine ideal. 'I've always had a problem with the average macho man – they've always been a threat to me,' he once said. Growing up in Aberdeen, Washington, he always felt at odds with the gruff culture

of loggers and lumber mill workers, the jocks at school who he felt 'just wanted to fight and get laid'. His father tried to make him play baseball and go hunting; he would spend the whole time brooding silently, waiting until he could go home and listen to cassettes and draw pictures. In an environment where being male meant being aggressive and macho, this introspective blond kid – barely five foot seven, so skinny he would pile on extra layers of clothing to look bigger – was never going to fit in. He grew to look at masculinity from an outsider's perspective: 'I definitely feel closer to the female side of the human being than I do the male – or the American idea of what a male is supposed to be.'

When Nirvana and grunge were gestating in the Washington music scenes, rock music was dominated by the macho-jock image of masculinity. Sure, if he were among today's sensitive, ukulele-playing indie rock stars, Kurt would have fit right in. Or rather, with his growling vocals and penchant for smashing up his guitar at the end of a show, he would probably be seen as part of a more aggressive breed of masculinity. But in the late 80s and early 90s, metal was the dominating genre, and it was clear that no girls – and no feelings – were allowed. Although Kurt had grown up listening to metal in high school, he became uncomfortable with the sentiments it expressed, telling *Metal Express* in 1994 that the music was 'pretty sexist'. As Nirvana grew in popularity, Kurt positioned himself as the progressive, pacifist counterpart to Guns and Roses's Axl Rose, who he

criticised as a 'total sexist jerk...a fucking sexist and a racist and a homophobe'. In response, Axl called him a 'pussy'.

It surely wasn't the first time he'd been called such names. Being an emotional, passive guy with a delicate beauty to his features naturally opened Kurt up to constant taunts about being homosexual. Though he had in fact always had relationships with women, he embraced the taunts, remarking, 'I wish I were gay, just to piss off the homophobes.' As a teenager, he was arrested for spray painting 'Gay sex rules' on an Aberdeen bank and 'God is gay' on a van. Whether or not he was actually attracted to men, he remarked that he felt 'gay in spirit', and in 'All Apologies' he famously sings, 'Everyone is gay' – a childish-sounding retort, but a sentiment that in essence recalls the idea of the Kinsey scale, where sexuality is a spectrum. Sometimes he would kiss Krist or Dave on the lips, or show up in interviews, performances and video clips dolled up in a dress – a middle finger to the toxic moshpit of macho, homophobic and transphobic culture. 'Wearing a dress shows I can be as feminine as I want,' he said.

Though Kurt often said he was uncomfortable being seen as a role model, he did have some advice for boys who wanted to be something other than the brutish, football-player type often heralded as the masculine ideal. 'In the simplest terms,' he wrote in his journals:

1. Don't Rape
2. Don't be prejudiced
3. Don't be sexist
4. Love your children
5. Love your neighbour
6. Love

yourself. Don't let your opinions obstruct the aforementioned list. For boys...Remember that your older brothers cousins, uncles, and your fathers are not your role models...They come from a time when their role models told their sons to be mean to girls, to think of yourself as better and stronger and smarter than them. They also taught things like: you will grow up strong if you act tough and fight the boys who are known as nerds or geeks.

Part of what made Kurt seem so cool and attractive to girls listening to Nirvana was the genuine respect he seemed to have for women. 'Women are the only future of rock and roll,' he wrote in his journals. Kurt admired gussy, irreverent women – punk rock girls who were wild and creative and had something to say, who weren't afraid to get their hair messed up or to be nutcases about the things that enraged or enraptured them. In 'Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle', Kurt imagines the defiant actress returning from the afterlife to exact revenge for her brutal treatment as a mental patient at Western State Hospital: 'She'll come back as fire to burn all the liars / leave a blanket of ash on the ground'. In 'Been a Son', he addresses the inequality of gender expectations, telling the story of a girl held back because she 'should have been a son'.

Of course, this attitude was no doubt largely influenced by the artistic, fearless women Kurt was lucky enough to have in his life. The music scene in Olympia, where Nirvana spent much of their early years, was more female-

dominated than Seattle, and it was in those waters that riot grrrl – a subgenre of punk that encouraged women to speak out about inequality – sprung. The movement was spearheaded by prominent feminist musicians like Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna and Go Team's Tobi Vail, who Kurt and his bandmates counted among their closest friends. The feminist rants in Kurt's journals are often prefaced with things like, 'As Kathleen said...' In 'Territorial Pissings', he screams, 'Never met a wise man / if so it's a woman'.

It's fitting that Kurt found a kindred spirit in Hole singer Courtney Love – an outspoken, irrepressible woman, known for her wild outbursts and often labelled as crazy, in the way that uncontrollable women often are. She was as troubled as he was, and their relationship was volatile, but together they challenged the traditional male–female dynamic. She was the loud-mouthed, dominating one, he the quiet and passive one, who often said he wanted to quit Nirvana and play guitar in Courtney's band. At the 1992 MTV awards, Courtney taunted Axl Rose by sarcastically asking him to be Frances Bean's godfather; when he told her to, 'Shut the fuck up, bitch,' and instructed Kurt to 'shut her up', both Kurt and Courtney burst out laughing.

It's this subversive image of femininity that is celebrated in the music video for 'Smells like Teen Spirit'. The first human faces you see belong to a group of tattooed cheerleaders with anarchist symbols emblazoned on their uniforms, looking like

they had just been photocopying riot grrrl zines at recess. It's a contrast to the usual 'chicks in video clips' trope, where women are half-naked accessories, fawning mindlessly over the male musicians. As Amanda Marcotte wrote in an excellent article for *The Daily Beast*, 'For girls watching this video, it was a revelation: You could instead choose to be a badass.'

There were some issues where Kurt's discomfort with stereotypical masculinity turned into a more vehement critique. One such issue that he was particularly troubled by was rape. 'Rape is one of the most terrible crimes on earth and it happens every few minutes,' he wrote in his journals. 'The problem with groups who deal with rape is that they try to educate women about how to defend themselves. What really needs to be done is teaching men not to rape. Go to the source and start there.' For me – a young girl who was always smart and contemplative for my age, but terribly naïve about larger issues beyond my privileged immediate world – it was his vocal denouncement of gender-based violence, and his refreshing insight into how it should be dealt with, that piqued my first feminist stirrings.

It was an idea he repeated many times during interviews, and several Nirvana songs grapple directly with the subject. In 'Floyd the Barber', Kurt imagines a horrific scene where he is violently assaulted and murdered by the characters from the 1960s sitcom *The Andy Griffith Show* – a wholesome, idyllic

representation of traditional American values and class, race and gender roles. The resulting image is gruesome: 'I was shaved / Barney ties me to the chair / I can't see, I'm really scared / Floyd breathes hard, I hear a zip...' By identifying as the victim, Kurt emphasises rape as a crime about violence and domination, rather than about excessive sexual desire.

Two other famous songs, 'Polly' and 'Rape Me', also address rape in a way that is deeply disturbing. 'Polly' retells a story Kurt read in the newspaper in 1987 about a 14-year-old girl who was kidnapped coming out of a rock concert, and brutally tortured and raped in the back of a mobile home. Polly managed to gain her attacker's trust by telling him the torture was boring her, and made a daring escape when he stopped for petrol. The story itself is macabre, but Kurt made it even more so by controversially taking on the perspective of the attacker. The lyrics are chilling, delivered in his characteristic droll growl: 'Polly wants a cracker / think I should get off her first'. For many listeners, it was a shock – understandably, the song could be misinterpreted as being pro-rape. When Kurt heard that a group of boys had raped a girl while singing 'Polly', he was horrified. He denounced them in the liner notes of *Incesticide* as 'a waste of sperm and eggs', saying that he had 'a hard time carrying on knowing that plankton like that' were in his audience.

In a similar way, 'Rape Me' is a brave but clumsy track that has always made a lot of listeners uncomfortable. As a 15-year-old, it was the one song on *In Utero* I'd always skip

over on my Discman on the way to school, and even as an adult it is difficult to listen to. The lyrics, 'Rape me / rape me again', contrast unsettlingly with the characteristically sing-alongable nature of the melody. But as Kurt explained over and over: 'It's an anti-, let me repeat that, anti-rape song. It's like she's saying "Rape me, go ahead, rape me, beat me. You'll never kill me. I'll survive this."' When you take that explanation, the song is subversive and has the potential to be a powerful statement. Naturally, though, many feminists still see it as a well-intentioned gesture that missed the mark.

When I listen to Nirvana, when I flip through old commemorative editions of Rolling Stone and Uncut that I bought around the ten-year anniversary of his death, when I look up at the beautiful black and white poster of Kurt smoking and playing guitar that I still have on my wall, I'm struck by the sadness that this guy will never know how much he really meant to the world, and how lasting that impact was – even for kids like me who were too young to have been part of it at the time. He wasn't a genius; he wasn't a saint. But he was a friend to all those marginalised, outcast, or different in some way, and on the twenty-year anniversary of his passing, that's what I will be paying homage to.

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