

Nirvana has struck a chord. It may be out of tune, but it's universal. It is loud, sweaty and rings to the furthest reaches of the room. And that room is packed with beer-swilling, pot-smoking teenagers who go to school only for shop class, wear plaid shirts, have black-light Zep posters in their lockers and lean against chain-link fences, smoking cigarettes at nutrition. But also in that room are fat record execs, weaselly critics and people from all walks of life, all equally entranced by the heavy, hypnotic, beautiful, garage-punk anarchy that is Nirvana and their album, *Nevermind*. They all get it.

It's been a while since a major-label debut has aurally stimulated so many diverse ears. And so quickly. For their part, the Seattle-based trio find it kinda funny. Like they do a lot of things.

"It's becoming a bit exaggerated," says soft-spoken lead singer/guitarist Kurt Cobain of the band's buzz. "I'm looking forward to some backlash, at least in criticism, because there's so much anticipation, so much encouragement by our friends and label, that I'm afraid."

"People have called our record perfect," adds bassist Chris Novoselic. "That's bad."

Nirvana was born in 1987, when Cobain and Novoselic met through Cobain's older brother. They lived in Aberdeen, a Washington city with about 18,000 inhabitants, many of whom wear "logger-type attire—big, flared, high-water pants; suspenders; and Pendletons," according to Novoselic. (It's not a fashion statement; it's a logging community.) Though Nirvana's record-company biography claims they enjoy collaborating on burd clocks and other such woodsy enterprises, the bandmembers, like their music, are a mass of contradictions bound together with a laid-back, careless, yet thoughtful, politically correct vibe. There's a purity here, an innocence, a translation of raw emotion into music seemingly unhampered by record-label stipulations or concerns about airplay and image. Those seeds were sown on two of the band's Sub Pop releases, 1987's *Bleach* and the live EP, *Blew*.

And people have strange trips, if Nirvana's songs speak the truth. Nirvana is kind of like a skewed garage version of *Twin Peaks*—one not cast by Hollywood. "Polly," for example, is written from the point of view of a sado-masochist. "If I say 'I' in a song, it doesn't necessarily mean Kurt," clarifies the lyricist. "It's definitely an anti-rape song, but I threw a few twists in. Actually, the story is about a rapist and a girl who is picked up by the rapist. The girl is a sado-masochist, so she played along with him while he was trying to rape her, and eventually escaped because of that."

Kurt's got a literary bent, and jokes that he likes "anything that starts with a B. I think I like Burroughs best, and I'm into Bukowski and Beckett." He's a fan of William Burroughs' dense style, and admires the "cut-up" writing technique he pioneered in the '40s, calling it revolutionary.

Is anything Nirvana does revolutionary?
He's quick with a response. "Absolutely not! That's not a goal."

What is?
"Just to keep writing good songs. Anything else that comes with it is secondary."

Typical of Nirvana's musical approach, Cobain, 24, plowed headlong into rock 'n' roll. He started out as a punk fan, learning about its heyday via the old *Creem* magazine. "When Nirvana formed, I had been playing for about four years, by myself in my room. I was writing my version of what I thought punk rock was, because I hadn't heard it yet," he recalls. "When I first started, like in seventh grade, I was heavily into Led Zeppelin. It eventually turned into what I thought was my own style, but it turned out to be punk rock."

Though Nirvana's 12-song spew is certainly as punk in attitude as a major-label release has gotten lately, it's inevitable that MTV, commercialism and the like will affect Nirvana. It's possible Cobain may become, gasp!, a role model. Would he make a good one? "Oh, definitely not. Musically maybe, but not as a person. No one deserves that title. I think what most people can get out of our lyrics is that I'm just as frustrated and confused as

teous buds. "An acre of hemp can make more paper than an acre of trees," he says, waxing rapturous. "Pot for fuel, food and fiber. You can run a diesel engine off hemp-seed fiber. It burns a lot cleaner. Even the word marijuana—in the '30s, when they were outlawing it, the Feds came up with the word marijuana, 'cause it's such an evil, foreign, Spanish-sounding word, whereas before it was always called hemp here."

Nirvana's sure to be topping all sorts of charts, but Novoselic is pretty jazzed by the fact that they were on *High Times*' "Pot 100," along with folks like Mudhoney and Metallica.

If Cobain and Novoselic are the pothead philosophers, the newest member, drummer Dave Grohl, is the outgoing, wacky one of the unholy trinity. A veteran of the Seattle-based band Scream, he's found the, well, chemistry, he likes in Nirvana. "Three-pieces are really cool," he enthuses. "It's really simple. It leaves a lot of room for each of us to be as loud and obnoxious as possible. There's no lead breaks or drum solos or any of that shit."

At 22, he's the youngest member, but Grohl is as grounded as the others when it comes to the band and the music business. "Anyone who thinks they can be in a rock 'n' roll band forever is full of shit. It's time to get their head straight and realize there is life after the Scorpions. I'm only 22, and I'm still planning on going back to school and possibly getting a life someday."

This is not a life?
"This is not a life; this is the life, man. People envy me," he says, laughing wickedly. "Nah," he continues, returning to what passes for normalcy. "It's really fun, but whatever."

It's a sure bet he won't be returning to his old job. "Tower Records was hell on Earth. I might as well have just blown my head off and gone straight to hell," he ralls. "They're really bad to their employees. Really bad. It's pretty much, 'Well, I have this haircut; where can I get a job?' So everyone goes to Tower. We did an in-store there, and I told people I used to work there. They go, 'It sucked, didn't it?'"

There's always school. "I would like to go back and learn something. I dropped out of high school at the age of 17 to tour with a

NIRVANA

Though the music is the beginning and the end for Nirvana, music for music's sake still doesn't preclude serious thought. Sort of. "Kurt and I get down and have these philosophical discussions about society and people's behavior. We're like laymen philosophers. Pothead philosophers," explains Novoselic. "We dissect people's trips. I think it comes pretty natural to us."

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anyone else, so it helps break down the rock-star barriers."

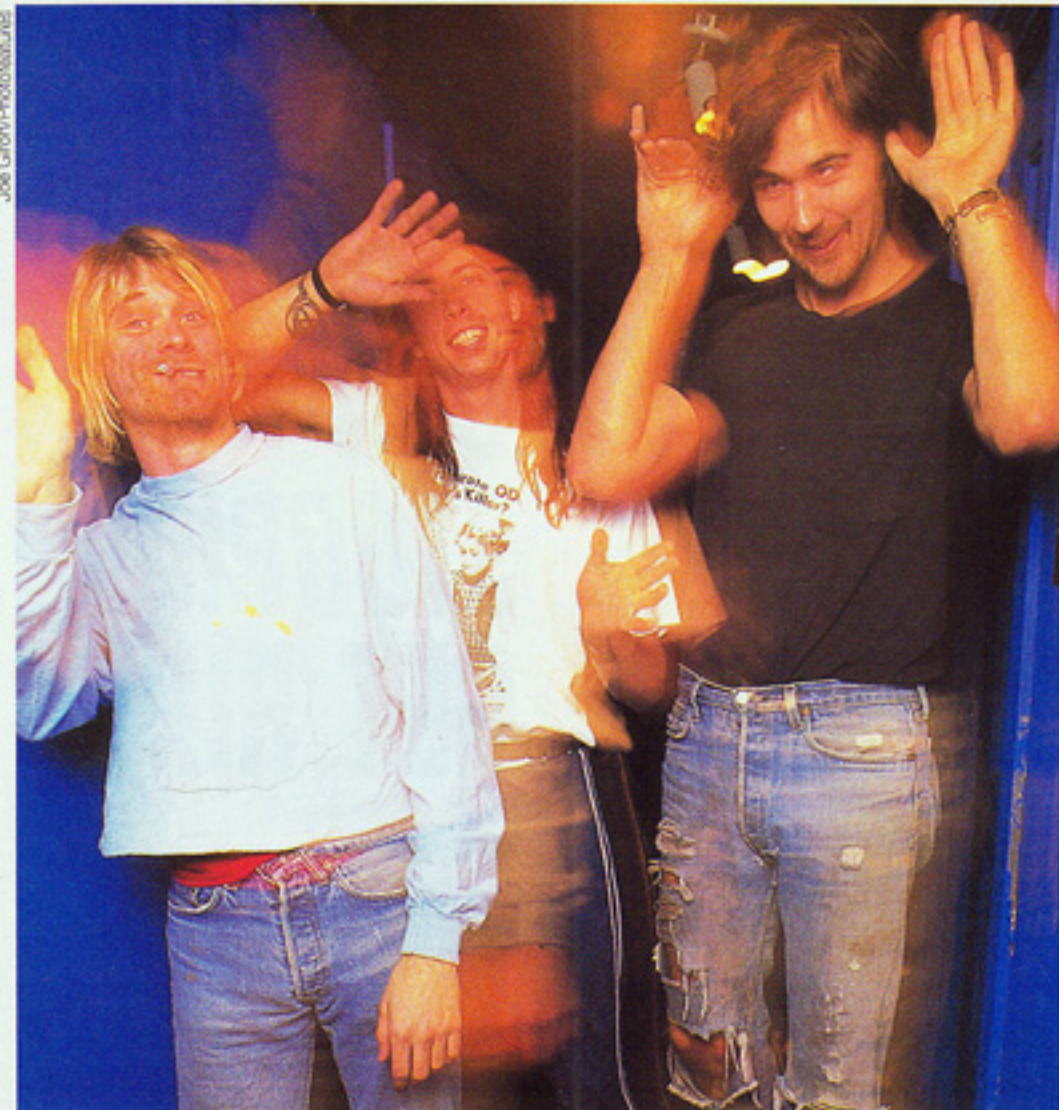
Perhaps Novoselic would be a better one to emulate? Nah. "I've been targeted as the hippie of the band," says the 6'7", 26-year-old bassist. "I'm vegetarian, have Eastern-type decor in the house," and he "does stuff like going down to the quarry not wearing anything." He's also, apparently, a fan of righ-



BY KATHERINE TURMAN

band, Scream. It's been so long since I sat down and actually learned anything. I'm more of a shit-talker. I'd rather run my mouth than read a book."

Like his bandmates, Grohl was initiated into punk somewhat circuitously, through a family visit to a cousin in Evanston, Illinois. "My cousin, Tracy, was two or three years older than me. We arrived, and my aunt Sherry



says, 'Tracy, they're here. Come downstairs.' I hear this 'chink, chink, chink,' coming down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs I see she has chains on and bondage pants and combat boots. I was like, 'Oh, she's punk.' I was totally converted. I owe it all to Tracy; Tracy Bradford."

That sort of haphazard, back-door, mellow approach to life serves the band well. Nirvana is democratic, with decisions "usually made, 'Okay, let's do this,' in under 15 minutes." The album's title, *Nevermind*, and the cover, a naked baby boy floating underwater toward a hook with money on it, were fairly easy decisions for Nirvana. But don't ask whose baby is floating so serenely across their album. They don't know. "The whole thing started with Kurt and I watching TV. We saw a special on women giving birth underwater, and there were these images of babies floating by the camera, squirming by, and it was hilarious."

Kicked-back, yep; humorous, totally; but Nirvana does give more than a passing thought to important issues. "No one, especially people our age, wants to address important issues," Cobain says, explaining the disc's title. "They'd rather say, 'Never mind, forget it.'" The song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" addresses that subject, as does, in a way, "Territorial Pissings," which Cobain sees as "an homage to the female gender—not sexually, just as people hoping they'll someday get the recognition they deserve. They're obviously less violent and more compassionate, and they understand passion. In fact, I'm

recording an album with my ex-girlfriend, who's in a band called Bikini Kill. In different ways I get more out of this kind of collaboration than I do out of this band. I'm all for all-girl bands. The female revolution is on the way." Putting their money where their mouths are, Nirvana played a pro-choice benefit in Los Angeles, which sold out instantly.

So it's time for the inevitable question. What is nirvana to Nirvana? Is it heaven? For his part, Cobain believes in "total peace after death. I think heaven would have to be total peace. I think probably the closest thing on Earth we can find to life after death is a hit of nitrous oxide. I was working as a janitor a few years ago, and we cleaned dentists' offices. We'd clean the offices really fast, and then turn off the lights and sit down with the nitrous and have an experience." He may have lost a few brain cells, but in the music biz, he ain't alone. "You can almost hear them popping away," he relates, "like pouring a bowl of Rice Krispies."

Nirvana might actually be the little unexplainable, everyday things that we so often miss—like why certain music can take you to a different place, a place of freedom and bliss. For Grohl, a brief nirvanic experience occurred on their recent club tour, which was done with a van and trailer. "It's the first van I've ever been in that had automatic window-roller-downer things," he says, semi-amazed. "It's pretty crazy, rolling down an electric window and hearing your song on the radio. Life doesn't get much better."

Now, that's Nirvana. •

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