

GILLIAN G. GAAR



# Entertain Us

THE RISE OF  
**NIRVANA**

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## ***THE RISE OF NIRVANA***

by Gillian G. Gaar

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## CHAPTER 1

# In The Pines

*“See those trees against the sky / Northwest breezes blowing by / Life’s so full of good things / Life’s so good!”*

RADIO JINGLE FOR ABERDEEN FEDERAL SAVINGS & LOAN

On February 20 1987, when Kurt Donald Cobain turned 20 years old, he was finally at a point where his life had a sense of direction. Since dropping out of high school in the spring of 1985, he’d drifted along aimlessly, briefly working various menial jobs but more often unemployed, going through periods of homelessness, crashing at the homes of various friends. The only reason he was now living in a home so small his friend Krist Novoselic referred to it as “a little half-house,” was because his mother had loaned him the money to put down a deposit and pay the first month’s rent.

Kurt had long yearned to be in a rock band, but his previous endeavors had failed to generate much interest. Now that he had a place of his own – or mostly his own, since he actually shared the house with Matt Lukin of the Melvins – he and Krist were determined to get a band going. They had roped in another friend from the Melvins circle – a drummer named Aaron Burckhard – and had begun rehearsing. Within a month of Kurt’s 20th birthday, the as-yet-unnamed band would play their first show. After years of false starts, Kurt’s career as a musician was finally getting off the ground.

It was a dream he’d had ever since he was a child, later telling his biographer, Michael Azerrad, that at age seven he “thought for sure I could be a rock star ... I thought the United States was about as big as my backyard, so it would be no problem to drive all over the place



and play in a rock band and be on the cover of magazines and stuff.” Aberdeen, Washington, seemed an unlikely place for such dreams to come true. It had been founded in 1884, when logging was the predominant industry there and in the adjacent towns of Hoquiam and Cosmopolis, all of which were nestled around a series of rivers that fed into Grays Harbor. Aberdeen’s population peaked in 1930 at just below 22,000, but the Great Depression hit the area hard, and the number of residents dropped steadily over the subsequent decades. Aberdeen still had a population of 19,000 when Cobain was born there on February 20 1967, but the timber industry was falling into decline, and the town’s boom days were long since over.

A half hour’s drive from the Pacific Coast, and 100 miles from the nearest large city, Seattle (also the largest city in Washington State), life in Aberdeen – a town just three miles long and four miles wide – was isolated. “It’s just a little bit behind the times,” says Jeff Burlingame, who grew up in Aberdeen and was later a journalist for the local newspaper, the *Daily World*. “It was a small town life, pretty much. There were a few things you could do: you could be real athletic, you could be creative and be shunned, or you could be into music and be shunned. It was a slower-paced life, and there just wasn’t as much culture. Kurt was one of those guys that was looking for culture, and it just wasn’t there.” Aberdeen was a place stuck in the past rather than looking toward the future.

As a child, Kurt nonetheless stood out among others his age due to his keen interest in art and music – something his parents, Don and Wendy, encouraged. By the age of two, a children’s harmonica and drum were among his favorite toys, and his aunt Mari Earl (Wendy’s sister) taped him on a Sony reel-to-reel deck as he sang ‘Hey Jude’ and the theme from *The Monkees* TV show at the same age. “I was so in love with The Beatles,” he told Everett True. “I would dress up like John Lennon and pretend to play guitar, and hold mini-Beatles concerts for my family when they came over.” At age four, following a trip to the park, Mari watched as her young nephew went to the piano

and banged out a rudimentary song about the trip. “I was just amazed,” she told Charles Cross. “I should have plugged in the tape recorder – it was probably his first song.” Kurt’s sister Kim, three years younger than her brother, recalls Kurt being able to pick out a song’s melody on the piano after hearing it on the radio.

Kurt was also an avid visual artist. The book *Cobain Unseen* has a photo of him in front of an easel apparently about to copy a comic book cover, and when he was older he shot short films on a Super-8 camera, some of them featuring clay figures he’d sculpted himself. But eventually music began to occupy more of his time. He’d been given a Mickey Mouse drum set at Christmas just before his eighth birthday, and played drums in the school band. Then, in 1981, he asked for and received a cheap second-hand guitar for his 14th birthday. By then he’d moved on from the pop of The Beatles and The Monkees to 70s hard-rock acts like Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Aerosmith, and Kiss, although his rock tastes were still balanced by pop. He also became a fan of new wave after seeing The B-52’s on *Saturday Night Live*, and Devo would become another favorite.

When he finally acquired a guitar, Kurt briefly took lessons from Warren Mason, who worked at Rosevear’s Music Center in Aberdeen. Mason also upgraded his instrument, getting him an Ibanez. “His main goal was to learn ‘Stairway To Heaven,’” Mason later recalled. Among the other songs Kurt learned to play were AC/DC’s ‘Back In Black,’ Queen’s ‘Another One Bites The Dust,’ and The Cars’ ‘My Best Friend’s Girl’ (which Nirvana would play at their very last show, on March 1 1994 in Munich), all indicative of his listening tastes at the time. The lessons quickly fueled his own burgeoning musical creativity. Realizing that “with power chords, you could play just about anything,” he soon began writing his own songs. “I didn’t think it was important to learn other songs,” he said, “because I just knew I wanted to start a band.”

Music also provided an escape from a troubled home life. Kurt’s parents had divorced when he was nine years old; for a time, he lived

with his mother and sister in Aberdeen, then moved in with his father, who'd moved to the town of Montesano, 11 miles east. But as each parent took up with a new partner, and Kurt reached his teens, he became withdrawn and argumentative, eventually leaving each household and being passed around among other relatives in the area. By the end of his high school years, he'd moved on to staying with friends, or wherever else he could.

His musical tastes were also beginning to veer toward punk rock. Kurt had become intrigued by punk after reading about the Sex Pistols' shambolic 1978 American tour in *Creem* magazine, later telling writer Jon Savage he'd "fantasize about how amazing it would be to hear their music and be a part of it." As it happened, New York punkers the Ramones had actually played Aberdeen on May 3 1977 at the Rocker Tavern, a bar that hosted local acts and the touring bands that occasionally dropped in between dates in Seattle and Portland, Oregon, the next largest city to the south. "Owning a live music/liquor venue in a town like Aberdeen is always an adventure," the club's owner, Stan Foreman, later noted. "It appealed to a crowd that worked hard in the mills and timber industry and played hard on the weekends."

The Ramones were an unusual choice for a venue more likely to feature mainstream touring acts like Foghat or The Guess Who. "I heard the Ramones were coming, and I think there was me and one other guy in high school who even knew who they were," says Kurdt Vanderhoof, then an aspiring guitarist. "I couldn't believe the Ramones were playing! I went down there and I couldn't get in – I was 16, I couldn't get into the bar – but I wanted to hear it. So I just hung out outside. A couple of people I knew – older brothers of some of my friends – they did get in, and they were all like: those guys suck, they were stupid!"

It was a prevalent attitude in the region, and aside from that one occasion, no other punk groups made it into Aberdeen. So Kurt was left to play what he imagined punk might sound like, telling Azerrad

his early songwriting efforts were “three chords and a lot of screaming ... like Led Zeppelin, but it was raunchy and I was trying to make it as aggressive and mean as I could.” It was a deprivation that actually worked to Kurt’s advantage, forcing him to develop his own creativity instead of simply absorbing outside influences.

By the end of 1982, Kurt had made enough progress with his songwriting that he wanted to take the next step and make a recording. During Christmas break that year he made his first known home demos at his aunt Mari’s Seattle home. Mari had begun playing guitar at age 11, and made her first public appearances at local venues where her brother Chuck’s band, The Beachcombers, was playing. She later formed a four-piece band that would play in Elks and Moose lodges, as well as hotel lounges in the region. She married and moved to the Seattle area in 1979, and for a time continued performing as a solo artist.

A shared interest in music naturally drew Kurt and Mari together, and when Kurt got his first guitar, he phoned his aunt to ask if guitar strings were put on alphabetically. When he arrived to make his demo, he was just as solicitous about learning to use her equipment. “He always was very, very careful,” she says. “And whenever he ran into any problems with the equipment he would always ask me: Aunt Mari, could you help me with this?”

Kurt used Mari’s four-track TEAC reel-to-reel deck; he also played guitar and a “funky little Sears bass” that his aunt owned (and which later sold at auction for \$43,750). But when Mari offered him the use of her Roland Compu-Rhythm drum machine, Kurt firmly turned her down. “Oh, no way,” he said. “I want to keep my music pure.” Instead, he used his pink Samsonite overnight suitcase as a makeshift drum, borrowing wooden spoons from Mari’s kitchen for drumsticks. In search of more unusual sounds for the recording, he also made use of a duck call that Mari had. “He just had to put some weird things in there,” she recalled.

Although Kurt recorded his music in the room alone, Mari and

her husband could hear it ringing throughout the house. “Most of what I remember about the songs was a lot of distortion on guitar, really, really heavy bass, and the clucky sound of the wooden spoons,” she says. “And his voice, sounding like he was mumbling under a big fluffy comforter, with some passionate screams once in awhile.” Kurt named the tape *Organized Confusion*, a phrase he also wrote on a T-shirt, but while he presumably made copies of the recording for his friends, none have surfaced to date. A month after the session, Kurt sent his aunt a letter, apologizing for making so much noise at her home. “I can’t handle the thought of invading your braincells [sic] with my chainsaw music,” he wrote. “I can’t see how you could stand it the last time I was up there.”

In the summer of 1983, Kurt made the surprising discovery that there was a real live punk-rock band in Montesano. The band was the Melvins, who had only been active for a few months, founded by Roger ‘Buzz’ Osborne. Buzz, who’d moved to Montesano at age 12 from the even smaller town of Morton, Washington, was initially a fan of hard-rock acts like Kiss, Aerosmith, Black Sabbath, and AC/DC, but had become interested in punk after some friends raved to him about a Clash show they’d seen in Seattle. Photos of acts like David Bowie and the Sex Pistols in *Creem* further piqued his interest. Unlike the many music fans who saw a clear divide between punk and hard rock/metal, Buzz was quick to pick up on the similarities between the genres. “The Sex Pistols album [*Never Mind The Bollocks*] just sounded like a logical extension of what I’d already been listening to,” he explained. “Whether it was Ted Nugent or whatever, the vocals were different, but I didn’t think the music sounded a whole lot different ... and then I gradually got into more and more punk rock type stuff solely on my own.”

Buzz had started playing guitar toward the end of his high-school years, teaching himself by listening to the few punk records he owned; he wouldn’t own an electric guitar until after he graduated. He introduced a fellow student, Mike Dillard, to punk by playing him

*Never Mind The Bollocks* (“I was going: oh, my God, this is the greatest thing I’ve ever heard!” Mike recalled), and the two began jamming together, with Mike on drums. Mike then brought in his cousin, who owned a bass, and another classmate, Matt Lukin, as a second guitarist. But as Mike’s cousin rarely showed up for jam sessions, Matt soon moved over to bass. The budding group began by playing covers of classic rock acts like The Who, Jimi Hendrix, and Cream, but quickly realized that if they wanted to have any kind of credibility they’d have to write songs of their own. “There was no future unless you were writing your own music,” Buzz said. They also needed a name, and decided on the Melvins, the first name of the manager of the Montesano Thriftway where Buzz and Mike both worked. It was both an in-joke – neither Buzz or Mike liked their boss – and deliberately enigmatic, its simplicity offering no clue as to what the band’s music might sound like. “We wanted a name that was like the Ramones,” Buzz explained.

Kurt had been given a flyer by Buzz when he was at the Thriftway one Friday that read: ‘The Them Festival. Tomorrow night in the parking lot behind Thriftway. Free live rock music.’ Curious, he returned on Saturday to find the band set up in a park-and-ride lot behind the store. “We found this outdoor plug from a building next to the parking lot,” said Mike. “We just dragged a big extension cord over there and plugged all the amps and stuff in and set up at about seven o’clock.” At the time, the Melvins played at the breakneck pace typical of punk and hardcore. Their songs were rarely longer than two minutes, with each musician playing his instrument in an all out attack, topped by Buzz’s abrasive vocals. Although the group’s first official release came out in 1984, the 2005 CD *Mangled Demos From 1983* has recordings made during this period.

Kurt was enthralled by the band. “They played faster than I ever imagined music could be played and with more energy than my Iron Maiden records could provide,” he wrote. “This was what I was looking for.” He later told journalist Gina Arnold: “When I saw them

play, it just blew me away. I was instantly a punk rocker.” He immediately became one of the band’s followers, a small group of like-minded friends who hung out at Melvins rehearsals in Montesano and were mockingly called ‘Cling-Ons’ by Buzz. (The ‘Cling-On’ nickname was first mentioned in *Come As You Are*, but future Melvins drummer Dale Crover later insisted, in journalist Mark Yarm’s book *Everybody Loves Our Town*: “Whoever says we called the people who hung out with us the Cling-Ons is completely full of shit, because I never heard anybody described as Cling-Ons.”) Kurt was already familiar with some of the band-members; he’d been on the same baseball team with Matt, and had Buzz in his art class. “He was always a good artist, drawing-wise,” Buzz said of Kurt. “[He] would draw really amazing caricatures of the teacher having horrible things done to him.”

Kurt’s entrance into the Melvins circle proved to be an invaluable step in the development of his own career. He’d finally discovered a group of friends who were as serious about music as he was. The band set a further example in their determination to do something musically different, stepping outside the ‘cover band’ status of most local acts. And four out of Nirvana’s eventual six drummers would have direct ties to the Melvins. “Nirvana changed the shape of music all over the world,” Buzz later told Jeff Burlingame. “And if it wasn’t for the Melvins, they never would have existed. Remember: No Melvins, no Nirvana.”

Buzz’s collection of punk records was also useful in introducing Kurt to music otherwise unobtainable in Aberdeen. Buzz had expanded his own knowledge of punk acts when he’d met Kurdt Vanderhoof in the fall of ’83, when both briefly attended Grays Harbor Community College. Kurdt had returned to Aberdeen after a stint in The Lewd, a Seattle-based punk band who’d relocated to San Francisco. When The Lewd fell apart, Kurdt decided to go in a more heavy metal direction and tried forming a band he wanted to call Metal Church. But when his initial attempts to start the band failed to

take off, he returned to Aberdeen. “I went back to Aberdeen just so I could live at my mom’s,” he says. “And I knew some musicians that could get into the metal thing. They couldn’t get into the punk thing, but the metal thing, they could.”

Kurd was happy to share his punk record collection with Buzz, and even sang with the band at an early Melvins show. “I was apparently the only guy that knew all those songs they were doing,” he says. “They were doing Ramones and Sex Pistols and all that kind of stuff.” Buzz described Kurd’s record collection as “a really good education. I never would have found those records; none of that stuff was ever down there.” Buzz also tracked down punk records via mail order, patiently waiting “weeks and weeks and weeks” for them to arrive. Another source was Tim Hayes, a friend who worked at DJ’s Sound City at Aberdeen’s Wishkah Mall (and later became the owner of Seattle indie record store Fallout Records), whose boss would let him take promos of non-mainstream acts the store wasn’t interested in selling: Black Flag, The Stranglers, The Cramps, The Dead Boys. Buzz in turn made compilation tapes of the records, which he then passed out to his friends, introducing the small but passionate Grays Harbor punk community to numerous other groups they would otherwise not have heard. Kurt, for one, found himself drawn to “the psychotic, weird, dirgey bands like Butthole Surfers, not for straight hardcore jocks, like Minor Threat.”

Also among the band’s fans was a six-foot-seven teen named Krist Novoselic. (Novoselic had Anglicized his birth name to ‘Chris’ at this time, but later reverted to the original spelling. This book will refer to him as ‘Krist’ throughout.) Krist Anthony Novoselic was born on May 16 1965, to Krist and Maria Novoselic. Both of his parents were originally from Croatia, and emigrated to San Pedro, California, where they met and married in 1964. (Pronounced Novo-SELL-itch; ‘Novoselic’ translates to ‘new villager’ or ‘newcomer.’)

Krist was born in the nearby town of Compton and raised in Gardena, where the family grew to include another son, Robert, and

a daughter, Diana. Krist had been “obsessed” with music since his childhood, listening to AM radio while watching his father work on the family Volkswagen. “My dad used to listen to Chuck Berry and The Rolling Stones and stuff,” he says. “He listened to Dick Dale. My dad was always cranking four-track tapes. He had this garage, it was kind of his club house, and he would paint, work on cars, just kind of dink around – like what I like to do – and listen to music. So I listened to a lot of music.” The Beatles were another big favorite. He was just as keen to find music shows on television, watching such programs as *American Bandstand*, *Soul Train*, and *Midnight Special*. By the 70s he too had moved on to hard-rock/metal acts like Black Sabbath, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin, and Kiss. (“When I was really young, like ten years old, I had all their posters and stuff,” he later admitted of the latter group, with what journalist Jerry McCulley recalled as “uncharacteristic sheepishness.”)

In 1979, the Novoselics moved to Aberdeen, where Krist felt decidedly out of place. “I was now in a different social scene, where the kids dressed different,” he later explained. “There weren’t a lot of kids in school that I could relate to with music ... Maybe I just had a little more sophisticated understanding of music. But I wasn’t very happy and my parents noticed that. And they go: oh, let’s send Krist to Croatia and see if that will work for him.”

Krist spent a year in his parents’ homeland, encountering a very different educational system than what he’d been used to at home. “School was very demanding,” he recalled. “You had to study a lot. It seemed like the standards were a lot higher in their public education.” Along with studying more orthodox subjects like history and math, there were classes like Civil Defense that touched on the harsh realities outside the schoolroom walls. “There were a couple times when the teacher brought this huge machine gun to class, and showed us how to disassemble it and put it back together.”

With his shortwave radio, Krist was able to gain exposure to the punk and new wave music beamed to the continent by the BBC.



When he returned to Aberdeen in 1980, he began making music himself. As a child, he'd taken accordion lessons, and now his mother bought him a guitar. "It just seemed like I listened to so much rock'n'roll, I just thought I'd take it up. So I started playing guitar."

Krist still felt out of place among his classmates, but kept busy in other ways, taking vocational classes in addition to his high-school coursework, as well as after-school jobs. He'd also been conscientiously taping each week's broadcast of *Your Mother Won't Like It*, the punk/new-wave show that aired on Seattle station KZOK. He finally found people who shared his musical interests when a co-worker at Aberdeen's Taco Bell introduced him to Buzz and Matt, bringing Krist into the Melvins circle. Buzz was also impressed with Krist's taste in music. "I played Krist some music, and he was one of the few people who actually got it," he said. Krist had found others in Aberdeen more resistant to new music; one friend he tried to interest in punk brushed him off, saying: "Ah, that punk-rock stuff – all it is is: 'Want to fuck my mom! Want to fuck my mom!'"

With few places available to play locally, the Melvins started landing gigs out of town, first in Olympia, the state capital, an hour's drive east from Aberdeen. But when Mike began spending more time with his girlfriend than the band, Buzz decided he needed to be replaced, although he avoided firing his friend by asking Matt to tell Mike the band was breaking up. He then asked Krist if he knew any drummers, and Krist introduced him to Dale Crover, who had also jammed with Krist's brother Robert. Buzz had previously seen Dale playing in local cover bands, "doing Iron Maiden or some crap."

"That's really all there was," Dale explained. "If you wanted to be in a band, [you'd] play with people that wanted to do high-school dances. To do these shows, it was covers of the day." Dale was excited to be asked to join the Melvins because he knew the band played the occasional show out of town. For his part, Buzz was excited about Dale's powerful drumming. "He was more into heavy metal," he said. "And then we introduced him to the punk rock thing, and a thousand

things really changed for us. We've got a top notch, number one great, amazing drummer, and that just pushed us through to what we ended up doing, which was music that's far more complicated, way more musical." A guitar player friend of Dale's, Larry Kallenbach, would also have a huge impact on the Melvins sound, teaching Buzz the drop-D tuning used on Black Sabbath's 'Into The Void,' with the low E-string tuned down a whole step to give the music a darker, heavier sound.

Once Dale joined the band, Melvins rehearsals moved to his parents' house in Aberdeen. Dale's older siblings had moved out, so there was plenty of room. "His parents were finished with raising kids and he got away with murder," said Buzz. "He was able to do whatever he wanted. The neighbors there – as long as we got done by 7pm, they didn't care. We practiced all the time." Kurt and Krist were regular attendees at the band's rehearsals. "They were open-minded weirdos," said Buzz. "As far as you can be in that environment. When there's not a lot of people that are thinking along the lines that you are, then you tend to gravitate toward the ones that are. We had a really dark sense of humor about everything. We would do all kinds of stupid things. One of our favorite things to do was to take want ads from newspapers that were six or seven months old and then call the people: are you guys selling that car? We thought stupid shit like that was hilarious." Another project was an idea for a magazine called *Sluts And Gore*, featuring "porno, biker[s], and gore." "We'd spend all this time making these stupid collages out of cutting up all these other porno mags, and [Kurt] would draw all these crazy pictures," Buzz recalled. "I wish I still had those; they were hilarious."

Krist was another happy recipient of Buzz's compilation tapes. "Buzz was kind of like this punk-rock evangelist," he remembered. "He would preach the gospel of punk rock." He was particularly impressed with the first album by San Francisco band Flipper, *Album* (aka *Generic Flipper*), although he admitted it took a few spins before he fully appreciated the band's raw sound. "[The] third time I heard

it, it just blew me away,” he said. “But at the same time *Generic Flipper* is nowhere on the radar screen ... society doesn’t recognize how important this is. Well, I recognized it, and Kurt sure did. He loved that record.” (In late 2006, Krist would join Flipper for a two-year stint.)

One of the few opportunities for local bands to play a more professional venue than a house party came on May 4 1984, when the Melvins opened for Metal Church at Aberdeen’s D&R Theatre. “That show went really, really well, surprisingly,” Kurdt recalls. “We had a lot of people show up. It was just a time when everybody was kind of excited about what was going on in music, and we happened to have some kind of a reputation already. We had just done our first recordings, and we ended up on the *Northwest Metal Fest Compilation* record.” Krist joined the Melvins during their set for a cover of Cream’s ‘Sunshine Of Your Love.’ It was probably his first public performance.

Seeing other shows necessitated travel, usually up to Seattle. “Matt had this big Impala,” Krist recalls. “It sat six comfortably: big bench in front, bench in back. We just cruised up there.” They didn’t just see punk shows; Buzz recalls seeing Van Halen as well as Black Flag. “I didn’t see a lot of difference; I thought they were both equally good,” he said. “But I appreciated the punk rock stuff more because it was more intimate and that’s what drove me away from arena rock eventually. Punk rock spoke to me more, and the intimacy and the message and things of that nature. And then I realized – this was really a big eye opener – that the world is bigger than the world that I’d been in, and that there’s a lot more cool things going on that the people that I was around had no idea about.”

At the time, no clubs in Seattle regularly hosted punk shows, so concerts were held in a variety of unlikely venues, including the hall of one building originally built to cater to Seattle’s Norwegian community (hence its original name, the Norway Center), and later rented by a conservation group called The Mountaineers. It was here that Kurt first saw Black Flag on April 27 1984, later claiming to have sold his record collection in order to buy a ticket. The tour was in

support of Black Flag's *My War* album, which is especially notable for the three songs on side two ('Nothing Left Inside,' 'Three Nights,' and 'Scream'), on which the band moved from their usual fast pace to a slower grind. It was a stylistic change that Dale cites as the inspiration for the Melvins to pursue a similar direction.

The show made an equally strong impression on Kurt. "I just remember him saying: that's exactly what I want to do," Buzz later recalled. A picture of Kurt later published in *Spin* magazine revealed a flyer from the show, also mentioning support act Meat Puppets, posted on his bedroom wall. If you'd told the grinning boy in the photo, sitting on his unmade bed, holding a guitar plastered with stickers, that in a decade Meat Puppets would be opening for his own band, he wouldn't have believed you.

Music offered the one bright spot in Kurt's life; beyond that, his future prospects seemed increasingly dim. He dropped out of high school in the spring of 1985 and soon found himself working as a janitor at the very school he'd just left. Most of his janitorial jobs were short term, as were his living arrangements; he was evicted from one apartment, and asked to leave two other friends' homes when he overstayed his welcome. The only area in which he showed any sense of discipline was music. He jammed with the Melvins when he could, although there are conflicting stories about whether or not he was ever seriously considered as a potential fourth member. But he was a regular at all their shows, sometimes helping to carry in their gear in order to get in for free, and drawing a Kiss mural on the side of the band's van. He also played with anyone who was willing, although he had so far been unable to get a band together that moved beyond the practice room.

"We had several 'joke' bands, as we called them then, but our main focus was on the Melvins, who were starting to get an Olympia/Seattle-based following," says Greg Hokanson, another friend who hung out at Melvins rehearsals. The shortlived band that Kurt put together with Hokanson and Dale Crover certainly had a

joke name – Fecal Matter – and only managed to play one show. The group made a few primitive recordings on a boom box, with some simple overdubbing, recording a backing track and then playing it on a stereo while Kurt sang into the boom box.

Hokanson recalls the band working through a number of covers: the Ramones song ‘Carbana Not Glue,’ the blues number ‘Nobody’s Fault But Mine’ (which Led Zeppelin had recorded on *Presence*), songs by Jimi Hendrix and The Monkees, and “an Elvis song.” Kurt also worked on original material. Another friend, Eric Shillinger, recalls them playing such songs as ‘Venereal Girl,’ a raunchy parody of Madonna’s ‘Material Girl’; ‘Let’s Roll, Diamond Dave,’ (“Let’s roll” being the catchphrase of a friend’s father); and ‘Quad,’ which attacked the pretentiousness of a friend who put the numerals ‘IV’ after his last name. Another song of the period, ‘Ode To Beau,’ was a country & western number about a fellow student who’d killed himself.

Although Kurt didn’t make the cut as a Melvin, Buzz was nonetheless impressed with his efforts to do something different. “I remember him showing me things and I thought: wow,” he said. “There’s a certain magic to putting two simple chords together in a way that sounds nice to someone. He had the ability to do that. Now, was he the greatest singer? No. Was he the greatest guitar player? No. But he has something that people who are better singers and better guitar players don’t have – the ability to put something together in an interesting way. That kind of technical ability of being able to master full guitar playing and be an amazing singer has nothing to do with writing music, you know. Nothing.”

In the spring of 1986, Kurt decided to more formally document Fecal Matter’s work, and Matt drove him and Dale back to aunt Mari’s house to record another demo. (“Since I wasn’t as good a drummer as Dale I didn’t do any recording with them,” Hokanson explains.) This session was previously thought to have happened in December 1985, but Mari remembers it taking place around Easter. “They set up in my

music room and they'd just crank it up!" she recalls. "It was loud. They would put down the music tracks first, then he'd put the headphones on and all you could hear was Kurt Cobain's voice screaming through the house! It was pretty wild. My husband and I, we'd just look at each other and smile and go: you think we should close the window so the neighbors don't hear? So they don't think we're beating him or something!" Mari also noted how Kurt had improved as a musician since his last visit. "He was much more confident in his vocals," she observed. "And he was more progressed in knowing what he wanted the thing to sound like."

Kurt and Dale recorded a total of 13 of Kurt's songs, with Kurt on guitar and vocals, Dale on bass and drums. They survive as the earliest known examples of Kurt's songwriting. The music clearly reveals his influences: fast, thrashing punk, and the slower chug of hard rock. Vocally, he's still searching for a style. Having not yet found that familiar, rasping drawl, he growls and shouts, he sings in a clipped British accent, he speaks in a mumbling drone, as in the verses of 'Downer,' a rumination on the blandness of society. ("I think I may have grown a bit as a lyricist since writing this," he later sardonically observed of the song.)

"It sounded *exactly* like Black Flag," Kurt later recalled of the Fecal Matter material. "Totally abrasive, fast, punk music. There were some Nirvana elements, some slower songs, even then. And some heavy, Black Sabbath-influenced stuff. I can't deny Black Sabbath. Or Black Flag."

Lyrically, the songs took broad, sarcastic swipes at mainstream society (one of them also attacked people for latching onto to punk simply because it's "trendy"), but Mari also noted a more disturbing thread when she looked at Kurt's notebook of lyrics while he and Dale were taking a break. "I was looking through the lyrics, and I found this one song that kind of bothered me a little bit because I remember the name of it being 'Seaside Suicide,'" she explained. "It just kind of left me with the feeling that possibly Kurt had tried to commit suicide or had wanted to or had had thoughts about it – something. That

kind of bothered me. And yet, I never talked to him about it. How I wish I had, you know?" This song appears not to have been recorded at the session. Nor did Kurt discuss his songs with his aunt. "As far as really sharing his music with me, and asking what I thought, he really didn't do that," she says. "Kurt was very sensitive about the stuff that he wrote and he was very careful about who he let hear it. He didn't really like someone just poking fun at it. And being a songwriter myself, I can understand that."

One song in particular stands out: 'Spank Thru.' Of all the Fecal Matter songs, it veers the closest toward pop, with an atypically jangling guitar opening. Kurt's voice drones during the verses, going up an octave in the chorus, which he sings with a mock sincerity appropriate for a parody of a love song with references to masturbation. The song is the only one from the Fecal Matter session to be officially released thus far (on the 2005 compilation *Sliver: The Best Of The Box*), although a number of the other songs have surfaced on the collector's circuit in either partial or complete form. 'Spank Thru' and 'Downer' would later be re-recorded, and 'Annorexorcist' would also be performed live for a brief period, while lyrics from other numbers would resurface in the Nirvana songs 'If You Must' and 'Even In His Youth.'

Kurt named the tape *Illiteracy Will Prevail* and immediately dubbed off copies for his friends, with a handmade illustration on the J-card of a pile of excrement surrounded by flies. He spelled his name correctly on the inside of the J-card, but on the outside credited himself as 'Kurdt = Guitar/Mouth.' It was the first time he was known to have spelled his name in this fashion, and he was credited as 'Kurdt' on all future record releases until the 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' single, as well as in interviews and press releases. "I have no real reason," he later told Azerrad about the various name spellings he used over the years. "I just didn't bother spelling it correctly. I didn't care." Of course, there was already another Aberdonian who spelled his name the same way: Metal Church's Kurdt Vanderhoof.

Dale was later dismissive of the recording, telling writer Greg Prato, in *Grunge Is Dead*: “People talk about that demo like it’s this unreleased thing that must be amazing. But not really. A crappy four-track demo.” At the time, Buzz thought otherwise, as he wrote in a letter to Krist and his girlfriend Shelli Dilly, who had moved to Arizona in early 1986: “Ko-bain and Dale went up to his aunt’s house and made a tape of some of Kurt’s songs. I was pretty impressed. Some of his songs are *real* killer!, despite the poor sound quality. It seems good, but could’ve been better with a little more time. Nevertheless it’s still a *great* demo. I think he could have some kind of future in music if he keeps at it.” The letter was dated April 16 1986 – more proof that the session happened in 1986, not 1985. Had the session been in December 1985, Kurt would undoubtedly have given Krist a tape then. And the letter makes it clear Buzz is talking about a recent event, not something from four months ago, when Krist was still living in Aberdeen. Kurt’s aunt says the session happened around Easter, which in 1986 was on March 30 – two-and-a-half weeks before Buzz wrote his letter.

Kurt continued practicing the Fecal Matter songs with Buzz and Mike Dillard, but the project quickly fell apart. Instead, Kurt ended up making his public debut in a one-off trio called Brown Towel (a name misspelled as ‘Brown Cow’ on some posters) on May 3 1986, at GESCCO (Greater Evergreen Student Community Cooperative Organization), a venue affiliated with The Evergreen State College in Olympia. Kurt recited his lyrics and poetry as Buzz and Dale backed him. Although he later confessed that his nervousness made him get “totally wasted” on wine before the performance, he acquitted himself well, “just jumping around the stage reading, singing, and screaming,” as Dale later put it – a fair description of Kurt’s performing style in Nirvana as well. “I had a splendid time,” Kurt later told the fanzine *Matt Lukin’s Legs* about the gig, describing the music as “Buzz’s Minutemen-styled tunes.”

The show also helped distinguish Kurt from the other Melvins

followers. Slim Moon and Dylan Carlson, who both lived in Olympia and were then in the band Nisqually Delta Podunk Nightmare, had previously seen Kurt at shows and parties. At one such gathering, as Slim and Dylan were outside talking about abrasive punk band Big Black, Kurt had coolly announced “I like Big Black” as he walked by. “And he said it in this voice, like it was so loaded with meaning,” Slim remembered. “It was like: I know you think I’m just a redneck who hangs out with the Melvins, but I know about Big Black. ... It was, like, this challenge. Like: I’m not who you think I am. There’s more to me than you think, than what you’ve written me off as.” (Kurt would later attend Big Black’s final show, at the Georgetown Steamplant in Seattle on August 11 1987; the band’s singer and guitarist, Steve Albini, would later produce Nirvana’s *In Utero*.) Now, at the Melvins show, they were surprised to find Kurt had talent in his own right; afterward, Dylan went up to Kurt and told him it was one of the best performances he’d ever seen.

Although Kurt’s attempts to take his music further were still stymied by his inability to find any compatible musical collaborators, he was now nonetheless focused on pursuing a musical career, having gone so far as to ask his aunt Mari for advice on how to put together a demo and dealing with song publishers. She sent him a copy of *Making It With Music: Kenny Rogers’ Guide To The Music Business*. “That says to me, and should say to others, that he was definitely looking to get into the music business and that was the direction he was heading at that particular time of his life,” she later recalled. “So many people think that Kurt was like: oh no, I don’t care if I’m ever famous. I don’t believe that at all. I don’t believe that for a moment. I think, in every musician, there’s a part of us that wants to be up on that big stage and wants to be on MTV. And he definitely had stuff inside of him that he felt was worthy of getting out there and making it. He thought he could do it, and so I sent him that book.”

Kurt would finally find the musical partner he’d been looking for in Krist Novoselic, who returned to Aberdeen in the latter half of

1986, having spent only a few months in Phoenix. (There were fewer job opportunities than expected, and Krist and Shelli found Arizona too hot and plagued by “all those Republicans.”) Kurt and Krist had previously jammed together as teenagers and were both in a Melvins side-project band called the Stiff Woodies, a name inspired by the name of a Seattle punk band, Limp Richerds. (Krist’s stage name in the group was ‘Phil Atio.’) “That band was just like a revolving door, just messing around,” says Krist. “Just having fun and drinking alcohol and jumping around and screaming. Making noise.” Kurt played both guitar and drums in the group, and Krist occasionally took a turn as a singer. A surviving recording of a session at KAOS, Evergreen’s radio station, has him handling the lead vocal on the uptempo ‘Breakdance Boogie,’ enthusiastically urging the listener to “Party down! Party up!”

At the time, Krist’s musical ambitions were less serious than Kurt’s. “I was having fun, having kicks,” he says. “I always wanted to be in a band, but there was nobody I could be in a band with.” Now that he’d returned to Aberdeen, Kurt gave Krist a copy of the Fecal Matter tape. “I was dinking around the house listening to it, and I said: hey, this is really good,” he recalls. “I really liked it. I thought it was cool; it was good melodies and interesting.” He was especially impressed with ‘Spank Thru.’ “It’s a well put together song. It’s got a hook. It’s kind of unique. It sounds different. And I went: yeah, let’s do it.”

“We kind of found each other,” Krist says of his musical alliance with Kurt. “Just out of necessity. Just to play music together. Of all the people that were hanging out with the Melvins, there was just something. We were drawn to each other. It made sense.” The hard times were far from over, but the band that would become Nirvana was on its way.



# Acknowledgements

I first typed Nirvana's name in March 1988, when I was preparing calendar listings for the April 1988 issue of *The Rocket* magazine (The Vogue: 'Sub Pop with Nirvana 4/24'), little suspecting that writing about the band would occupy much of my future work for the next quarter of a century. During that time I've interviewed many people about the Northwest music scene, Nirvana, and other bands, giving me a wealth of information to draw from.

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When I interviewed Krist Novoselic in 1997, he mentioned that a Nirvana boxed set was being planned, and I said I'd like to work on it. Had he not said yes, my life (and this book) would've taken quite a different path. Thanks, Krist.

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This book is dedicated to William Kennedy, who went above and beyond the call of duty in helping with the transcription. And to the memories of Charles Lawson (a victim of the American health care system) and his beloved cat Mingus. I miss them both.

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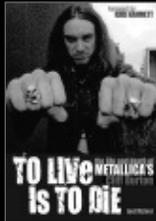
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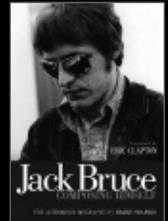
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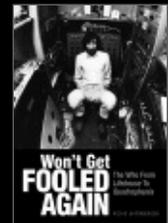
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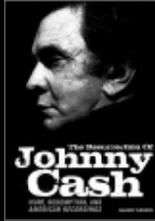
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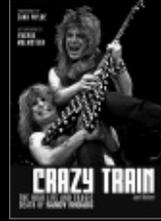
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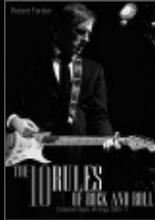
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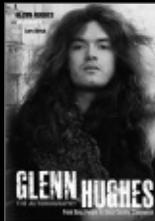
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