

Arts and Entertainment

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work and incredible polish and ability. The best that noisier bands like Nirvana could hope for was marginal success on a major label.

Nirvana's debut on Geffen Records, "Nevermind" (1991), completely redefined the boundaries of commercial music. Selling 10 million copies worldwide will do that. "Nevermind" topped the charts with soaring anthems and vulnerable lyrics that gave first voice to a frustrated generation. Cobain's uncompromising songwriting, framed by Andy Wallace's shiny mixes (later dissed by Cobain as a sell-out), helped "Nevermind" appeal to fans all across the rock spectrum, from pop to punk, alternative

to heavy metal.

Overnight, the Seattle scene became a media rage. The charts flew open to a series of promising Seattle bands (Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Soundgarden) and lame soundalikes (Stone Temple Pilots). Grunge fashion moved into department stores and companies cranked out products and advertising for the Nirvana generation at breakneck speed. Cobain himself became a caricature in the media parade he hated so intensely. The details are well-documented: his roller-coaster ride with celebrity and success, his fight with the band over royalties for "Nevermind," his descent with wife Courtney Love into

heroin use and addiction, an unknown stomach ailment that left him howling in pain, an intensifying self-loathing and destructiveness that left him suicidal.

During the mix-down of Nirvana's final album, bureaucratic voices within Geffen Records attacked the band's effort as grating and anti-commercial. What finally emerged was one of the finest creative moments of the '90s. Rougher and deeper than "Nevermind," "In Utero" (1993) unblinkingly combined sheer noise with a quieter melodic touch, and showed Cobain beginning to face the truth of his creative gift. It seemed that his music, if

not his troubled life, might soon turn in the direction of the reflective "Dumb" and "All Apologies."

Movements often disappear or veer off into irrelevance without their founding spirit. Even with his life crumbling around him, Kurt Cobain's voice still had the power to keep his audience above the hype and noise of the commercial machine he unwittingly gave new life to. The day after his body was found, Cobain's mother was quoted as saying, "Now he's gone and joined that stupid club." Musically leaderless, a generation is left behind with the stupid game of imagining what might have been.