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Smells Like Superstardom

It's not my fault. I never wanted the fame.

Kurt Cobain.

Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the genre-defining grunge band Nirvana, had a complicated relationship with the fame he had. With Nirvana's success, Cobain was elevated to the voice of Generation X and his relatable background gave Generation X their icon. However, Cobain sought to eschew his iconic status as he felt most comfortable in the background. Instead of promoting himself through his fame, he would try to promote other underground bands, and social issues like women's rights and critique homophobia.

This paper offers a critical appraisal of Cobain's rise to superstardom in order to better make sense of who he was and what he represented. Within this context, this paper specifically addresses his upbringing that shaped his character, Cobain's complex relationship with fame, and his real or perceived burden of being a generational icon.

Cobain had many issues in his life like depression, anger, and the feeling of being abandoned by his family. He showed these issues through the emotions he put forth in his songs by singing in an aggressive, angry tone that related to his fans and people of his generation.

The significance of Cobain's relationship with superstardom is important because it shows that superstardom can affect people in a variety of ways. There are some celebrities that are able to live with their fame, whereas some other ones let their fame get to their heads. Instead of being self-centered, he gave a spotlight to underreported issues including sexual assault, drug

addiction, toxic masculinity, and depression. This relationship is also significant decades later because of our culture's reliance on recording every minute of a celebrity's life for the whole world to see.

To understand the relationship that Cobain had with his superstardom, the paper is structured in three parts. The first part is about the early start of Cobain, grunge, and Nirvana. In this section, I will discuss how Cobain's childhood and upbringing affected him, the grunge culture, and how Nirvana began with a difficult start. In addition, I will also discuss how the grunge sound was related to Cobain's emotions. The second section will be about the relationship he had with his fame. In this section, I will explain how celebrities feel about their fame. Then I will mention how Cobain felt being considered a sellout and how he promoted local and underground bands instead. Furthermore, I will include how he despised the bigger songs he created. The last section will deal with Cobain as a cultural icon. In this section I will discuss how he fit into the Generation X's angst, and why people from Generation X saw him as the voice of their generation, and how he carried that burden.

EARLY BEGINNINGS

Kurt Cobain's childhood was one of the most prominent stages for how he was beginning to see himself and the way he thought of the world. During his childhood, the events that affected him the most were: the divorce of his parents, being unable to connect with students at school, the musical genre of punk, and his hometown of Aberdeen, Washington.

The divorce of his parents made Cobain a recluse and caused his joyous personality to a pessimistic attitude. Before the divorce, Cobain was an outgoing, happy child. For instance, his mother, Wendy O'Connor said that "He got up every day with such joy that there was another day to be had,... When [he'd] go downtown to the stores, he would sing to people" (Azerrad b,

para 47). However, after the divorce he became “very inward – he just held everything. He became real shy” (Azerrad b, para 49). The divorce also led him to live with his father and his stepfamily which made Cobain feel that he was missing out on a real family (*Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*). Because of this familial change he was unable to make personal connections within his own family. The divorce negatively impacted him and gave him unresolved anger that he would deal with throughout the rest of his life and also be an inspiration of how he channeled the music he would be famous for. The divorce of his parents showed Cobain the loss of love that he received.

Now that he became antisocial after his parents’ divorce, he had negative experiences with other students during high school. Since he attained a rebellious attitude in high school he believed that there were no other teenagers he was able to talk to. For instance, “[He] felt so different, and so crazy that people just left [him] alone” (Kurt Cobain on Identity). This rejection of other classmates further increased the hopelessness that he felt after his parents’ divorce. This led him to hang out with other teenagers who felt the same way that he did and they would smoke marijuana (*Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*). However, he soon left that group and developed friendships with women rather than men because he realized that he was “incompatible” with other men and related to what women had to suffer through, like sexism (Blank on Blank). This would lead him to raising awareness about women’s issues when he became famous. During this time, he also developed a friendship with a gay friend who he became close to, however he had to stop the friendship because of his mother. “It was real devastating because finally [he] found a male friend who [he] actually hugged and was affectionate too, and [they] talked about a lot of things... [He] couldn't hang out with him anymore” (Kurt Cobain on Identity). The absence of his best friend was significant for Cobain

because he lost one person that made it easy for him to connect to and become friends with. Since Cobain thought that the other students were outcasting him it was easier for him to connect to his gay friend because they were both rejected by the high school population.

Next, his hometown of Aberdeen, Washington affected him to develop his progressive views. His hometown was known for the high suicide rates and not being a good place to live in during the time Cobain was growing up. There were also many people, like his mother, that were homophobic around the town (Azerrad b, para 36). This can be the reason why Cobain kissed his band member, Krist Novoselic on the lips during the closing credits of *Saturday Night Live* where they were musical performers for the show. They wanted to anger the people from their hometown and show that they are wrong because of their homophobic views. The town was also filled with people who were focused on “macho male sexual stories as a highlight of all conversation” (*Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*). The community's culture that Cobain was living in, like as the music he listened to when he was younger, was stressing about the triumphs of men and the exploits of women as sexual conquests rather than equals. Because of how they treated the minority groups of the community, he would begin to despise his hometown.

However, when he discovered the musical genre of punk rock he was able to use it as a coping mechanism. When he was younger he listened to bands like Led Zeppelin or Aerosmith because he liked the melodies but he stopped because of their focus on sex and other male focused themes (Kurt Cobain on Identity). Since he felt that women were being objectified in the songs he stopped listening to that type of music and started listening to punk rock in high school. He was able to relate to the emotion and the message that was found in the genre. For instance, “It expressed the way [he] felt socially, politically, and just everything. It was the anger that [he] felt, the alienation” (Kurt Cobain on Identity). The messages that the punk rock bands were

sending was of individuality and how a person fits in a society that is against them (Kristiansen 13). Since the focus was on the outsider it was easier for Cobain to be immersed in the genre and enjoy it without having to be judged because of who he was. He would later use the punk rock genre as an influence for how he wrote and sang when he was the frontman and guitarist of Nirvana by using the emotion and amplitude of his voice to highlight the issues that he cared about. The punk rock aesthetic helped develop his music with Nirvana which became a grunge sound.

Grunge was an important vehicle for Cobain to relay the messages he wanted to talk about. It was created in the state of Washington in the mid 1980's by the rock band The Melvins. They played in a different tempo than the other bands of the time period and created distorted instrumental sounds. Grunge was also a combination of genres of punk rock and metal. The focus of the genre was to let the audience know about issues that are not mentioned (McManus para 4) rather than to create popular music for the celebrity of the band. Since grunge focused on social issues, Cobain would be able to express what he was feeling at that time. This would have been more difficult if he chose a different genre that was focused on the repetitive nature.

In addition, the popularity of grunge in the early 1990's made Seattle prominent in the music scene, which the residents in the city loathed. With bands like Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam, and many others, people wanted to know more about the city where they developed their sound. However, when newspapers came into Seattle to get to know about the grunge culture, the grunge artists responded back with a fictitious "Grunge Speak" (Cross 52) to confuse newspaper reporters. This showed that the people who were in the grunge culture were being rebellious and did not need the press since the press did not pay attention to them before the genre became a national sensation. This act of the grunge culture also relates to Cobain's

personality since he was against being the popular person and rather do his own thing. The artists being uncooperative with the media was a way for the grunge artists to choose to be isolated with the rest of the music scene rather than fame that they would have received if they answered the newspaper's questions.

One of the important facets of the grunge genre that made it different than other musical genres is the sound and the emotion that was evoked. The sound was characterized as mostly using guitar feedback and emphasis on the drums which made it sound unnerving to the listener. Duff McKagan, bassist of Guns N' Roses, and a Seattle native described the sound to the happenings of the city. "It's *grungy*. People are into rock & roll and into noise, and they're building airplanes all the time, and there's a lot of noise, and there's rain and musty garages. Musty garages create a certain noise" (Azerad a, para 23). The grunge sound related to the aesthetics of the city and in turn people were able to hear the noise that the city created which was unknown to the musical sphere at that time. Since the sound was distinct that became an important characteristic of grunge music. Furthermore, since most of the songs were sung in a guttural tone, there was a pure emotional output that other genres did not have.

The grunge genre, just like punk, had mostly independent bands and lived by the philosophy of the underground. The bands were mostly locally famous, like the Melvins. There was also one recording company that signed the bands who was Sub-Pop which was located in the state of Washington. According to Cobain, since there were only a limited amount of bands, a small community formed between the bands and they would help each other when a band needed it (Soulsby 44). This helped with building solidarity within the community and make it an exclusive genre. This was different from popular genres like pop because pop stars were only focused on themselves rather than helping other artists. Because the grunge bands were only

popular in the state they were also part of the underground scene where their music was difficult to be found by the general public.

Grunge was also responsible for is the specific fashion that people would begin to wear. The stereotypical grunge apparel was “Flannel and leatherette, the boho-hobo staples of second-hand attire, are the basics of a non fashion statement” (Marin para 8). Since the clothes that they wore was the antithesis of what the rock stars from previous enjoyed about the glitz and glamour which showed with their clothing. The irony of the non-fashion statement was that it became a fashion trend for the grunge fans to dress and for the general public to follow suit. Furthermore, this also helped with the attitude of being grunge since they wanted to feel a sense of detachment with fame and become alienated because they were seen as homeless instead of famous rockstars.

Nirvana had some growing pains when the band was created. The band was created by Kurt Cobain, and Krist Novoselic who would play the bass guitar, and had help with the drums from Dale Crover from The Melvins. Later they would meet Chad Channing, their drummer before Dave Grohl and guitarist Jason Everman (Soulsby 43). Channing and Everman would later be kicked out by the band shortly after the band signed a record deal from Sub-Pop. There was a lot of moving parts before they settled on becoming a three man band since they had to choose who would be beneficial for them to keep in the band. In addition, since they became an official three piece band it was helpful for them to have an equal amount of creative worth in the band. According to drummer Dave Grohl, they were “not into ‘control’, [they're] into ‘creative’, but [he doesn't] think there's such thing as ‘creative control’” (Soulsby 170). The equality in the band and not having one person have all the control made it easier for them to come up with

music in the long term, which was different in other bands since there was usually one person that became the prominent figure of the band.

There was also various band name changes that Nirvana went through when they were beginning the band before they ended up with Nirvana. Cobain stated that “Chris and [him had] been in *too many* various forms of Nirvana for the past four years under such names as Skid Row, Ying Yang Valvesteen, Pen Cap Chew, Bliss, Ted Ed and Fred, and other unmentionables” (Soulsby 38). The reason why they had various name changes was because it became a “gimmick” (Soulsby 12) for them and to get them noticed by the bookers and get hired for gigs. However, when they wanted to branch out and become a legit band, they chose their band name to be Nirvana. One of the reasons why Cobain chose the name was not because of the religious significance, but because it felt natural and aligned to the band (Soulsby 180). However, there was another band with the same name that was popular in the 1960’s and Nirvana had to settle in court to keep the name when Nirvana became popular (Gaar 2).

Nirvana was both in the underground scene and also in the mainstream. Their first album titled *Bleach* was recorded by Sub-Pop. They toured to promote the album across the country, but it was still considered underground because of the low mainstream success. However, they reached the mainstream when their sophomore album *Nevermind* debuted in the music charts. The meteoric rise of the album can be credited of the exposure the band received from a bigger record company. Kurt Cobain stated that “This success is entirely due to the fact that now, with Geffen, it’s much easier to find our records, unlike in the past with Sub Pop” (Soulsby 206). Now that they reached the mainstream, the *Bleach* album received a bigger push and became a success. The album helped them become more in demand and etched the band members as prominent rock stars.

SUPERSTARDOM

Fame and superstardom has affected celebrities differently with them either having a positive or negative experience. In addition to how the celebrity feels about the fame, there is usually a typical journey that the celebrity takes throughout their fame. First the celebrity feels a “love/hate towards the experience; [secondly,] an addiction phase where behavior is directed solely towards the goal of remaining famous; [thirdly,] an acceptance phase, requiring a permanent change in everyday life routines; and finally an adaptation phase, where new behaviors are developed in response to life changes involved in being famous” (Rockwell Giles 184). This can make it difficult for celebrities to upkeep their fame and still be in the public eye. Cobain had a troubled relationship with his new fame and made the first stage of the journey public since he mostly disliked the fame that he received from being in Nirvana. The way he showed it was by how he acted in the media, how he was during concerts, and promoting the underground bands rather than his own band.

One of the three issues that Cobain used his celebrity on to focus on was the awareness of women’s issues, specifically rape that women had to overcome. The songs “Rape Me” and “Polly” had themes about rape and were in the points of view of the victim and the perpetrator, respectively. Cobain had a personal connection with rape victims and felt strongly about discussing an issue of this magnitude. “I think there’s too much sexism in the world. About 90 per cent of the women I know have raped one way or another. It’s crazy. I find women to be very compassionate human beings. Polly is about a girl who was raped” (Soulsby 290). Cobain had a strong relationship with women since he was able to relate to them when he was young and see that society did not empower women to achieve as much as men, and the struggles that they women had to deal with. This is why one of the reasons Cobain wrote “Rape Me” was to help

rape victims regain their confidence back. He stated that women can think “So rape me, do it, get it over with. Because you're gonna get it worse” (Fricke para 56).

Cobain was also a proponent of gay rights and spreading awareness of the issues that gay people faced at that time. He was interviewed by *The Advocate*, which is a prominent LGBT magazine and attended a No-on-Nine benefit concert since the ballot measure would have limited LGBT rights (Soulsby 384). The admiration that he had for the community was because they were alone just like he felt when he was younger and were seen as underdogs to a society that did not want them. He asserted that “[he] think it’s pretty obvious that [they’re] against the homophobes and the sexists and the racists” (Soulsby 382). A message was also imprinted in the *Insecticide* liner notes where we did not want people to support the band if they had these views of bigotry (Soulsby 374).

Cobain was against the idea of masculinity and tried to change gender norms. For example, he kissed Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic in the closing credits of *Saturday Night Live* to spite the homophobes that lived in his hometown (Soulsby 374). He also wore dresses for the “In Bloom” music video since he did not take himself seriously and just be himself. He was unable, nor did he want to conform to the idea of the typical masculine man that made his life terrible when he was in high school. This also helped with championing for the LGBT population. He also dressed this way because he did not like how masculinity was important in society during the time. The other way he changed gender norms is with his relationship with Hole singer Courtney Love because they had a cooperative say in the decisions that they made as a family.

In addition, Cobain was known for his antics during the concerts when he performed. For example, he would break the guitars, amps and other equipment after the concert was over

(IMatrixSooClose). The reason he did this was because of his “insecurity” (Soulsby 269) and making the climax of the show eventful. It was also a fun activity for them to do because they were able to be wild and dangerous. This was also different from other bands since it was uncommon for other bands to destroy their equipment since it was costly to do so. The act of destroying equipment was also a callback to their punk rock influences and being against authority since it showed the repressed anger that they had bottled up inside. The guitar breaking did not stop when they were underground since they kept on doing it when they became famous. This was significant because they had to pay out of pocket after they broke the guitars (Soulsby 133).

Cobain had a negative relationship with the media when he became famous because they were making his life worse. He did not like doing interviews because of the stress involved and the unhappiness that was created during the media interviews. The newspapers or magazines would misconstrue his words and made it seem like he said something else than his intentional meaning. For example, they were “blowing off a lot of interviews lately, which has been pissing off our record company, but that is the only thing we can do to keep ourselves sane... I don’t want any more promotion” (Soulsby 237). Furthermore, the press would usually misconstrue his words and made it seem like he said something else than his intentional meaning, especially in the lyrics of his songs since it was sung mostly in the first person. His view on the media was prominent because he would rather stop talking to the press which would help be able to keep his sanity rather than talk to them for promotions to a concert or a new album which was uncommon with other bands or celebrities. Other bands and celebrities would love to have the promotion that Cobain and Nirvana had since it was free and gives them exposure that they didn’t have before.

Cobain also faced with his superstardom is the dilemma of being a sellout and still being street credible. This affected Cobain since he came from a punk background that emphasized being yourself and not becoming a corporate subordinate to the big record labels. Since Nirvana left Sub-Pop to sign a record deal with David Geffen Company (DGC) Records it was difficult for the band to maintain its underground roots. With DGC's help, *Nevermind* became a commercial success which further alienated Nirvana with their underground fans. In a *Rolling Stone* interview he stated that "I don't blame the average seventeen-year-old punk-rock kid for calling me a sellout... I understand that. And maybe when they grow up a little bit, they'll realize there's more things to life than living out your rock & roll identity so righteously" (Azerad b para 6). As Cobain was becoming older he saw that it was becoming more difficult to be in the underground because the mainstream gave him and Nirvana more opportunities to be successful, like making more money. However, there were ways that he kept his underground roots and that was by promoting obscure bands in his concerts. An example of this was in Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged in New York* acoustic performance. The setlist included songs from artists like the Meat Puppets, Lead Belly, and The Vaselines who were not known to mainstream audiences, and it included lesser known songs from Nirvana's discography, like "On A Plain". His focus on singing these songs was for Nirvana to become a vehicle to expose fans who only knew them from their *Nevermind* album to different bands that they would not typically listen to.

The last way he dealt with his superstardom was by trying to expose all the songs that he wrote and not just popular songs of the band, specifically "Smells Like Teen Spirit". The hype that the song created made it become overexposed and hampered other songs that he felt deserved the same recognition. "The reason it gets a big reaction is people have seen it on MTV a million times. It's been pounded into their brains. But I think there are so many other songs that

I've written that are as good, if not better, than that song, like 'Drain You.' That's definitely as good as 'Teen Spirit.' I love the lyrics, and I never get tired of playing it. Maybe if it was as big as 'Teen Spirit,' I wouldn't like it as much" (Fricke para 19). They would stop playing the song in concerts because it was played all the time and Grohl liked playing the song but it was upsetting to him that people only knew that Nirvana song (Weber). The band did not want to be defined by the popularity of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" because then they were pigeonholed and marked as known only for that song.

GENERATION X HERO

Cobain's popularity with his young audience made him become the voice of Generation X (Gen Xers). There is no exact date of the generation that begins or ends, but it is composed of people that were born around the 1960's to the 1970's (Ortner 415). This generation was defined by their angst toward society, rebellious nature, and not having the stereotypical family which made people related to Cobain because he experienced these issues. However, just like accepting his superstardom, it was difficult for Cobain to accept the fact that he was the voice of his generation.

One way Cobain connected with Gen Xers because his parents were divorced. For example, when his parents divorced when he was nine, there was more than one million divorces occurring and the same number of children that were being affected by this termination (Holtz 27). This amount of children being affected by divorce was the biggest seen in any generation beforehand. Cobain also wrote about his familial woes in the song "Sliver" where he sang about wanting to be home with his parents. This loss of a stereotypical family structure was a new experience that these kids had to deal with. Furthermore, the lack of having involved parents made this generation of kids grow up faster by engaging in riskier behavior and feeling angst.

Gen Xers had societal angst and felt isolated because their future was uncertain. Gen Xers from the lower middle class did not receive the same opportunities and ended up with “McJobs” where the jobs didn’t require them to their full capabilities and Gen Xers who were in the upper class that had anxiety about the future of becoming successful (Ortner 421). The Gen Xers were able to relate to Cobain because the use of his primal screams during his songs was able to be a method of them to release their anxiety. In addition, some of the songs that he wrote like “Lounge Act” where he sings “Don't tell me what I wanna hear, afraid of never knowing fear” (Nirvana) describes the angst that the generation was feeling. The media also propagated the idea of how Cobain related to Gen Xers because of how he sung and his general attitude. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Cobain said that “[he] still [saw] stuff, descriptions of rock stars in some magazine — 'Sting, the environmental guy,' and 'Kurt Cobain, the whiny, complaining, neurotic, bitchy guy who hates everything, hates rock stardom, hates his life’” (Fricke 5). This “hate” that Cobain had towards the media was from the fact that the media labeled him as something that he was not without getting to know why Cobain acted the way he did.

The next characteristic that Gen Xers were able to relate with Cobain was because Gen Xers participated in dangerous activities. The activities included elevator surfing, “tracking” which involved jumping away from the train tracks at the last minute, and laying on a road with oncoming traffic (Holtz 73-74). The reason they did this was because it was fun, but also it showed who was the bravest person of the group. Cobain related to these risk takers by crowd surfing and destroying musical equipment. The risk of doing these activities are not equal to what Gen Xers were doing, but it was still dangerous because of the high likelihood of injuries. Also, the aggression and the raw emotion that Cobain showed during the destruction of the

equipment was relatable to the crowd that felt that they were not being respected by the older generation.

However, Cobain opposed being the hero of Generation X. He felt that the burden was unwarranted since he felt unqualified to be a spokesperson. For example, in an interview he stated that “I’m a spokesman for *myself*... it just so happens that there’s a bunch of people that are concerned with what I have to say. I find that frightening at times because I’m just as confused as most people. I don’t have the answers for anything. I don’t want to be a fucking spokesperson” (Azerrad b, para 25). He was speaking on behalf of himself and the issues he faced and was not intending for people to give him the label of being the voice. Just like his fame, he was not accepting the role that was given to him by the public. The irony of this rejection is that it was the same rejection that Gen Xers felt how they fit in their society.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the way that Cobain communicated his refusal of his fame began in his childhood when he felt rejected, such as his progressive views of homosexuality, racism, and appreciation of feminism. His apathetic attitude towards his celebrity was a new way of coping with fame that was not seen before since most celebrities liked their newfound fame. This attitude also helped him become the face of his generation which he avoided being referred to as.

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