"Nevermind"—Nirvana (1991)
Added to the National Registry: 2004
Essay by Josh Shepperd (guest post)*

Original album cover   *Original label*   *Nirvana*

Few would debate the contention that Nirvana's "Nevermind" is one of the ten most influential and beloved rock 'n' roll albums of the 1990s. A case could almost certainly be made that it's one of the ten most influential and beloved rock 'n' roll albums of all time. It's a dark, funny, emotive, disturbing, powerful, unpredictable, and *fun* album that's been described in so many bombastic framings--from the exemplification of the temperament of Generation X to a redefinition in rock 'n 'roll sound--that it's almost impossible to qualify all of the factors that orbit its legacy. One way to canonize an album of such profound reception and wide reaching influence is to consider its broader cultural moment, and receive "Nevermind" as both a paradigm of its genre and as an artifact reflective of its scene, influences, and shifts within the industry itself.

How unexpected of a success was "Nevermind"? It hit #1 on January 11th, 1992, one week after Michael Jackson's album "Dangerous," just to enter into a struggle over the top spot with Garth Brook's "Ropin' the Wind" for three months. The "Wayne's World" soundtrack unseated both albums in April, and by the summer Billy Ray Cyrus was dominating the charts. The previous year, top rock albums included (also legendary performances from) Metallica, Guns N' Roses, and Van Halen. In a way Nirvana's flagship album continued with the rock tradition of competing with R&B, rap, easy listening, and country for listening dominance through power chords, but in other ways it felt exciting and new. Something had clearly shifted from the previous five years in tone, sound, and world outlook, and "Nevermind" came to stand for all of those changes for millions of listeners.

Hard hair rock, a digestible synthesis of metal shredding, country music-influenced balladry, and performance of hyper-masculinity, had dominated the late 1980s. Hair rock sang about stock themes like sex, fighting, and cars, while hinting at shifts in gender performance by toying with sexually ambiguous glam-inspired photo shoots. But the music, by and large, reinforced expressive hierarchies. On paper, not much changed

between hard rock's continued dominance in 1991 and grunge's meteoric rise in 1992. Grunge was still hard, male-dominated, pulled from the playbook of three power chords, verse/chorus/verse with breaks for short leads, and featured songs that usually finished in three to four minutes. But grunge carried a more progressive politic, with fewer sexual theatrics, lyrics sensitive to gender and orientation rights, and frank discussion of topics like depression and alienation. Spare Metallica's contemplative, virtuosic metal, grunge seemed to be offering a genuine "alternative" to the mainstream rock trends of the late 1980s, focusing on existential topics such as sadness, hope, and the uncanny. While grunge songs still sometimes moved at a balladeer pace, its artists elided simple themes, and openly, publicly, introspected for a previously untapped audience. "Nevermind" further came on to the scene pulling from a repository of bands not typically played by Top 40 radio, and spoke to audiences immersed in the punk and indie scenes.

Nirvana wasn't the first indie-style band to sign to a major label--Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon famously recommended them to Geffen Records at a moment in which the music industry began to mine independent labels for talent. Nirvana was picked up for international distribution after warm reception to their excellent Sub Pop album "Bleach," along with a plethora of unconventional artists--from Daniel Johnston to the Butthole Surfers and Boredoms. Early indie rock innovators such as Sonic Youth, My Bloody Valentine, and The Jesus and Mary Chain were finding beauty in dissonance, unexpected chord progressions, and droll anti-establishment lyrics amplified by new strategies in studio production. Armed with Butch Vig's lush, full, crystal production values, supported by huge financial backing, a newly insurgent "120 Minutes" with an eager 18-35 year old demographic audience, and Kurt Cobain's jagged and memorable poetry, "Nevermind's" songwriting, production, lyrics, and national distribution wing catapulted them into the national eye. Fellow Northwest bands Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Mudhoney, and the Screaming Trees broke shortly after, on the heels of historically good albums, providing rock writers with a convenient and packagable space, sound, and place to describe a cultural moment. Nirvana hadn't just released a terrific album, they became the locus of a new critical market for creativity and commerce. According to the press, Seattle, home of coffee and rain, had gestated a scene as strange as "Twin Peaks," with safe yet edgy music that featured emotionally complex songwriting that one could play for one's kids. Previous to 1992, bands such as Mudhoney and Soundgarden were far more established than Nirvana. But "Nevermind" gave listeners a sense that something was happening similar to the British Invasion. Seattle was a well-packaged scene and a sound that one could learn about and follow. Grunge became synonymous with a group of similarly aged songwriters, with shared backgrounds and mutual influences.

Indeed one of the great virtues of Nirvana's public face was to what extent they credited and praised their influences. By Cobain's own account, he was writing loud and murky music in the tradition of Pacific Northwest legends The Wipers, and Phoenix rockers Meat Puppets. The Wipers, in particular 1983's "Over the Edge," had built a precedent for a thick, muddy punk power chord sound, with leads comprised of more power chords, few tempo changes but many changes in volume. "Nevermind" can be listened to as a loyal addition to the Wipers tradition, but Kurt Cobain's influences were also diverse, and became a point of discussion for fans. Was that demo a Vaselines cover? Has Kurt

been listening to the Kinks? Did he just name drop post-punk feminist band The Raincoats in an interview? Nirvana's sound was resolutely Pacific Northwest, but it paid full respect to the pleasure principle of pop, while aligning with indie and power punk aesthetics.

"Nevermind's" legend is in some ways indicated by its aesthetic legacy. One could imagine a canonizing piece for the National Recording Registry that instills just how big "Nevermind" got merely by listing its countless number of imitators. Nirvana, for their part, didn't attempt to remake "Nevermind" with their follow up, "In Utero," moving instead more in the direction of pop hooks, and adjusting their sound to Steve Albini's clean, drum-forward production.

But ultimately, and I think this will ring true for many of us who grew up in the 1990s, "Nevermind" deserves to be remembered for its songs, and the way that Cobain's songwriting left an imprint on our collective experience. Who could forget the way that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" curated dissonance with space? How many of us were comforted by the sardonic and self-deprecating lyrics and pop hooks in "Lithium"? "Nevermind" sprung from a place, a scene, series of influences, production culture, and changes in the music industry, to become a legendary album. At the same time it materialized seemingly from the ether with a coherent sound, ruminative angst-y mood, and discourse with an audience who the band seemed to anticipate would be in on an inside joke: that the world's not funny, but it can be navigated through an aesthetic life. This was a profound sentiment for a cassette tape, one that continues to resonate through the annals of cultural memory…

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