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**S»U»B**  
**CULTURE**



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## **Introduction**

One of the most revolutionary bands of the twentieth century was Nirvana and their album *Nevermind* was a staple of the grunge music scene movement. Grunge fed into the popular lexicon, that Seattle became fashionable or why thousands of teenagers around the world put their shirts over their pants, wear lumberjack shirts, and hang a guitar over their shoulder and form a band.

In order to reach the conclusion that this album caused the above mentioned we will use the music charts of the principal countries of the world: USA, UK, France, Australia, Canada, Germany... This is how it is going to be demonstrated in order to explain how a culture was envisioned and a genre of music like Grunge became a popular and well placed to Seattle grunge scene on the map.

Therefore, this is not a paper to tell Nirvana's story, but the mention of some important events of this band will be necessary. This research will focus on everything surrounding the recording of *Nevermind* (before, during and after it).

## **Before *Nevermind***

Everything began in Olympia, Washington in 1979 when Bruce Pavitt felt the need to share musical information with other people of what it takes to create a music magazine which was titled *Subterranean Pop*<sup>1</sup>. He called the magazine *Subterranean Pop* because his theory was that *"there was a tremendous amount of music happening in America that had the potential to be very popular. But because the distribution channels and the media channels were shut off, those acts had to work their way out of the ghetto. So it was an underground culture that had the potential to be very popular. Nirvana was the ultimate example of that"*.<sup>2</sup>

In the second issue of the magazine, which was already under the name of Sub Pop, the magazine published about new bands while alternating using cassettes which included some of the songs from the groups mentioned. They totally published nine issues: six magazines and three cassettes. It is in 1986 when Bruce Pavitt moved to Seattle and met Jonathan Poneman and together they created the record label Sub Pop Records. Pavitt and Poneman, determined to launch the label Sub Pop, sought a bank loan and invested \$ 40,000 to launch the label which would later become the sound driver of Seattle. As a result *Dry As A Bone* by Green River, produced by Jack Endino and *Hunted Down* by Soundgarden, both albums released by Sub Pop, hit stores in June 1987.

Few months' later Nirvana members, Kurt Cobain, Krist Novoselic and Dale Crover made a demo recording of ten tracks to be submitted to the Sub Pop. Nirvana's first single was recorded in 1988 and produced by Jack Endino. It consisted of two songs: *"Love Buzz"* a version of the Dutch group Shocking Blue song and *"Big Cheese"*. In the drums was already the new third member of Nirvana Chad Channing replacing Dale Crover. Only 1,000 copies were released in both songs.

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<sup>1</sup> The first issue came out in spring 1980

<sup>2</sup> Extract from *Everybody loves our town: an oral history of grunge* by Mark Yarm page 97.

The exclusivity was deliberate: Sub Pop used the CD to open his club of limited edition singles. To consolidate its reputation as elite seal, their moniker increased when the company released their own shirts with the word “loser” stamped on the front, at a time when the rest of the country revered the yuppie winner stereotype.

With Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman as executives, Jack Endino as producer, and Charles Peterson as photographer, the four were responsible for the Sub Pop style and left their mark on *Sub Pop 200*<sup>3</sup>, a compilation of three EPs, accompanied by a 20-page booklet with photos of Peterson. Those pictures showed that new look based on hair disheveled and lumberjack shirts which definitely represented standard elements of Seattle image. Someone, probably Poneman, baptized this movement with the generic name of Grunge: fudge. What Kurt Cobain later defined as follows: “*it means playing whatever you want as sloopy as you want as long as it’s good and has passion*”<sup>4</sup>

Nirvana’s contribution to the collection was the strange and unusual “*Spank Through*”. Critics ignored it and focused on the more aggressive contributions of Tad, Mudhoney and Soundgarden.

Nirvana, shortly after entering the studio to record *Bleach*, his first album ended production faster than expected. It only took Nirvana three days to produce it but the cost was astounding with the final budget being \$ 606, 17.

A copy of *Sub Pop 200* came into the hands of the most important and veteran critic of the British music scene, John Peel<sup>5</sup>, who was responsible of promoting the CD in the BBC and his column in The Observer newspaper. Sooner the British media interest shifted from Manchester to Seattle, and music critic Everett True of Melody Maker<sup>6</sup> traveled to Seattle through the invitation of Poneman and Pavitt.

The result was an enthusiastic report<sup>7</sup> about Sub Pop that was devoted to the Seattle scene as the musical event of the decade. However, while in Britain the music press was full of praise for the Seattle sound, the truth is that few people in the city itself had heard of Mudhoney, and no one mentioned Nirvana in the local press. Soundgarden was the only one with some relative popularity.

Elsewhere in yankee geography groups like Butthole Surfers and Sonic Youth had passed the hardcore style and invented indie rock: simple musical structures, arrangements, innovations, artistic experiments, unpredictable results. Sonic Youth passionately supported Sub Pop movement and to demonstrate it they took Mudhoney as support in his British tour of 1989.

In financial terms, Sub Pop was not at its best. Stamp revenues were minimal, despite the promotion in the press and the European reputation of their groups. In the summer of 1989, they had not even sold 10,000 copies of any of their albums in U.S.A. In addition, they had notable distribution problems since they had to face with major

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<sup>3</sup> Picture of *Sub Pop 200*. Figure number 1. Appendix page 8

<sup>4</sup> Extract of the book *Classic albums: Nevermind, Nirvana* by Jim Berkenstadt y Charles R. Cross

<sup>5</sup> John Peel’s biography. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/johnpeel/biography/>

<sup>6</sup> The UK publication that became the weekly magazine of the world's oldest music. It was created in 1926 as a magazine aimed at musicians, in 2000 was merged with his "rival" New Musical Express

<sup>7</sup> Melody Maker report of Sub Pop. Figure number 2. Appendix page 9

labels. In some cities it was easier to find Sub Pop records imported from Europe than authentic American ones. Anyway the commercial interest Seattle new bands was undoubtedly growing up.

Polygram<sup>8</sup> signed Mother Love Bone, A&M<sup>9</sup> with Soundgarden, and Sony with Alice in Chains. Geffen<sup>10</sup>, who had tried to sign the last two bands and had been rejected by both, he was desperate to hunt “their” Grunge group. The first Geffen seal “alternative” album was Sonic Youth's *Goo* and it entered in the top 100 best selling albums in the U.S.A.: cheap and profitable.

David Geffen was eager to repeat the move, and take his piece of cake from that delicious alternative feast that was being cooked. It was the leader of Sonic Youth, Kim Gordon, who suggested Geffen that they should sign for a band almost then unknown by comparing them to the former three: Nirvana.

Nirvana members were unhappy with Sub Pop, and even though major labels had been interested in Nirvana as far back as *Bleach*, the band was not eager to go down that path again. At that point in time the band members were not interested in switching to the major label world. Years of frustration with Sub Pop had changed their attitude toward the music industry politics. “*the accounting was screwed up, and we didn't get paid for a long time*” Kurt Cobain told Big O magazine's Paddy Chng in 1992 “*The distribution was inadequate too. We had kids coming up to us saying they couldn't find our records anywhere. That's when we decided that we should leave Sub Pop*”<sup>11</sup>.

And so, Nirvana received a contract for two albums with Geffen and an advance of one quarter of a million dollars while Sub Pop pocketed \$ 70,000 as compensation for breaking its contract with the group, and a three percent in addition on the rights of real Nirvana records and the right to print Sub Pop logo on the band's albums.

In the music world, 1990 was a memorable year for the Seattle music scene: Soundgarden was nominated for the Grammy Awards, the video of Alice in Chains come to be part of the MTV programming and all the A&Rs<sup>12</sup> of the big multinational record labels were literally trying to hunt Seattle bands.

### **During Nevermind**

In March 1990, Nirvana began recording their second album, *Nevermind* produced by Butch Vig at Smart Studios. Two days after, Nirvana drummer Chad Channing, left the band and was replaced for a short period by Dan Peters, who was a member of Mudhoney and who finally returned to Mudhoney again.

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<sup>8</sup> Record label that Philips created in 1972 for its own musical interests. In 1998, was sold to Seagram and absorbed into Universal Music Group.

<sup>9</sup> In 1998, A & M Records was acquired by Seagrams and included in Universal Music Group. Later, he joined Interscope Records and Interscope Geffen to form Reords-Geffen-A & M.

<sup>10</sup> In 1980 David Geffen, who had founded Asylum Records in the '70s, he founded a new record label called Geffen Records. Geffen Records I turn DGC Records, a subsidiary brand that focused on alternative rock. In 1998 he was absorbed by Universal Music Group and DGC Records disappeared.

<sup>11</sup> Extract from “*Classic rock albums: Nevermind- Nirvana*” by Jim Berkenstadt & Charles Cross. Page 50

<sup>12</sup> Artists & Repertoire

Dave Grohl, who had previously played with Brain, Damage and Scream, became finally the new Nirvana drummer.

After completing the recording sessions, Butch Vig and the rest of the band began to mix the album. But after a few days, both Butch Vig and Nirvana realized that they were not satisfied with the outcomes of the mixes. As a result, they decided to take someone to oversee the mixing process and Geffen Records provided a list of possible options. Among them there were Scott Litt (known for his work with R.E.M.) and Ed Stasium (also known for his work with The Smithereens). Nevertheless, Nirvana chose Andy Wallace, who co-produced Slayer's 1990 album *"Seasons in the Abyss"*. Andy Wallace introduced several special effects and adjusted the sounds of drums, completing approximately a mix per day<sup>13</sup>.

### **After Nevermind**

On September 24, 1991, the *Nevermind* album was released. Later on Kurt Cobain was interviewed by Billboard magazine because the *Nevermind* album position was 144 on the Billboard Charts. The predictions on the part of the band were modest. Kurt Cobain confessed Billboard magazine: *"I expected our core audience to buy our record within the first couple of weeks and then the sales would decline after that. But after I realized that we were on MTV, I suspected we would sell a lot more"*<sup>14</sup>. In fact, the album's initial sales were continuously rising instead of decline for almost a year. Six months after its launching, the album was sold out four more times in a week than it was during the first week.

The bass player of Nirvana Krist Novoselic said: *"whatever happened was surely out of our control"* Cobain claimed that the record took off without a big-budget advertising campaign: *"there was definitely no big million dollar investment in promotion behind this record at all"*.

Cobain did not exaggerate at all: the promotional efforts were modest by any standard. Despite that Geffen had ambitious expectations for the album; they did only obtain a few small advertising in some selective alternative publications. The press promotion was low key by the standards of a major label. *"When we got advance cassettes...I did a selected mailing to maybe three hundred critics"* remembers Lisa Gladfelter-Bell, the Geffen publicist assigned to *Nevermind*. *"I targeted publications like Rolling stone and Spin, with long times that were geared towards music, and then the Seattle area magazines like The Rocket [...] I remember, from day one, getting good feedback"*<sup>15</sup>.

Gladfelter-Bell was really surprised by the first critics and she encouraged the company to increase the fixed quantity of copies; those were supposed to be initially 25.000 copies, but in order to response to press and radio demand the copies rose up to 46.251 in the United States and 35.000 in the UK.

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<sup>13</sup> Information from *"Come as you are: The story of Nirvana"* by Michael Azerrad. Page 174

<sup>14</sup> Extract from *"Classic rock albums: Nevermind- Nirvana"* by Jim Berkenstadt & Charles Cross. Page 112 & 113

<sup>15</sup> Extract from *"Classic rock albums: Nevermind - Nirvana"* by Jim Berkenstadt & Charles Cross. Page 112 & 113

## Nevermind consequences

### – Musicians

Eddie Vedder (singer & guitarist of Pearl Jam): “Everyone was excited about the songs. There was something about those songs –not only was there an immediate connection, but you didn’t get sick of them. It was an incredible bit of playing, songwriting, and focus of energy-having it seem natural”<sup>16</sup>.

Van Conner (bass player of Screaming Trees): “woow, this is really good man. You guys are going to sell... 100.000 records...you guys will be bigger than Hüsker Dü”<sup>17</sup>

Jerry Cantrell (guitarist of Alice in Chains): “I thought it was amazing. It was a serious step up from the record before. It was like three or four steps up”<sup>18</sup>

Duff McKagan (bass player of Guns N’ roses): “Nevermind was Kick-ass”<sup>19</sup>

### – Publications & Critics

According to Jim Berkenstadt & Charles Cross in “Classic rock albums: Nevermind - Nirvana”: “Nevermind did an amazing thing: the album and single “Smell like teen spirit” started to cross over, from MTV to commercial radio, from college radio to top 40, from top 40 to album oriented rock radio. It became something extremely rare in the music industry: a cross-format phenomenon, hitting all the current major rock categories including modern rock, hard rock, album rock, and college radio”<sup>20</sup>.

Rolling Stone publication did rank Nirvana’s *Nevermind* 17<sup>th</sup> in the top 500 albums ever<sup>21</sup>.

Spin magazine conducted an interview to Nirvana after *Nevermind* was launched: “Heaven can’t wait. Some Things in Life are Beyond explanation. Lucky for you, the Triumphant bliss rock combo Nirvana Is not one of them”.<sup>22</sup>

Few months after, the album was already in the top 20 of most countries:

- a) USA (01/11/1992): *Nevermind* album was number 1<sup>23</sup> leaving Michael Jackson's out.
- b) Eurochart Hot 100 (8/5/92): *Nevermind* album was number 10<sup>24</sup>
- c) Australia (1992): *Nevermind* album was number 2 during two weeks<sup>25</sup>
- d) Germany (27/01/92): *Nevermind* album was number 3 during nine weeks<sup>26</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Information from “The oral history of Seattle rock music: grunge is dead” by Greg Patro. Page 274

<sup>17</sup> Information from “The oral history of Seattle rock music: grunge is dead” by Greg Patro. Page 273

Hüsker Dü fue un influyente grupo de punk, hardcore y rock alternativo de los años 1980, originario de Estados Unidos. Su disco *New Day Rising* aparece en la lista de los 500 Mejores Discos de la Historia según la revista Rolling Stone, en el puesto 495: <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-19691231/new-day-rising-h-252-sker-d-252-19691231>

<sup>18</sup> Information from “The oral history of Seattle rock music: grunge is dead” by Greg Patro. Page 274

<sup>19</sup> Information from “The oral history of Seattle rock music: grunge is dead” by Greg Patro. Page 274

<sup>20</sup> Extract from “Classic rock albums: Nevermind - Nirvana” by Jim Berkenstadt & Charles Cross. Page 125

<sup>21</sup> Nirvana ranking in the Rolling Stone <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-19691231/nevermind-nirvana-19691231>

<sup>22</sup> Spin Magazine January 1992. Page 32. Figure 3. Appendix page 10

[http://books.google.be/books?id=PioTMOUFQPMC&printsec=frontcover&hl=es&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.be/books?id=PioTMOUFQPMC&printsec=frontcover&hl=es&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>23</sup> Album *Nevermind* number 1 in the USA. Retrieved from <http://www.billboard.com/#/artist/nirvana/chart-history/5316?f=305&g=Albums>

<sup>24</sup> Billboard 30 May 1992. Page 42.

<sup>25</sup> Australian-charts.com. Retrieved from <http://australian-charts.com/showitem.asp?interpret=Nirvana&titel=Nevermind&cat=a>

- e) France (05.16.92): *Nevermind* album was number 1<sup>27</sup>
- f) Canada (7/3/92): *Nevermind* album was number 1<sup>28</sup>
- g) UK (1992): *Nevermind* album was number 7<sup>29</sup>
- h) Belgium (16/11/1991) *Nevermind* album was number 3<sup>30</sup>

– **An interview related to the topic: Nothink band**<sup>31</sup>

Nothink<sup>32</sup> Spanish band was interviewed by me. Nothink members are Juan Blas (JB - vocals & guitarist), Alex Ferrero (AF - bass) & Mike Peñas (MP-drums). Those musicians have shared the stage with bands like Metallica, Biffy Clyro, Beatsteak, Rage Against The Machine, Queens of the Stone Age...

**Do you consider that any band that makes rock, after the boom of the Seattle Grunge scene, are strongly influenced by this period?**

AF: Absolutely. In fact, our latest album “Hidden State” has been recorded in Seattle.

JB: Grunge and not only because of Nirvana, which has been the most venerated and well-known band, but also thanks to bands like Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Alice In Chains, The Melvins and even many other ones that made new things. Things that had been never made. With those innovations they gave music a new touch. Even if you don't like them, in my opinion if you really want to play high quality music, the good music you have to know about Seattle at that time”

MP: just have a look to where do Jimi Hendrix come from.

**Did Nirvana's Nevermind album supposed a before and an after in the music industry?**

JB: That album was something that was unbelievable at that time. Without an aggressive promotion and a very limited budget became a world reference. He was unstoppable.

Today the industry has changed, but not only by music bombs like Nirvana but widely by new technologies ... there are a lot of successful stories through the network and then they jump up to the real world.

**Why this album did cause so much fuss?**

AF: That's what we talked about with Matt Bayles<sup>33</sup>, the producer of our last album who has worked with bands like Pearl Jam and Alice In Chains, and he came to say that it was magic. Maybe you liked or maybe you don't but in fact MTV helped the album to be all over the world. Nevertheless it was an easy job to MTV to carry out that promotion because *Nevermind* songs just sold themselves as you all already know.

MP: They were in the right place at the right time and they hit the keys. This is how history is made.

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<sup>26</sup> German albums charts. Retrieved from [http://www.musicline.de/de/chartverfolgung\\_summary/title/NIRVANA/NEVERMIND/longplay](http://www.musicline.de/de/chartverfolgung_summary/title/NIRVANA/NEVERMIND/longplay)

<sup>27</sup> Billboard 30 May 1992. Page 42

<sup>28</sup> RPM. March 7, 1992. Archived by Library and Archives Canada. Retrieved from <http://xurl.es/0rykp>

<sup>29</sup> David Robert. *British Hit Singles & Albums. Nineteenth edition*. Hit Entertainment, 2006. Page 396

<sup>30</sup> Steffen Hung. “Dutch charts portal”. Retrieved from <http://dutchcharts.nl/search.asp?search=Nirvana&cat=a>

<sup>31</sup> Picture of the interview to Nothink. Figure 4. Appendix page 10

<sup>32</sup> Nothink Webpage <http://www.nothink.net/>

<sup>33</sup> Matt Bayles discography. Retrieved from <http://www.mattbayles.com/discography.htm>

### To sum up

In Seattle between 1986 and 1992 there were thousands of bands: Fastbacks, The Walkabouts, Three Swimmers, Beakers, Little Bears in Bangkok, Max Band, Quack Quack Quack, Green River, Mother Love Bone, 64 Spiders, Bundle Of Hiss, The U-Men, Skin Yard, My Eye, Feast, Psycho Pop, Red Dress, Blackouts, Love Battery, Seawide, Hammerbox, Coffin Break, The Melvins, The Posies, Young Fresh Fellows, Mudhoney, Tad, Gas Huffer, Some Velvet Sidewalk, Dead Moon, Flop, Blood Circus, 7 Year Bitch, Soundgarden, Alice In Chains, Pearl Jam, Nirvana and the list goes on. With so many bands and such a distinct music genre, everyone within the Seattle music scene knew each other and even some members switched to different bands at some point in their career.

It was a time when the big bands of the moment did not pass through Seattle because it was not a profitable city musically speaking. Something was brewing in that area, many new bands and styles developed making Seattle a unique treasure for the music world. Sub Pop enters the scene by creating and promoting the image that would be called Grunge as the music that was breaking out in the city of Seattle. Bruce Pavitt claimed years later that it was Everett True who really sold Seattle to the world with his report in *Melody Maker*<sup>34</sup>.

After *Nevermind* the Seattle scene became a profitable area and soon the major labels started to pay attention to these bands<sup>35</sup>. Seattle became fashionable. Grunge became fashionable. Journalists from all over the world started coming to the city and they wanted to know everything about that thing called Grunge.

Grunge look was getting known due to those journalists' reports. This new style highlighted converse shoes and lumberjack shirts (the use of this stuff is something comprehensible taking into account that Seattle was a woodcutter's city)<sup>36</sup>. The publications began to talk about it and that was the birth of this very famous stereotype.

Grunge became world famous after Nirvana's *Nevermind*, however they did not create anything new at all. They were part together with the rest of the bands of the same Seattle musical ocean. But suddenly they became that Seattle drop that splashes the world with their sound. In fact, that drop keeps on splashing for instance their launching 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary last 24 of September 2011 and it was world news<sup>37</sup>. That has provoked their entrance in the main Charts in the world again. Thanks to the success of other bands from Seattle like Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Mudhoney, Alice In Chains...the city became well-known all over the world.

Seattle had already a name and a sound. Then it just need it a body which it going to be covered with those lumberjack shirts and Converse shoes. Entertainment Weekly said in a 1993 article that "*there hasn't been this kind of exploitation of a subculture since the media discovered hippies in the '60s.*"

Since that period Seattle has become the best "guarantee of origin" place in the world on a musical level.

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<sup>34</sup>Information from "*Hype!*" By Doug Pray

<sup>35</sup> Information from "*Hype!*" By Doug Pray

<sup>36</sup> The History of Seattle. Retrieved from [http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file\\_id=1669](http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=1669)

<sup>37</sup> Pictures of different cover magazines with the news of 20 years of *Nevermind*. Figure 5. Appendix Page 10



**Figure 1**  
Sub-Pop 200<sup>38</sup>



<sup>38</sup> Set list

- 01 "Sex God Missy" – Tad
- 02 "Is it Day I'm Seeing?" – The Fluid
- 03 "Spank Thru" – Nirvana
- 04 "Come Out Tonight" – Steven Jesse Bernstein
- 05 "The Rose" – Mudhoney
- 06 "Got No Chains" – The Walkabouts
- 07 "Dead is Dead" – Terry Lee Hale
- 08 "Sub Pop Rock City" – Soundgarden
- 09 "hangin' Tree" – Green River
- 10 "Swallow My Pride" – The Fastbacks
- 11 "The Outback" – Blood Circus
- 12 "Zoo" – Swallow
- 13 "Underground" – Chemistry Set
- 14 "Gonna Find A Cave" – Girl Trouble
- 15 "Split" – The Nights and Days
- 16 "Big Cigar" – Cat Butt
- 17 "Panjama Party In A Haunted Hive" – Beat Happening
- 18 "Love Or Confusion" – Screaming Tress
- 19 "Untitled" – Steve Fisk
- 20 "You Lost It" – The Thrown Ups



**Figure 3**

Spin Magazine. January 1992.



**Figure 4**

Interview to Nothink (Alex Ferrero, me, Juan Blas)



**Figure 5**

20 years of *Nevermind*



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