Grunge: Cultural Phenomenon
by Heather Clark

The year is 1992 and Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, Nirvana, Soundgarden and Screaming Trees are on the radio. It is the peak of the Grunge era in music, and it’s influences are felt worldwide, far beyond it’s birthplace in Seattle, Washington. The media hype surrounding this genre is huge, with The New York Times declaring that the “grunging of America” is on.

Why was this musical genre so influential on culture at large? What was its appeal? And how did it develop from its roots in the early 1980s to a formula for commercial success in the mid-1990s?

Roots
The cultural phenomenon of Grunge, or the “Seattle Sound,” had it’s roots in punk, heavy metal and indie rock of the early 1980s, most notably in the Pacific northwest. The local punk scene provided the starting point for the evolution of the Seattle Sound and was inspired by The U-Men, 10 Minute Warning and the Fastbacks among others, as well as the heavy style of The Melvins. Heavy metal of the 1970s was an influence, particularly Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin. Additional contemporary influences included “noise” rock bands such as the Butthole Surfers, Red Kross, Killdozer of Wisconsin, San Francisco’s Flipper and Los Angeles’ Black Flag.

Mudhoney’s Steve Turner remembers, “A lot of other people around the country hated the fact that Black Flag slowed down… but up here it was really great…we were like ‘Yay!’”

Neil Young was eventually given the title “Godfather of Grunge,” based on his work with Crazy Horse; distorted guitar was a particular theme, especially on the album Rust Never Sleeps.

Development
Mark Arm, later the vocalist for Mudhoney, is credited with the first use of the term “grunge” in 1981 to describe his band at the time, Mr Epp. and the Calculations: “Pure grunge! Pure noise! Pure shit!” The usage of the term in this instance was purely descriptive, although Mr. Arm had no idea at the time how far-reaching the epithet would become.

The movement coalesced in Seattle with bands Green River (members of which later formed Mudhoney and Pearl Jam) and Soundgarden among others, both of which were featured on the 1986 Deep Six compilation by C/Z Records. These bands featured a heavy, sludgy sound with slower tempos than had previously appeared in heavy metal music.

Jack Endino, a producer at Sub Pop Records, which became the locally-based label for the genre, said, “People just said, ‘Well, what kind of music is this? This isn’t metal, it’s not punk, What is it?’…People went ‘Eureka! These bands all have something in common.’”

Seattle’s isolation from other cities’ music scenes is partly responsible for the development of Grunge. Jonathan Poneman of Sub Pop noted, “Seattle was a perfect example of a secondary city with an active music scene that was completely ignored by an American media fixated on Los Angeles and New York.”

Sub Pop, formed by Bruce Pavitt and Jonathan Poneman, was initially the primary label for projecting the Seattle Sound. Released in 1986, the Sub Pop 100 compilation was released along with Green River’s Dry As a Bone. A Sub Pop catalog described Green River as “ultra-loose GRUNGE that destroyed the morals of a generation.”

Seeking to hype their label and attract attention from outside the region, Sub Pop invited Melody Maker journalist Everett True, of Britain, to report on the developing scene. As the secret began to get out about Seattle, a wave of media attention began that was epic in scope.

Media Attention and Mainstream Success
Soundgarden was the first Grunge band to sign with a major label, A&M Records, in 1989. Other bands, including Alice in Chains and Screaming Trees, also were signed and performed relatively well. By that time the hype about the scene had been building and the music community hoped that it had peaked and that they could get back to normal life in Seattle.

In October 1989, Nirvana released Bleach with Sub Pop; the album sold about thirty thousand copies. Once they signed with Geffen Records in 1991, however, and subsequently released their major label
debut, *Nevermind*, the floodgates opened. The album's first single, *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, was played constantly on radio and the video on MTV, and was selling nearly half-a-million copies a week by year-end 1991. Michael Azerrad, author of *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981–1991* says it best:

> “With only minimal promotion to begin with, *Nevermind* hit number one, blanketed MTV with several videos, and went on to sell more than ten million copies. The funny thing was the album was a fairly complete compendium of the music the industry had been largely ignoring for the previous ten years, synthesizing underground bands like Black Flag, Hüsker Dü, Dinosaur Jr, The Pixies, Scratch Acid, the Melvins, and others. But it made that sound palatable to the mainstream with strong melodies and slick production.”

Pearl Jam released their album *Ten*, also in 1991, prior to the release of Nevermind, although sales didn’t start to increase until mid-1992. Soundgarden’s *Badmotorfinger*, Alice in Chains’ *Dirt* and the *Temple of the Dog* album (a collaboration featuring members of Pearl Jam and Soundgarden) were among the top selling albums of 1992.

Bands who had moved to Los Angeles to try to get signed started moving back since the attention of the labels had shifted so dramatically to Seattle. Bands with no connection with Seattle started to overrun the city. They all wanted to be the next Nirvana. The labels responded by giving huge advances to bands who had hardly played any live shows and who had no chance of ever paying them off.

### What was the Appeal?

What was it about the music that held such an attraction to the masses, namely youth? Much of the music shows a disenchantment with society and a sense of entrapment. In 1992, music critic Simon Reynolds said about Generation X, "there’s a feeling of burnout in the culture at large. Kids are depressed about the future." Being a member of GenX myself, I can remember feeling a great affinity with how Grunge addressed these feelings. For those who related to the music from the heart it gave people something to finally belong to, compared to those who were attracted to its popularity.

Also, people were tired of glam rock and over-produced, highly performed music. Producer Martin Rushent said (insert cockney accent here), “When you’ve been through periods where you’ve had keyboard players with 50,000 pounds worth of kit on stage with 82 keyboards and 95 samplers…after a while you go, ‘hang on, this is like too much food at one sitting, it’s too much sound, it’s too many colors. It’s all prancey and posey. Let’s go see some bands where they just bash it out.’”

### Infiltration

The commercial success of Grunge led to a fascination with all things Seattle. Media attention focused on the small city with reporters all trying to get the “Grunge story.” However, much of the attention focused on lifestyle and “fashion” rather than the motivation behind the music. “They talked about what we wore and whether the girl in the band before shaved her armpits,” said a member of 7YearBitch about being interviewed yet again about “the scene.”

When *The New York Times* called Megan Jasper at Sub Pop to get the “inside story” on grunge, she had had enough. “There was nothing to do except just start poking fun at the entire thing…I said, ‘why don’t you just give me a word and I’ll give you the grunge slang for it.’” Eager to get the jump on other publications and run with the story, the *Times* neglected to confirm the information and printed the “Lexicon of Grunge” to the utter delight of the Seattle indie community.

The permeation of Grunge into mainstream culture filtered through to every aspect of life. Anything that could be was coated with a Grunge aesthetic. The fashion industry capitalized on the fad by selling designer versions of ski hats, torn jeans and flannel shirts for hundreds of dollars. A car advertisement in 1993 showed a grungester saying: “This car is like, punk rock?” There were even Grunge pencils for back-to-school! The 1992 film *Singles* focused on Grunge themes and had a soundtrack that read like a Grunge yearbook including Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Mudhoney, Screaming Trees and others. Several bands also made cameo appearances in the film.

The Seattle scene was made out by mainstream media to be one single community whose common goal was the promotion of Grunge, where everyone wore the same clothes and played the same music all in an attempt at market success. The truth was that people wore flannel shirts and longjohns because it was logger country and because they were available at thrift stores for low prices. And because it was cold! There was a multitude of sounds, and, according to Mark Arm of Mudhoney, everyone was “ripping off each other’s ideas.”

Quoting Michael Azerrad:

> “The scene, once a refuge for original thinkers, was now being overrun by jocks and cheerleaders in underground drag. “If I was walking around somewhere, on the street, it was instant tribal identification,” says Ian MacKaye. I’d see people and immediately be attracted to them—some woman with a shaved head or just something about them, it was just instant identification. And it was really a very important aspect of my community and the larger community that I felt a part of. And a few years ago, when punk rock spread everywhere, it became really hard for me. Suddenly...”
it was like some weird horror movie. I kept seeing people who I’d identify with instantly and then I realized, wait a minute, they’re just normal people. It’s like some old World War II movie where you’re in a whole town of regular Americans but they’re actually all Nazi spies.”

Deterioration
After Grunge went big, the indie music community started to implode. Prior to finding a pathway to commercial success, the community was tightly-knit; people trusted one another and made deals with verbal contracts. Once the possibility of big money entered the picture, people started to think, “what more can I get?” Indie labels stopped putting the effort into creating success for their bands, because oftentimes the band would be scooped up by a major label who would reap the benefits of their hard work. Bands were being bid-on by labels hoping to make big bucks.

When Sub Pop signed Nirvana in 1989, the band insisted on a written contract. Their 1989 album Bleach became one of Sub Pop’s biggest sellers ever. However, Geffen Records bought out the rest of their contract with Sub Pop in 1991 and the defection hit the label hard. Bruce Pavitt remembers, “It came as a complete and total shock. It really scarred me. It made me a lot more guarded and a lot more cynical about what I was doing. I felt that all problems aside, I’d given every drop of blood to making this organization work and making the bands work and it seemed like an incredible betrayal at the time. I wept publicly. I was really, really crushed.” However, the fact that they had a written contract saved the small label; Geffen was forced to pay them royalties for every album that Nirvana sold.

However, many bands paid a great price for their success. With the never-ending requests for interviews, photo sessions and being recognized everywhere they went, many musicians, including Nirvana, were overwhelmed and disillusioned. Heroin abuse and overdosing was becoming common through the industry. Then in 1994, the world was stunned when news came that Kurt Cobain had committed suicide, unable to cope with the constant intrusion and demand.

Post-Grunge
After that time, the cultural phenomenon that was Grunge petered out. It was as if people realized that something had been broken and couldn’t be pieced back together, and that it was time to move on. The major labels however, wanted to continue their financial success. The Post-Grunge period was ushered in with bands like Candlebox, Bush, Creed, Collective Soul and Green Day. Post-Grunge was characterized by what Grunge had become; highly-polished, “mainstream-alternative” rock. The elements that coalesced in the 1980s to create the original Grunge sound became a formula for commercial success in the late 1990s. These bands generally enjoyed a brief success before being replaced with the next biggest name.

Personal Note
I was not involved in the Grunge scene before it was nationally successful, since I lived in Bos, and was not very familiar with punk rock. However, I was hooked like many others just as these bands were enjoying their first big successes. As time went on though, and the “jocks and cheerleaders” started wearing flannel and longjohns, it became overplayed. I miss that cultural period; despite the longing expressed in the music, there was a sense of promise then that seems lost now.

Bibliography
3Hype!. Republic Pictures, 1996.