

Title:

The Roots of Nirvana

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Summary:

No band develops in a vacuum; every band starts out thinking, at least a bit, of other musicians that they want to take after or rebel against. But Nirvana was the first great band of actual music snobs: record fiends who wanted to make it very clear exactly what they listened to.

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Article Body:

No band develops in a vacuum; every band starts out thinking, at least a bit, of other musicians that they want to take after or rebel against. But Nirvana was the first great band of actual music snobs: record fiends who wanted to make it very clear exactly what they listened to. They all loved Led Zep and Aerosmith and CCR and Black Sabbath and Kiss and then some more Led Zep on top of that. Mostly, though, Kurt Cobain and Krist Novoselic had grown up as Pacific Northwest punk rock kids. They hung out with the Melvins in Aberdeen, Washington, were required by circumstance to define their position with respect to K Records and the Olympia scene and carried Flipper and Bad Brains records like shields to ward off poseurs. (Dave Grohl had a roughly equivalent experience growing up in the DC area.) When they hit the big time, they covered their favorite bands, got them to open for Nirvana, wore their T-shirts every chance they got. Kurt even oversaw reissues of his beloved Raincoats' lost work.

In case there was any ambiguity left about who Nirvana considered their ancestors, it's all laid out in Kurt's Journals -- the scribblings of an inveterate listmaker who clearly loved even writing the names of his favorite records, like talismans of good luck and good punk rock karma. Certain discs turn up again and again in Kurt's pantheons of music: some are multiplatinum warhorses (Meet the Beatles, Aerosmith's Rocks), others are hopelessly obscure (Fang's Land Shark, the self-titled Tales of Terror album). Most of them, though, are remarkable American indie-rock and hardcore albums from the '80s, with a few artier European post-punk records and the inevitable Leadbelly album thrown in. They're worth investigating for anyone who loves Nirvana: these are

not just the raw materials Cobain and Novoselic and Grohl transmuted into gold, they're what the band aspired to.

The Best Of Leadbelly

Artist: Lead Belly

Release Date: 2003

When Nirvana played their wrenching cover of Leadbelly's "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?" (a.k.a. "In the Pines") on MTV Unplugged, it looked like an unexpected gesture toward the blues blood that still courses so powerfully through rock's veins. Actually, though, Kurt doesn't seem to have been so into vintage blues in general -- he just loved Leadbelly obsessively (and had previously recorded four Leadbelly songs with Screaming Trees' Mark Lanegan). This collection is a solid introduction to the "King of the Twelve-String Guitar," a roaring ex-con who miraculously pulled joyful music out of his personal horrors.

Surfer Rosa / Come On Pilgrim

Artist: The Pixies

Release Date: 1988

Kurt called this 1988 album "a die-cast metal fossil from a spacecraft," and some of the Pixies' favorite tricks -- endlessly looping riffs that had never quite been used before, tense clean-toned verses that bloom into explosive, distorted choruses -- showed up on Nevermind a few years later. Steve Albini's drumstick-to-your-skull engineering work here pretty obviously inspired Nirvana to hire him for In Utero, too. But most of what Nirvana got from the Pixies was an attitude: the sense of being off-balance and screaming while keeping one foot in tightly controlled structure.

Over The Edge

Artist: Wipers

Release Date: 1983

Kurt's "Top 50" list ultimately included three albums by Portland, Oregon's Wipers: Is This Real?, Youth of America and 1983's Over the Edge. Singer-guitar monster Greg Sage's band was ferociously chugging and deeply into its own alienation -- and operated independently of the music-business machine -- years before anyone else in the Pacific Northwest caught on to their techniques. Nirvana and Hole both eventually covered Wipers songs; "So Young," from this album, could very easily be mistaken for a Cobain original.

Singles 1-12

Artist: Melvins
Release Date: 1997

If you were a punk rock kid in Aberdeen, Washington in the mid-'80s, the Melvins were IT: they spiked their hardcore with brutal metal, they could play scorchingly fast or tortuously slow, they got to play in Olympia and Seattle and their practice space was the locus of the local punk scene. They also had a knack for doing screwed-up things on their recordings, and the 1996 series of singles collected here is classic Melvins -- tributes to the Germs, Flipper and Butthole Surfers, corrosive audio experiments and straight-up blasts of the grunge style they helped to invent.

Jamboree
Artist: Beat Happening
Release Date: 1988

In some ways, Kurt never quite fit in with Olympia's K Records, their flagship band Beat Happening and the "love-rock" scene around them -- too much tummy-rubbing, not enough gut-punch -- but he loved it enough that he got the K logo tattooed on his left arm, and its fascination with childhood fed his own. 1988's Jamboree, evidently his favorite Beat Happening record, is half pastel nostalgia, half savage dread, a la-la pop album that collapses into a puddle of screeching noise at the end.

Bayou Country
Artist: Creedence Clearwater Revival
Release Date: 1969

Like a lot of other punk bands, Nirvana adored classic rock; unlike most of their peers, they embraced it -- one of Cobain and Novoselic's first attempts to play music together was a Creedence cover band. Kurt cited this 1969 album as a favorite of his, and you can hear a lot of John Fogerty's throaty bellow on "Born on the Bayou" in the way he taught himself to sing; you can also hear how Creedence's sturdy chording and simple melodies resurfaced in Nirvana's music. What Nirvana might also have picked up from Creedence, though, was the art of self-reinvention and presentation: remember, Fogerty's really a Cali kid, not a bayou native.

LiliPUT
Artist: Kleenex / LiliPUT
Release Date: 2003

"Anything by Kleenex" was the way Kurt usually put it on his lists of favorite records. The young Swiss women who recorded first as Kleenex and then as LiLiPUT

between 1978 and 1983 had a garbled discography, and this compilation of everything by them didn't appear in the US until 2001. So start with their delirious, glorious singles "Split," "Ain't You" and "Eisiger Wind," full of shrieks and chirps, and powered by the rhythms of people who are determined to play their way and nobody else's.

Kill Rock Stars

Artist: Various Artists - Kill Rock Stars

Release Date: 2003

In the summer of 1991, Nirvana were just another well-loved Washington band, and the other bands compiled here -- on the anthology that launched the label of the same name -- were their contemporaries and scenemates: their old pals the Melvins, Bikini Kill (featuring Kurt's ex-girlfriend Tobi Vail), label owner Slim Moon's band Witchypoo, Steve Fisk (who'd recorded the Blew EP), Heavens to Betsy (with a very young Corin Tucker, later of Sleater-Kinney) and a duo of Lois Maffeo and Pat Maley that went by the name of Courtney Love -- no relation... or almost none.

Extended Play

Artist: The Raincoats

Release Date: 1995

In the liner notes of Incesticide, Kurt told the story of how he'd tracked down "that wonderfully classic scripture," the Raincoats' 1979 debut album, in England. Songwriters Ana da Silva and Gina Birch reformed the group in 1994 to open for Nirvana on the tour that never happened. They did, however, tour America, and recorded this EP for a BBC radio session: two new songs and two early favorites, performed with the sure-footed power and fresh-minded re-conception of the proper language, subject and sound for pop songs that had drawn Cobain to them in the first place.