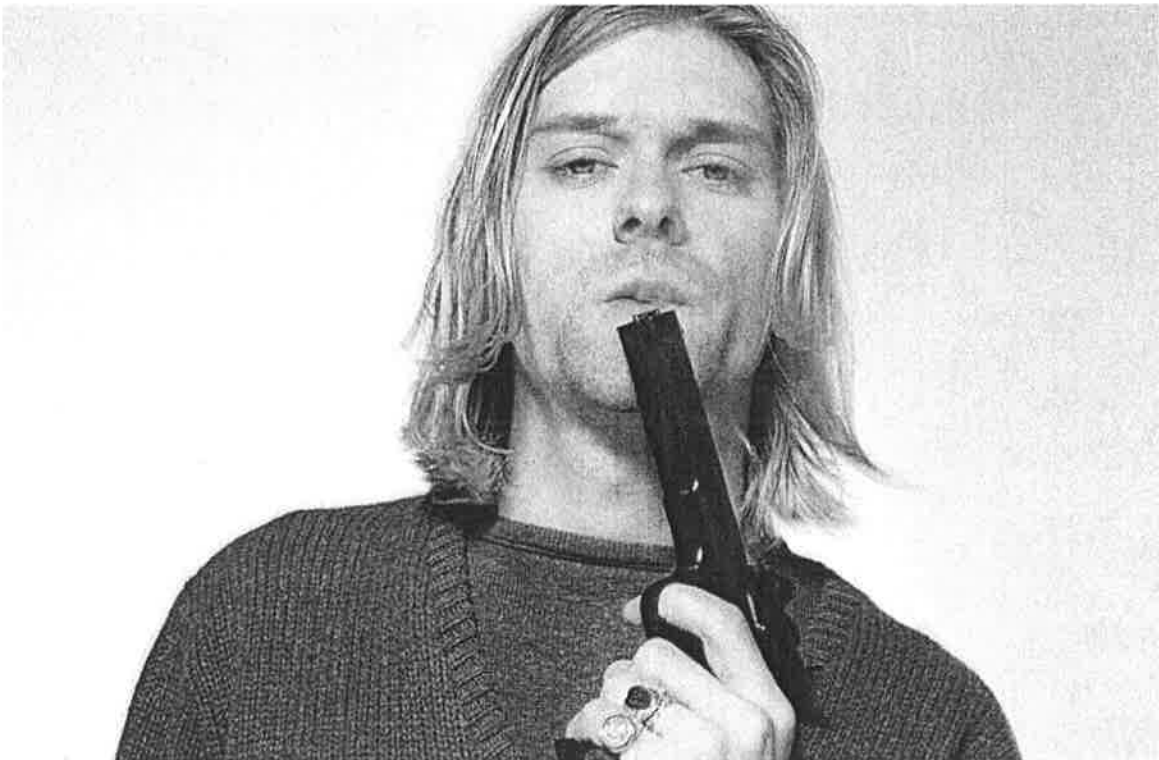


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## “A New Complaint”: The Self-Destruction of Kurt Cobain



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“Nirvana rocker kills self—Fatal shotgun blast” stands in black and white bold print in the *New York Daily News* on the morning of April 9, 1994. Kurt Cobain, the front man for the rock group had ended his life. However, in doing so, he challenged the stability of so many that depended upon him—the youth subculture that attached themselves to the tortured musician were now lost again. Cobain’s life was taken at the height of his musical success, but his death only seemed to intensify the mystique of this quiet, but genius performer. Questions buzzed throughout the world, as the most distinguished and innovative “punk rock” icon now ceased to exist, and ceased to provide guidance for so many that were lost. In his life Cobain provided a shield for those oppressed youngsters, as his music raised a big middle finger to all authority. His music packed a powerful punch against social and political conventions, and his lyrics solidified his torment and endless anxiety. Cobain set himself firmly within rock culture during his life, but his suicide solidified his everlasting recognition.

From the 1989 release of Nirvana’s first album, *Bleach*, Cobain’s lyrics and vicious personality attracted a youth culture and generation. Seth Kahn writes that “For many disaffected American kids, Cobain had become an icon, a model, a cathartic outlet for their problems—disintegrating families, economic troubles,

and so on.”<sup>1</sup> His music was full of outward hate towards the constantly oppressing society, and the ever-changing expectations that so many had for him and his music. He was the spokesperson for a youth subculture with nothing to claim for its own but animosity and disaffection.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of Cobain’s musical stardom, this culture was following those that had a propensity to “tap into rock’s accumulating stylistic resources and create seemingly impossible unions shot through with sociocultural and music-stylistic ambiguities”.<sup>3</sup> Anything loud and offensive, anything different, appealed to the massive youth following in music at the time. Cobain’s self-destruction began here—with this cloud of social expectation lingering over him at every turn, and the increasing levels of anxiety that came with the unwanted popularity. He outwardly expressed his desire to revolutionize music; however, as time passed the stresses became far too much for the tortured artist to handle.

Cobain’s public reputation outlined him as a less than stable individual. This youth subculture that followed the revolutionary Cobain now held the same reputation, as parents and older generations tied the band and their followers to drug abuse, alcoholism, and emotional instability. Cobain’s role of unenthusiastic spokesperson for a generation was initially based upon the relationship between him and his native Pacific Northwest: his upbringing in this region linked him to grunge culture.<sup>4</sup> When Nirvana entered the mainstream Cobain’s voice was

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<sup>1</sup> Kahn, Seth. “Kurt Cobain, Martyrdom, and the Problem of Agency.” *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2000, pp. 83–96., [www.jstor.org/stable/23414524](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414524)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mazullo, Mark. “The Man Whom the World Sold: Kurt Cobain, Rock’s Progressive Aesthetic, and the Challenges of Authenticity.” *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2000, pp. 713–749., [www.jstor.org/stable/742606](http://www.jstor.org/stable/742606)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

suddenly taken as representative of his entire generation.<sup>5</sup> As one of Cobain's eulogists in the mainstream stated: "Born into a generation that doesn't want heroes but simply someone who understands, Cobain understood".<sup>6</sup> Cobain understood his role in society after creating this revolutionary rock music; however, he became defined by his hateful nature. Already a grim personality, Cobain spiraled out of control emotionally as he assumed this "spokesperson" role and found momentary solace in drugs and alcohol. The generation, which he now represented, followed his every move as he weaved his way through the unwanted spotlight.

The ever-shifting nature of Cobain was attributed to his rapid descent into a tragic state as he grew to assume the social expectations and deny his own self-interests. Followers of Cobain, and of almost all most musicians, did not understand the power they held on the musically talented and famous individual. Their ignorance led Cobain to pull himself away from the limelight, and seek solace in substance and self-lamentation. Kahn hones in on two major components of Cobain's life that led to his emotional struggle: (1) "the tension between his conflicting purposes/desires to be famous and to be left alone, and (2) the question of agency in postmodern, mass-mediated society".<sup>7</sup> Jessie Kavadlo writes that "rock and roll is required to stay in the moment" and that is

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<sup>5</sup> Mazullo, Mark. "The Man Whom the World Sold: Kurt Cobain, Rock's Progressive Aesthetic, and the Challenges of Authenticity." *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2000, pp. 713–749., [www.jstor.org/stable/742606](http://www.jstor.org/stable/742606)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kahn, Seth. "Kurt Cobain, Martyrdom, and the Problem of Agency." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2000, pp. 83–96., [www.jstor.org/stable/23414524](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414524)

what pushed Cobain to his fatal edge.<sup>8</sup> The media consistently labeled Cobain differently, as one day his actions could define him momentarily as a drug addicted pessimist and the next a poetic genius that has revolutionized the musical world. Regardless, Cobain had always lacked stability, as his upbringing was difficult. His parents divorced at a very young age, and his mother eventually began dating a man that was visibly physically abusive to his mother. He began to withdraw from social interactions, as he became a defiant youngster. A brief article written by a British Medical Journal explores the psychological downfall one has when they are subject to depression and drug abuse. Simon Manchip, the writer, explores a variety of different aspects of Cobain's childhood and how his upbringing was troubled and many of his family members had committed suicide in the past.<sup>9</sup> This personality only intensified with age, and Cobain was not ready to have so many people rely upon him.

Kadvalo introduces, what he believes to be, rock's key themes—"suicide, stardom, and authenticity".<sup>10</sup> The music Cobain produced lives at the mercy and attention span of teenagers and listeners.<sup>11</sup> To stay attuned with his musical agenda, Cobain needed to live in the present, but he was so stuck in the past. He maintained his authenticity as he did not stray from his rather depressive

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<sup>8</sup> Kavadlo, Jesse. "The Terms of the Contract: Rock and Roll and the Narrative of Self-Destruction in Don DeLillo, Neal Pollack, and Kurt Cobain." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 87-104., [www.jstor.org/stable/23416199](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416199).

<sup>9</sup> Manchip, Simon. "That stupid club." *British Medical Journal*, 28 May 1994, p. 1447. *Academic OneFile*,

[go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=tel\\_a\\_uots&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA16141698&it=r&asid=e1bb7df981fe09607821a8d3e4cb4b1d](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=tel_a_uots&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA16141698&it=r&asid=e1bb7df981fe09607821a8d3e4cb4b1d). Accessed 5 Apr. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Kavadlo, Jesse. "The Terms of the Contract: Rock and Roll and the Narrative of Self-Destruction in Don DeLillo, Neal Pollack, and Kurt Cobain." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2007, pp. 87-104., [www.jstor.org/stable/23416199](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23416199).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

lyricisms and musical angst. Mark Mazullo engages Cobain's success in preserving his musical identity. Mazullo writes that, "the communion between Cobain's identity and his music allowed him to express himself authentically in his art" and he was special because his art was sincere.<sup>12</sup> Despite his inability to flow with the media and judging society, Cobain upheld the originality of his art form and did not stray away from the changing nature of his listeners. For many his self-destructive nature was outlined well in his music, as he made it a point to deflect any praise for what he had created. Chris Mundy of Rolling Stone says, "If guitars could talk, Cobain's would scream, melodically and irreverently, 'What are you looking at?'"<sup>13</sup> When the news broke that Cobain had taken his life, it did not come as a surprise for many.

On April 8, 1994 Kurt Cobain killed himself at his home in Washington state. He shot himself using a shotgun, and left a brief note to the few closest to him. He finally had found his only path to emotional stability. The media immediately turned to, largely, ridiculing the musical icon, but some publicity turned to praise. Matty Karas writes a brief article outlining the social reactions following Cobain's death on MTV. MTV spiraled into whirlwind of Cobain videos that interrupted their normal broadcast, and highlighted his drug addiction. The videos of Cobain spoke of the youth subculture that followed Nirvana, and never seemed to lower him in the eyes of the public. Karas writes that, "Perhaps the most striking aspect of MTV's coverage was its failure to do what USA Today,

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<sup>12</sup> Mazullo, Mark. "The Man Whom the World Sold: Kurt Cobain, Rock's Progressive Aesthetic, and the Challenges of Authenticity." *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 4, 2000, pp. 713-749., [www.jstor.org/stable/742606](http://www.jstor.org/stable/742606)

<sup>13</sup> Kahn, Seth. "Kurt Cobain, Martyrdom, and the Problem of Agency." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2000, pp. 83-96., [www.jstor.org/stable/23414524](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414524)

CNN and other outlets did almost immediately: Find the many fans who believed Cobain was less an icon for his generation and more an addict who tried to beat his depression with heroin and abandoned a young daughter.”<sup>14</sup> The cultural and social interpretations of Cobain determined his afterlife as they painted a horrid picture that struck deep into the emotional character of the artist, and largely ignored his musical talents and massive success. On the surface, his music was why he truly mattered, but there was a person beneath that so many people began to ignore.

Cobain’s suicide did, however, prove to be greatly symbolic. Roger Beebe writes in *Rock Over the Edge* that Cobain’s “suicide was reduced by much of the media into an example of a more general generational malaise gone completely amok, and references were made to ‘the bullet that shot through a generation’”.<sup>15</sup> Cobain and Nirvana’s musical success attributed heavily to their overall popularity, and eventually endorsed their lasting influence on the musical scene for many years to come. Beebe’s comment suggests that the media portrayed the suicide as expected, for the youth subculture that bound themselves to the unconventional rocker was lost all along. The bullet that shot through the skull of Cobain, certainly was one that crashed through an entire generation. Despite his death serving as a dead end for a generation, it was symbolic in that the band’s popularity “inaugurated and coincided with some definite and striking cultural

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<sup>14</sup> Karas, Matty. "Kurt Cobain's death: MTV's Persian Gulf War?" *American Journalism Review*, vol. 16, no. 5, 1994, p. 10. *Academic OneFile*, go .galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=tel\_a\_uots&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA15459596&it=r&asid=3d82919be4fee2df48e7e981175b5124. Accessed 8 Mar. 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Beebe, Roger, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders. *Rock over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002. Print.

moments”.<sup>16</sup> Yes, it was symbolic in this sense; however, the same generation that now painted him across all forms of media was the same that drove him to his self-destruction.

Cobain’s death happened directly in the middle of this new and evolving culture in music, and it produced widespread television coverage. Unlike the rockers that perished in the 1960s (Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, etc.), Cobain’s life was celebrated and judged by millions as they watched his past actions scroll across the television screens. MTV was the central music television network at the time, and their normal broadcast was soon filled with the face and music of the lost icon. Matty Karas’ article suggests that MTV took a different route than the more formal television networks when covering the suicide, but in reality they aimed to show how those of different generations viewed Cobain—as a drug addicted doomster or musical genius that sparked positivity in a generation.

A few short days following the death of Kurt Cobain, MTV aired a segment entirely dedicated to the artist. Their conventional broadcast was replaced with five rapid public interviews on the street. The MTV reporter spilled out the question that probably was, simply put, ‘how do you feel about the recent suicide of Kurt Cobain?’. Five youngsters answer the question differently, but all claim to feel some form of sadness for the rocker’s death. However, many seemed to be more disappointed. Calling out comments such as, “Yeah, he’s dead and like I’m sorry to hear that but, I really just feel for his kid more” as the young generation

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<sup>16</sup> Beebe, Roger, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders. *Rock over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002. Print.



often labeled him as a coward for leaving behind his musical stardom and family.<sup>17</sup> Immediately following the interviews, the middle aged MTV spokesperson for the segment "A Week In Rock" delves into a formal explanation and description of the sudden suicide.<sup>18</sup> The MTV voice moves through the technicalities regarding the discovery of Cobain's body, but then quickly jumps to praising his past accomplishments by filling the screen with his live performances and magazine covers. Interviews from friends and band members praise the beauty in Cobain's musical career, and reminisce about the amazing experiences the band had as they rapidly climbed their way to musical fame. He did fall trap to many social conventions, as he followed the 'rocker persona' that was violently carefree and often under the influence. The segment quickly turned to the birth of his daughter, and what he left behind, leaving the MTV piece to fade away and evoking a definite sadness from the on looking population.

"Blowing your brains out is just stupid ... he was an idiot ... perhaps he wanted to be a rock legend" and blamed the "pressures of fame".<sup>19</sup> Even after his death, Cobain's personality was dictated by the millions that found solace in his music. The media and following culture judged and controlled his every action, and drove him to absolute insanity as he long struggled with anxiety and depression. Kurt Cobain was an innovative musician that met self-destruction like so many other rockers. Drugs, alcohol, and the pressures of musical stardom

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<sup>17</sup> Wilshaw, Darren. "Kurt Cobain Death ( MTV - A Week In Rock 1994 )." *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 May 2015. Web. 06 Apr. 2017. [latest\\_citation\\_text](#)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Manchip, Simon. "That stupid club." *British Medical Journal*, 28 May 1994, p. 1447. *Academic OneFile*, [go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=tel\\_a\\_uots&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA16141698&it=r&asid=e1bb7df981fe09607821a8d3e4cb4b1d](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=tel_a_uots&v=2.1&id=GALE%7CA16141698&it=r&asid=e1bb7df981fe09607821a8d3e4cb4b1d). Accessed 5 Apr. 2017.

overwhelmed him to a point of no return. To be a rocker you are certainly required to stay in the moment, and Cobain always held tightly on to the past. Dedicated and authentic, Kurt Cobain will live on forever as his death came too soon, but his music was far too powerful to fade away.