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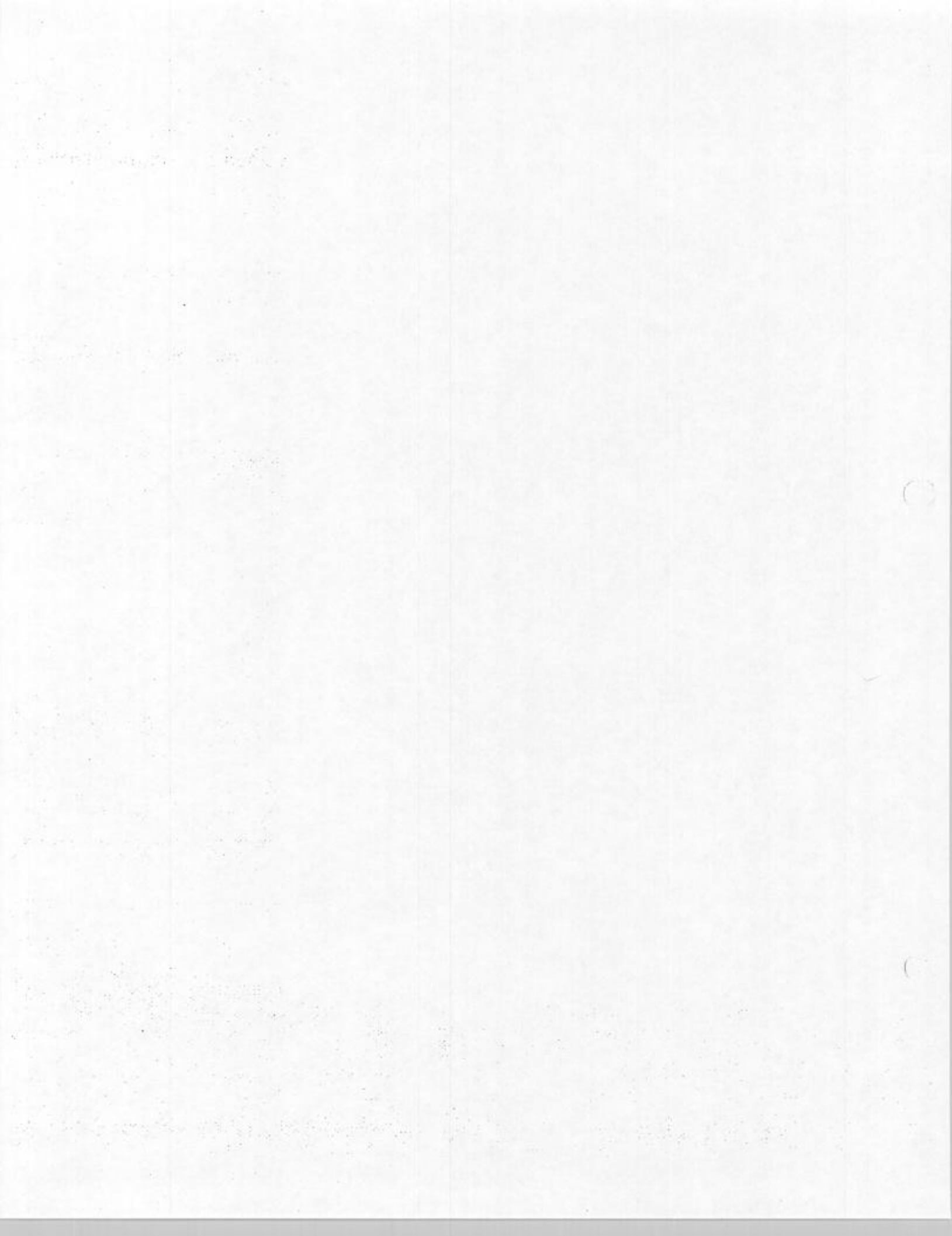
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Covering Cobain: Narrative Patterns in Journalism and Rock Criticism

Steve Jones

The death of anyone “in their prime” and in the public eye, whether by suicide, murder, or natural causes, causes recurrent questions to surface: Why this person? Why now? What, if anything, does their death *mean*? Such questions are, of course, ones that journalists ask quite commonly, whether in relation to a death or any variety of other events. In one particular case, the death of Kurt Cobain, journalists asked those questions, and others, in ways that reveal interesting things about journalism, popular music and popular music criticism, and the interpretive process. Also revealed are the assumptions about youth culture, fandom, and stardom that have come to shape the public understanding of one of our most prevalent forms of popular culture—popular music.

In earlier work (Jones) I examined the dominant themes in popular music criticism. Three intertwined themes were most prevalent—authenticity, racism/urban culture, and mass culture. These themes illuminate not only the problems with which popular music critics have grappled, but those addressed by the music and its audience.

These themes are present in the journalistic coverage of Kurt Cobain’s suicide. In essence, the employment of these themes is as a strategy for meaning-making as journalists reported on the events surrounding Cobain’s death. In terms of “typical” rock star deaths, Cobain’s did not fit the mold. While others died accidentally, usually from a drug overdose, or were involved in airplane or car wrecks, Cobain took his own life.

The only other breach of the typical rock star “story” similar to that of Cobain’s was the coverage of John Lennon’s murder. Fred Fogo, in an examination of the social drama surrounding Lennon’s death, gathered magazine and newspaper articles containing references to Lennon’s

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death. Fogo noted that his analytical focus was on cultural commentary rather than on "straight" journalism, because, borrowing from James Carey, such commentary keeps: "significant events afloat long enough so that interpretation, explanation, and thick description can be added as part of ongoing development" (Carey 151). The phenomena surrounding Cobain's suicide, particularly in light of ongoing attempts to classify, commodify, and understand contemporary youth culture, provided a backdrop against which journalistic coverage of his suicide took on added significance as did the coverage after Lennon's murder. Not only were journalists interested in Cobain, it seemed, but in "grunge," in "Generation X," etc. Consequently, the effort to integrate and incorporate a broader commentary took on added significance for journalists and their editors, and that effort resulted in recourse to the three common themes I've mentioned: authenticity, racism/urban culture, and mass culture. This article represents a case study of how these themes were employed and deployed as part of the sense-making of Cobain's death, and youth culture generally, in the journalistic coverage of Cobain's suicide and Nirvana's career. Articles from magazines and newspapers were collected and read in light of the previous work mentioned earlier, categorized, and again read, more closely, with a critical eye toward revealing the narrative patterns with which journalists sought to explain Cobain's suicide and Nirvana's significance. Cobain's suicide didn't make "sense" in the traditional way that rock star deaths did, and coverage of his suicide became an attempt to make sense of his suicide, its causes and meanings, by using these narrative themes to frame circumstances largely new to reporters and critics.

Authenticity

A main theme running throughout the coverage of Nirvana is that of authenticity. As well, authenticity pervades popular music criticism. It is likely also the most frequently debated topic, and one that brings popular music's inherent elitism to the fore. Various narrative strategies exist by which popular music critics employ authenticity to underline their opinion of a particular artist or performer.

David Sanjek claims authenticity is critical to the discourse surrounding popular music, and writes that it is "the degree to which a musician is able to articulate the thoughts and desires of an audience and

not pander to the 'mainstream' by diluting their sound or their message" (2). Simon Frith argues in turn that such discourse in the the music press serves ideological, rather than commercial, purpose:

Fanzines, fanzine writers (and the important critics in the mass music papers share the fanzine stance) are the source of the arguments about what rock means, arguments not only about art and commerce, but also about art and audience. (177)

Thus popular music criticism itself can be understood as meaning-making, a way of continuing the discourse of popular music, of attempting to understand the multifaceted relationship between performer, audience, artifact and history, on a nonmusical plane.

The most common rhetorical strategy used to determine a popular music group's or artist's authenticity is to use popular music's history to determine contemporary authenticity. In other words, how does something new compare to something old? Robert Christgau is the master of that strategy, and it is encapsulated in the following passage from a review he wrote in 1968:

The success of rock and roll was as much a rejection of contemporary popular music as it was an affirmation of the blues and the country-and-western music in which rock is rooted. The vitality of rock and roll . . . was the vitality of an oppressed subculture—all right, not that of urban blacks or hillbillies, but of the young, particularly the white young. (80)

In Nirvana's case authenticity was determined in several ways, but largely solidified only by Cobain's suicide. Prior to his suicide the band had clearly emerged as spokespersons for a new generation, though they themselves seemed to have eschewed that role. Nevertheless, a variety of events and incidents that led them to be the first to ride the "grunge" crest also led them to be the ones most often looked to for insight into youth culture. To some degree the very nature of being the first (or seeming to be) gave them the stamp of authenticity, synthesizing as they did a variety of popular music's styles and ideas. Their own history, beginning as they did in obscurity, releasing records on independent labels, hauling their own sound equipment, also established them as "the real thing." Such a pedigree didn't go unnoticed by those well versed in

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the dues-paying school of popular music thought, and Cobain's "roots" were often written about, as in this *Rolling Stone* article:

Cobain took jobs as a janitor at a hotel and at a dentist's office (where he dipped into the nitrous). . . . A year and two drummers later, in October 1988, Sub Pop [Records] released the single "Love Buzz"/"Big Cheese"; *Bleach* was released in June 1989, recorded for the princely sum of \$606.17. . . . Just last September [bassist] Novoselic and Cobain were so poor they had to pawn their amps. (Azerrad, *Nirvana: Inside the Heart* 96-97)

After the release of their second major-label album and sell-out tours, the band were not noticeably less authentic to critics, though they had plainly cleared the dues-paying stage of their career, perhaps in record time. It was enough, it seemed, for critics and reporters to notice that Cobain clung to the music of other Northwest bands and lived in (relative) clutter, doted on his daughter, and was, for all intents and purposes, not visibly living the rock 'n' roll lifestyle. Such observations were commonly used to bolster claims that Cobain was indeed committed to the ideals of punk rock rather than having an interest in being a rock star.

After Cobain's suicide, though, Nirvana's and Cobain's authenticity seemed to become mixed up with some critics' own. One writer, upset that other media in the UK had not given much coverage to Cobain's suicide, wrote:

I don't remember too much about the evening of April 8 (1994). . . . One thing I *do* remember about that weekend is the distinct feeling that me and my friends were the only people in the world who gave a toss. (Price 34)

Self-reflection became very common among critics and journalists in the days immediately following Cobain's suicide on April 8, and much of it also reflected popular music's connection to its own history in the face of the management of authenticity of experience. Many added Cobain to the "dead rock star club" by assigning him a place alongside the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Keith Moon, but most numerous were the comparisons to John Lennon, like this one from Los Angeles critic Lorraine Ali:

I can't recall exactly where I was when I heard the news that John Lennon had been shot. . . . I will always remember where I was when the news of Kurt's death reached me. (28)

Some reached deeper into rock's past, by going to the very beginning to find an antecedent to Cobain's story:

He put a gun to his head, pulled the trigger and was gone. And his next single was his biggest hit. The singer was Johnny Ace, who died in a Russian roulette game on Christmas Eve, 1954; the song "Pledging My Love" made him the first posthumously successful rocker. Kurt Cobain went about his suicide more deliberately. (Pareles, *Music Confers an Afterlife* 11)

The comparisons edged into nonmusical territory as well (though usually, as in this case, bookended by rock history):

Cobain was at the center of it all, the John Lennon of the swinging Northwest, a songwriter with a gift for searing lyrics as well as seductive hooks, a performer with a play of facial expressions so edgy and complicated that they rivaled Jack Nicholson's. His subject was the same perennial, youthful fury captured by the Sex Pistols, before they too self-destructed, and by the Who, before Pete Townshend survived to purvey nostalgia to Broadway theatergoers. (Handy 70-72)

Ultimately, through the historical narrative, there emerged a consensus that Cobain's death was indeed in some significant way emblematic of larger issues connected to contemporary youth culture. The most common narrative found Cobain realizing a fate he was destined to meet. As one critic wrote:

After his death, people were comparing Mr. Cobain to John Lennon; in fact, he shared Lennon's combination of pop craftsmanship and primal self-expression. But Lennon didn't kill himself, and none of the other 1960's rock martyrs—Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin—is an exact analogy either. Where each of those troubled souls saw a sense of possibility, Mr. Cobain was always facing dead ends. He was never one to accentuate the positive. (Pareles *Reflections on Cobain's* 11)

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The New York *Times's* Pareles in particular found much to say to compare and contrast Cobain's death with that of other rock musicians, though at each turn he clearly espoused the mythology that made these musicians "martyrs."

The narratives that formed in the wake of Cobain's suicide were themselves part and parcel of that mythology. They focused around authenticity, and served to solidify and stabilize Cobain's and Nirvana's place in the continuum of popular music's history. As one critic put it, Cobain's suicide stamped not only *his* music with the mark of the authentic (for he lived, and died, by the beliefs he seemed to espouse in his lyrics) but it stamped *all* popular music (and attendant subcultures) of the era and style as authentic:

[H]owever tragic and squalid a rock 'n' roll death may be, it inevitably confers significance upon the victim and upon rock music as a whole.

Crudely put, Kurt Cobain is the Slacker Martyr. The whole grunge ethic of dropping out because life sucks strikes many as lazy, parasitical and apolitical in its supine, despairing refusal to stand up and fight back. But Kurt Cobain might well have died for this principle. (Stubbs 31)

Understanding Cobain's motives for suicide via his music was not enough, however, and many chose to delve into his personal history to learn more and to frame better the meaning of his music and his death, turning, in effect, to issues related to racism, urban culture, and moral decay.

Racism, Urban Culture, and Moral Decay

Such a turn was hardly new to popular music criticism. From its earliest days, popular music critics examined issues of racism, urban culture and moral decay. Likewise, much journalistic coverage of popular music is preoccupied with lurid tales of drug abuse, debauchery and depravity, and is often used by conservative critics as ammunition for their attacks on rock 'n' roll. Indeed, popular music is often understood as a manifestation of urban life and culture while simultaneously being held responsible for manifestations of moral decay.

Racism, too, haunts popular music, from the exploitation of black songwriters by white artists (and music publishers) to the segregation of musical styles along lines of race. As Chapple and Garofalo put it:

The de facto segregation of whites and blacks and objective oppression of blacks by whites extend to every major aspect of the U.S. economy, including the music industry. The business is a particularly interesting and glaring example of this pervasive racism, since it has grown fat off the creative impulses and culture of black people. Through the years black music has been stolen, covered, and pilfered in more subtle ways, while its artists have been effectively suppressed and denied their due. (163)

Such exploitation did not go unnoticed by critics. As jazz critic-turned cultural critic Nat Hentoff has said:

You see the discrimination and injustice in the music industry and you naturally gravitate toward [social criticism]. Unless you're a totally aesthetic critic and that's a whole 'nother thing. (Personal interview)

Jazz critics struggled with racism in their writing, much of which went on to become popular music criticism's direct precursor. However, unlike jazz critics, popular music critics tended to focus on issues of racism, urban culture, and moral decay within the context of song lyrics, only later addressing them without any such prompting. Hentoff crossed over between jazz and popular music criticism. For him, popular music provided a glimmer of hope that racial barriers were being torn down by music. In the combination of influences in popular music Hentoff saw a disintegration of boundaries between people. Similarly, Lester Bangs had an extreme faith in the revolutionary promise of popular music, but as personal fulfillment and transcendence rather than as social revolution.

One can find in the coverage of Nirvana an interesting duality. On the one hand they came to represent a particular urban music scene, the "grunge capital," Seattle, in articles like this one in *Spin* :

From out of nowhere [Nirvana] breezed in to [sic] 1992 and turned the music world upside down and inside out, transforming "alternative" music into a bona fide big-buck category, and Seattle into a modern-day music mecca. (Gelman 50)

Nirvana clearly benefited from proximity to Seattle, from like-minded peers in that city with whom they sometimes performed, from

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the clubs in Seattle, and record labels too. Yet on the other hand Nirvana was born in Aberdeen, Washington, a lumber town with a vast array of economic and social ills. After Cobain's suicide much began to be made of his "formative" years there and of the reaction he had against Aberdeen's culture and its citizens. As a reporter for *Esquire* put it:

Aberdeen is a town of about sixteen thousand, more than a hundred miles and several decades from Seattle, one of those exposed places where the weight of America bears down with grim, uncushioned brutality. . . . The arrival on February 20, 1967, of a sensibility as well tuned as Kurt's into . . . a town as culturally provincial as Aberdeen was tantamount to the broad-daylight landing of an alien spacecraft on the front lawn. (Wright 56)

Then, when Cobain hears punk, he finds "a way to scrawl graffiti across an entire culture" (60). Thus the story of how "the sounds of the city" formed an artist is retold, but with a different twist. This time there isn't a city, but a town, albeit one facing the same social and economic difficulties that urban centers do. It's only near a major metropolitan area, Seattle, and that area is not one known for urban decay, moral depravity, etc., in ways that other cities' music scenes were prominently part of. However, again music is that "outlet for frustration . . . [creating] a kind of community of outcasts; it provided a refuge" (Pareles, *Reflections on Cobain's* 13). The adjectives with which Aberdeen was described in nearly every story about Nirvana ("gloomy" and "depressed" were the most common, although "gray" and "sodden" were also often used) came to represent not only something about Cobain's evolution as a musician and songwriter but his own state of mind, and eventually, the state of the panoply of "grunge" groups. As Jon Pareles put it in the *New York Times*:

But it's not just a matter of biography. Seattle rockers write songs to face down death. The reasons may be as various as the Northwest's perpetual rain, young workers' poor economic prospects. . . . Grunge has a manic-depressive heritage. (*Death Sings Along* 13)

What is most telling about the ways coverage of Cobain's suicide insistently included descriptions of Aberdeen and Seattle is that little was made of those places other than their (supposed) causal effect on

Cobain's music and suicide. First there was the weather and its supposed effect on Cobain's psyche. Second, and more important, there was, as one writer put it, Cobain's sympathy "with homosexuals and (sense of being) trapped in the male culture of Aberdeen" (Egan 11). Such attempts at implicating racist and homophobic attitudes, economic misery, and the rainy weather, as in Michael Azerrad's Nirvana biography, *Come As You Are*, were common. If critics and journalists were seeking answers to Cobain's suicide and music, they'd found one, and weren't about to let go. This time, though, having to be around those with racist attitudes, it was claimed, led a songwriter *not* of the oppressed race to be unable to cope with life.

Particularly in regard to the theme of moral decay, Cobain's (and his wife, Courtney Love's) bouts with drug abuse provided for an easy fit to "youth gone wrong" stereotypes. As a reporter for *Newsweek* put it:

As a teen, Cobain dabbled in drugs and punk rock, and dropped out of school. . . . By last week the world knew Cobain had a self-destructive streak, [and] that he'd done heroin. (Giles 47)

These particulars of Cobain's life provided hooks with which journalists and rock critics could not only construct his story but find a way to make sense of his suicide and make it fit with the myth of the rock star, thereby creating simultaneously a cautionary tale of drugs and rock 'n' roll and a story that had all the expected elements and thus "sold" to the mainstream press. Some even went so far as to claim that Cobain's death spurred other rock stars to "clean up their act" (Peden 35-36).

Mass Culture and Commercialization

Mass media and mass culture are common topics in popular music criticism and in mainstream press coverage of popular music, most often in the form of comment upon the relationships between performers, audience, and industry. Excellent examples of this type of criticism can be found in the work of Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs and Ralph Gleason.¹

The topic of musicians selling out to the mainstream is closely related to the discourse of authenticity, and is by no means new to music, much less to popular music, or even to journalists.

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For the majority of rock critics the co-optation of popular music is to be guarded against. Of course, just what is to be guarded, by whom, and for whom, is a matter of much debate, and one that in the aftermath of Cobain's suicide was not easily settled. Journalists and critics covering Cobain's suicide were very cognizant of the ways his death would both be commodified and serve to sell Nirvana-related goods. Reporters in the music trade magazine *Billboard* quickly reported on the surge in sales of Nirvana albums following Cobain's death and speculated on the unreleased material available to Nirvana's record company, calling the entire affair "a grim accident of timing" (Rosen and Morris 9). England's *Melody Maker* reported:

Copies of Nirvana's albums straight away started selling faster in shops throughout the world. At Tower Records in LA, Nirvana videos showed in the store. In London's Piccadilly, Tower Records started playing [the band's album] "Nevermind." A member of staff was quoted in the April 10 issue of *Independent on Sunday* as saying, "I know, it's really awful. Somebody dies and you try to make money out of it. But it's not just a sell-out thing. It is kind of like a tribute as well." Record stores in America were hiking up the price of collectable [sic] Nirvana records by an average \$8. ("Kurt Cobain" 28)

One retail clerk noted, "It's a pathetic scene. Everything is going out the door. If people were really fans, they would've had this stuff already" (Borzillo 102). Of course the phenomenon of the "collectible" was quick to appear:

The most sought-after Nirvana title in [Seattle] was "Bleach," the band's first album, released by Sub Pop [Records] in 1988. The day after Cobain's death, a teen-age customer asked a clerk at the Seattle Cellophane Square store if "Bleach" was a collector's item yet. (Borzillo 102)

Marketers were in for less criticism than the media, though. In the *Melody Maker* story the reporters quoted Nirvana's UK press agent as stating, "I just hope now the media have got the story they've always wanted" (28). One reporter noted that NBC had considered a television movie of Cobain's life, and placed it within a spate of yet-to-be-released films about dead rock stars (Harrington).

Perhaps the most glaring phenomenon was the large number of critics who placed at least some of the blame for Cobain's suicide on the media and mass culture, an opinion well-represented in a *Melody Maker* article that saw Nirvana being raked over the mass culture coals:

Full circle. The former obsessive Lennon fan was now the greatest, most reluctant rock star of his generation.

Nobody teaches you how to be a rock star. Nobody gives instruction in what to do when 10 million people own a sliver of your soul. The stampede doesn't stop. And fame cures nothing. Perhaps it's thrilling at first. But what's it like to see your modest ideals ripped out of your hands as a thousand bands start up in the race to repeat what you've achieved?

You let the rock machine eat its talented young yet again. . . . If you'd stayed sane and alive it would have really blown our minds. (Arundel 33)

Or, as one of Cobain's peers put it in a *Village Voice* interview:

Kurt Cobain is not a person. . . . He's turned into something that represents different things for different people. I understand the press is going to be all over it, but I wish they would leave it alone completely. Because that attention is why Kurt died. (Powers 32)

Other rock stars had not received quite this same treatment. Certainly claims that fame killed others are not uncommon. However, none of the other dead rock musicians, who journalists and critics were fond of naming in the same sentence as Cobain, were seen as media victims in the way Cobain was. In those cases, fame led to other causes of death: drugs, debauchery, recklessness. In Cobain's case, fame was often claimed as a direct cause of his troubles. There are, I believe, two reasons for this narrative formation. First, Cobain was indeed reluctant to be a spokesperson. He repeatedly told interviewers that he was speaking only for himself, and not for Nirvana or for a generation. What such a strategy earned him was the word "reluctant" placed before the title "spokesman." If indeed there was a "grim accident of timing," it was that of the inevitability of Cobain's expressed ideals becoming commodified. As one reporter noted, "Cobain's torment with the corporate culture he entered was validated and celebrated by his sponsors, spit back as style and image" (Gogola 581). The topic of

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several interviews with Cobain was the media excess he faced after the phenomenal popularity of "Nevermind," and it seemed he engaged (deliberately or not) in a dialogue with the press that ensured his anti-fame stance would become a major source of his fame.

That reporter's comment points to the second reason that Cobain's suicide was different from other rock stars' deaths. Popular music's fans and critics alike have become more knowledgeable than ever about the role of the media in the careers of musicians and groups. That knowledge colored every facet of the process of narrative-building following Cobain's suicide. *Rolling Stone* senior editor Anthony DeCurtis put it thusly:

When you interview the famous for a living, you get used to the strange process of hearing complaints about things most people desire with all their hearts; success, wealth, recognition, celebrity—the kinds of things Cobain had so much trouble handling. It's usually a posture, and you mentally roll your eyes as the litany of elite misery begins. (38)

For DeCurtis, Cobain's story did not match up with the usual media narrative that rock stars themselves construct, and it didn't match up with the story that he usually constructs as an interviewer and journalist. One reporter claimed that Cobain chose a particularly media-worthy way to die:

Killing himself as and when he did, Cobain at least managed to deliver a final jolt to the rock world he loved and loathed. Rock stars are glamorized for dying young, but they aren't supposed to kill themselves on purpose. (Ross 106)

Again, something about Cobain's suicide simply did not fit the narrative mold that had been created for rock stars' deaths and attendant coverage. For many reporters Cobain's suicide, the demands and pleasures of mass culture, and mass culture's demands on themselves (along with its rewards) were inextricably interwoven, and difficult to separate.

Indeed, mass culture came to be generalized as the root cause not only of Cobain's suicide but of "grunge" itself, as in one reporter's assertion in the *Utne Reader* that "Grunge sees the lie of consumer culture but still yearns for the manufactured suburban bliss of 'Leave it

to Beaver' and 'Mayberry R.F.D.' (two of Cobain's favorite shows)" (Ferguson 61). Another story, in the *Washington Post*, continued the litany of television shows that purportedly gave insight to Cobain's life, this one claiming that those of Cobain's generation sought a "Brady Bunch" life (Freedland 1).

Perhaps in the ultimate mass culture gesture, Cobain was finally placed alongside Elvis, as in Jon Pareles's editorial column:

In a way, the continuing presence of deceased musicians makes it hard to believe in their death. If Elvis is still singing "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" on the stereo, maybe he'll show up at the convenience store. . . . And who's to say whether somewhere, long after midnight at some beer-soaked collegiate hangout, that's not Kurt Cobain plunging head down into the mosh pit? ("Music Confers an Afterlife" 11)

Reports of Cobain sightings have not (yet) been made, though in late 1994 rumors surfaced that Cobain had not committed suicide but had been murdered by hit men hired by his record company. The label, it was suggested, had heard that Cobain had broken up the band, and wanted to ensure the continued sales of Nirvana albums, and reckoned the best way to do so was to stage a suicide. Such reports may be the latest flowering of conspiracy theory, or, more likely, may be the natural evolution of cynicism about popular music, commerce, and the media.

Conclusion

Journalists and popular music critics have long grappled with the themes examined in this essay. The coverage of Kurt Cobain's suicide, however, provides an illuminating example of the process by which these themes are recalled and utilized to repair and maintain a cultural understanding of popular music and its practitioners. In many ways the coverage of Cobain's suicide served as a platform from which a variety of discourses on several topics took place. As Simon Frith notes, the music press and music critics (and, I would add, the mainstream press when it reports on popular music) have a "general image of the world" and a "general interpretation of rock" (173) that provides space only for particular narratives. When circumstances fall outside the parameter of those narratives, reporters and critics make sense of them in ways that essentially recapitulate the dominance of those narratives.

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The three themes discussed in this article, authenticity, racism/urban culture, and mass culture are necessarily intertwined, and often surface within the same news story or editorial, sometimes within the same sentence in a report on Cobain's death. It should be noted that these themes are not unique to the discourse surrounding popular music, but are indeed part of the social discourse in contemporary America. Along with making sense of Cobain's death, journalists and critics, along with their audience, and Cobain's, continue to create meanings associated with cultural forms that resonate throughout society. The coverage of Cobain's death, then, can and ought to be viewed not only as journalism in a traditional sense, and certainly not as simply the coverage of a specific news story, but as journalism that incorporates public discourse and concerns with common experiences in an effort to understand larger issues surrounding a particular event.

Note

1. Good examples of their ideas and styles can be found in the following: Ralph J. Gleason, "Perspectives" and "Monterey: The Afternoons"; Lester Bangs, "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung" and *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*; Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*; Robert Christgau, "Secular Music" and *Any Old Way You Choose It*.

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