

Seattle: Seeking Nirvana

Twenty years ago today, the release of the album *Nevermind* defined the new Seattle sound. But beyond the tragic tale of Kurt Cobain, the city and its surroundings have plenty to lure visitors.

By Chris Leadbeater

Saturday, 24 September 2011

The boy on the corner of Pike Place and Pine Street knows his music history. Perhaps 13 years old – 14 at most – he cannot have been alive when the man printed on his chest died. Yet even on this dank Washington State morning – rain drifting in from the Pacific; tourists ambling down the slope, aiming for the clutter and coffee of Pike Place Market – the face on the T-shirt still fits. Kohl-eyed, stubble-cheeked, wearing a quietly pained expression, it is an image that became ubiquitous – but whose fame grew and swelled here in Seattle.

Two decades ago, Kurt Cobain gazed out from more than items of teenage clothing. He peered at the globe from magazine covers, TV screens, glossy posters and the stages of vast venues. And his arrival was swift. One minute, the world knew nothing of Nirvana. The next, they were everywhere, the planet's biggest band, their ascent powered by their photogenic frontman – and the rowdy anthems he crafted behind his lank fringe.

Their coming to the fore in 1991 altered the musical landscape. True, Nirvana's style was heavily indebted to the punk scene of the late Seventies, but in his combining of sonic power – slashes of guitar, bass-heavy rhythms and vocal aggression – with pop hooks of sometimes Beatles-esque melody, Cobain was the instigator of something thrillingly new.

For three years, with Seattle its epicentre, “grunge” ruled the airwaves – and never more so than in the shape of *Nevermind*, Nirvana's keynote album, released 20 years ago today. Purists may point out that the band had already released their debut, 1989's *Bleach* – but *Nevermind* was the distillation of their art, angry yet accessible, loud yet loveable. And in its opening track “Smells Like Teen Spirit”, it brandished what is still one of the most recognisable guitar riffs ever written. It has since sold more than 30 million copies.

The rest is so much newsprint: Cobain's 1992 marriage to fellow rock star Courtney Love – an alliance that pushed him from the music sections to the gossip pages; his struggle to cope with his new, vaunted profile; a discordant third Nirvana album (1993's *In Utero*) so desperate to distance itself from its crowd-friendly predecessor that its opening lines find Cobain attacking his big hit (“Teenage angst has paid off well, now I'm bored and old”, he sneers on “Serve The Servants”); a spiral into heroin addiction; his violent suicide at 27.

But what I want to discover when I land in an overcast Seattle is whether Cobain's story still echoes in the city that provided much of its setting. For Nirvana were a band built on geographic fact, as firmly pinned to America's most north-westerly metropolis as the Beatles to Liverpool, the Velvet Underground to New York or Elvis Presley to Memphis.

Yet initially – aside from the young fan, who heads towards the waterfront, where the chill tongue of Elliott Bay licks at the city's west side – evidence is difficult to unearth. And in starting my search, I dance with the macabre, driving 40 blocks west, to where Lake Washington nuzzles the other side of this wave-lapped city. Then I stroll to 171 Lake Washington Boulevard – where, on 5 April 1994, Cobain held a shotgun to his head. Instantly, I feel foolish and ghoulish. The house is just another expensive home in this affluent suburb, a thick wooden gate now concealing its front. There is little to see here.

Even Viretta Park, an adjacent grassy stub that has long been a fan memorial, has a faded feel, the graffiti on its benches – lyrics, declarations of grief – looking weather-worn and chipped. I get the impression that what happened here has dropped out of focus. It is a Saturday morning, and Seattle is relaxing en masse, watching the air displays and yacht races of the annual Seafair festival on the lake. Nobody looks at the mansion, or the park.

So I turn back – to the parts of Seattle that Cobain inhabited in happier times. But these, too, are tricky to trace. The billboard above the Paramount Theater, where Nirvana played in the first flushes of Nevermind-mania in October 1991, is touting an upcoming Adele show. And its sister venue, the dilapidated Moore Theater, has seen better days – although that was already the case when Nirvana took to the stage of this 1907 relic in June 1989.

The Crocodile – a grunge proving ground at which Nirvana made a “surprise” appearance in October 1992 – sticks to the script, a small venue amid the noisy bars of the Belltown district. But The Vogue, a nearby club where the band tore through their first Seattle set in April 1988, has since become Vain, a beauty salon – though the long brick-walled interior that ebbs behind the wigs in the window betrays the building’s past.

The heritage gap is now plugged by Nirvana: Taking Punk To The Masses – an exhibition at the Experience Music Project, one of the city’s grandest cultural spaces. Put together with the assistance of Krist Novoselic, Nirvana’s bass player and Cobain’s childhood friend, this retrospective places the band within the context of the fertile music scene that emerged in Washington State in the late Eighties – while also displaying holy-grail totems from their brief lifespan. “I literally went into Krist’s attic and took down bins of stuff that he hadn’t looked at in a decade,” explains the curator, Jacob McMurray.

These include Gibson guitars that hung from Novoselic’s broad shoulders in 1993 and 1994, the bassist’s personal set-list from the final Nirvana concert (in Munich on 1 March 1994), the acoustic bass he strummed at their celebrated MTV Unplugged in New York show in November 1993 – displayed alongside the Musrite Gospel guitar Cobain used to write much of Nevermind, and the band’s first record contract, with the Sub Pop label.

But it is the personal pieces that give the exhibition colour and texture: a thrift-store cardigan from Cobain’s wardrobe, holes in the sleeves where he worried them with his fingers; a photo of the band on the Dover-Calais ferry on their 1989 European tour, windswept and bemused; a snap of a grinning Cobain recording demo tracks in 1986, an optimistic, hopeful 19. “People think the Nirvana story is all gloom and suicide,” McMurray continues. “But these were fun goofy guys. We’ve tried to bring that out here.”

Outside, the Experience Music Project tells a story of its own – shiny, rainbow-hued and visibly the work of architect Frank Gehry. Perched below the 605ft Space Needle, the city’s 1962 vision of the future, it is an arty exclamation mark. And it is hardly alone.

For Seattle is a fascinating city, San Francisco’s cool cousin, all implausibly steep streets and fractious climate – but blessed with a youthful vibe (it was only founded in 1852) where its Californian “neighbour” pines for the Sixties. It is also a curious hybrid, a hard-working port with a real cultural edge. And its two-tone appeal is immediately apparent – the sweat of its industrial zone, where the main Boeing plant churns out aircraft; the high-brow Seattle Art Museum, where water-colours sit next to striking contemporary pieces.

At times, these two facets merge: in the Olympic Sculpture Park, on the cusp of the Bay, where modern works (notably sculptor Alexander Calder’s red metallic beast The Eagle) lie so close to the water that ships moor yards away as freight trains clank past; in Pike Place Market, where you can eat gourmet seafood (Sockeye salmon with mango salsa for \$16.95/£11) at Athenian, or buy an art-print to go with your latte at coffee shop Local Color – but where fishmongers still eviscerate the daily catch on slick marble slabs. Nirvana were part of this – the musical force that put Seattle on the map, and yet also symbolic of its character, forward-thinking and tireless of work ethic, always on tour.

But it would be simplistic to define Nirvana only in terms of Seattle. The band's roots sprouted not in the city, but in Cobain and Novoselic's adolescence on the Olympic Peninsula, the expanse of mountains and forest that shields Seattle from the Pacific.

This is significant. For while Nirvana are as indelibly the sound of America's west coast as the Beach Boys, this is a different west coast, marinated in rain, mist and darkness. Cobain even acknowledged this on early track "Spank Thru", written in his home town of Aberdeen, singing: "As the soft pretentious mountains glisten in the light of the trees/And the flowers sing in D Minor/And the birds fly happily/We'll be together again my love."

So I set off in search of this, boarding a Bainbridge Island ferry at the Marion Street dock in the maw of Downtown. And it is amazing how soon Seattle loses its grip, skyscrapers diminishing as the boat inches across Elliott Bay, then suburban malls receding as I drive north on Route 3, flashes of traffic as Route 104 rolls north-west over the two-mile Hood Canal Bridge, a last urban burst in Port Angeles, where colossal tankers litter the harbour.

From here, along the twists and twitches of Route 101 – west-coast America's north-south highway – all is wild beauty. Lake Crescent is aptly named, an extravagant curve of blue. And a detour onto Routes 113 and 112 sends me to Cape Flattery, the most north-westerly point of the contiguous United States, where the Canadian outpost of Vancouver Island winks across the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the open Pacific is an ominous blank canvas.

Then I flick south, rejoining the 101 as the ocean makes its moody presence felt. Ruby Beach belongs to the same continental flank as California, but it suggests a different universe: its sand grey and damp, the giant trunks of dead cedars piled where the tide has left them.

But there are plenty more where they came from. Quinault Rain Forest gathers its firs and spruces into one evangelically green playground – before the trees crowd the camber so closely at Neilton that the 101 only just squeezes through as it guides me into Aberdeen.

I know I have arrived in Cobain's home town because the sign that marks the city limits uses Nirvana's second-most famous single as a gesture of welcome, "Come As You Are" displayed in tall white letters.

But within, there is little to hint that this was the birthplace of a rock superstar. Where I had expected to find a phalanx of shops flogging Nirvana memorabilia, there is just a flat mill town, reduced to economic dust when the local lumber trade slumped in the Eighties.

"This town has a love-hate relationship with Cobain," says Roy Vataja, a classmate of Novoselic's who now works for the Aberdeen Museum of History. "This is mainly due to his drug problems. It doesn't matter that his is a cautionary tale. It's a conservative town."

Nonetheless, Vataja has devised a walking tour of Aberdeen which pinpoints the locations that witnessed Cobain's youth: Grays Harbor Community Hospital, where he was born; the wooden house at 1210 East First Street where he spent much of his childhood; Robert Gray Elementary School, where he had a fitful education. None makes any reference to their former charge – though their mundanity helps explain why the small-town boy who flitted through them would end up being burned in the unflinching international spotlight.

There is, however, one place that pays tribute. At the end of East Second Street, a tiny park has been laid out by the Young Street Bridge – underneath which the teenage Cobain drank and composed songs while staring at the sullen flow of the River Wishkah. It was here that some of his ashes were scattered – and something lingers: in the sketch of his face on a board that bears the lyrics to Nevermind number "Something In The Way" (which mentions the bridge); in a concrete guitar sculpture; in the graffiti on the bridge supports.

As I am leaving, Will Lethbridge pulls up – a Canadian who has driven from Vancouver so that his son can play his favourite Nirvana song (learned via the computer game Guitar Hero) in this hallowed spot. Plugged into a portable amp, 18-year-old Josh reels off a version of “About A Girl” that is eerily perfect as evening light flickers on the Wishkah. A magical moment. And while it is impossible to argue that a man who ended his existence so brutally would have cared for life after death, there is an immortality here all the same.

Travel essentials: Seattle