

A Style of Music That Took the World by Storm:
Evolution of Grunge

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On September 24, 1991 the album *Nevermind* was released by Nirvana, one of the most famous bands to emerge from the sound of grunge music.¹ The album *Nevermind* became an overnight sensation eventually selling 30 million copies and influencing many other musicians. Grunge music or alternative music, which it is also known as, rose to its height in the late 80s and early 90s even though some would argue that there were earlier bands that held the sound. The music had a unique sound with heavier playing of instruments. The normal Rock'n'Roll differed from grunge mainly because of the messages in the lyrics and the sound. Tons of bands including Pearl Jam and Soundgarden and artists like Kurt Cobain and Neil Young, made their mark in this music genre that will never be forgotten. Record labels and music companies looked for this type of sound and were jumping on the new opportunities. Many people's lives were affected in more ways than just a musical aspect. It affected society including people's personalities and appearances. Some would say it was short lived because the fame only lasted for about 5 years, but it was definitely a huge outbreak. The emergence of grunge music in the late 80s and early 90s changed the face of rock music.

Seattle, Washington was home of grunge music, which was also referred to as the, "Seattle Sound."² Before grunge bands became popular, most were just playing in unknown places and shops in Seattle. Due to the Sub Pop Record Label that released, "a three-boxed set

¹Montgomery, James. "Nirvana's Nevermind, By The Numbers." News. September 23, 2011. Accessed November 02, 2016. <http://www.mtv.com/news/1671298/nevermind-nirvana-album/>.

² "ESSENTIAL QUESTION." The Emergence of Grunge. Accessed November 06, 2016. <http://teachrock.org/lesson/the-emergence-of-grunge>.

called Sub Pop 200,” that was, “a compilation of bands like Nirvana, Soundgarden, and Mudhoney..” these bands started to get exposure.³ Sub Pop released Nirvana’s first album along with other bands. Because of this, bands started to find their way out of the streets of Seattle and into the mainstream music scene.

The grunge sound was heard from many musicians before it officially became a popular genre. There is not a definite band or year that grunge music was introduced because earlier music is reported to have some aspects of the sound. Music groups in the mid-80s began to have this mix of punk and heavy metal that was claimed as the grunge sound. One example of this would be Neil Young, who is known as the, “Grandfather of Grunge,” who released his album *Freedom* in 1989 which is known as the first true alternative album and possibly when the grunge scene came into play.⁴ Following this, Nirvana who released their first album to be alternative in 1991, was also crowned with the influence of the beginning of grunge music. The sound originated out of Seattle, Washington where bands such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam released their music from.⁵ When Nirvana released its album, *Nevermind*, the hit, “Smells like Teen Spirit,” was raved upon by the public. They became an overnight sensation and this helped shape the image of alternative music. Gradually, many bands started to copy Nirvana and make music with this sound. Well known bands like Stone Temple Pilots, Soundgarden, and Temple of the Dog were created.

³ Marin, Rick “Grunge: A Success Story. *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1992. Web. 06 Nov. 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/style/grunge-a-success-story.html>.

⁴ Oliver., By Eric. "Neil Young:." Neil Young Godfather of Grunge. Accessed November 02, 2016. <http://thrasherswheat.org/gog.htm>.

⁵ Marin, Rick “Grunge: A Success Story. *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 1992. Web. 06 Nov. 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/style/grunge-a-success-story.html>.

After Nirvana's overnight sensation, many people realized that this music was going to be successful. This especially opened the eyes of the record labels and other music companies. Many record labels noticed that this genre of music was becoming popular and could be a substantial money maker. Record companies decided to change sounds of bands that were already signed or find bands with this sound. Jim Morrison states, "every producer probably in rock, in the rock industry was like alright we gotta either find bands that sound like this or we can change some sounds of current bands we have signed because of course, corporate wise, they're looking for the money trail so that's what was going on I'm sure."⁶ The popularity of the music was what record companies needed to make more money.

Grunge music contradicts earlier Rock'n'roll music due to the sounds of the instruments and the structure of the music. Most grunge songs were, as stated by Jim Morrison, "Three and a half to five minutes songs....Nothing like the classic rock bands of the 70s like Led Zeppelin and like Pink Floyd, the Allman Brothers, to just name a few. They'd play for like ten to fifteen minutes and it would be really complicated."⁷ The arrangements of the music were different because classic rock bands played more instrumentals which included multiple bridges, hooks, and transitions. Whereas grunge music mainly focused on the vocals of the songs and more simple musical arrangements. Another addition that made grunge music different was how certain instruments were played. Morrison says, " Basically grunge rock sounded different I'd say due to heavier sounded distortions on the guitar and deeper, full bass guitar as well. Created much fuller and distorted sound honestly that no one was really used to."⁸ The main difference of

⁶ Morrison, Jim. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. September 18th, 2016

⁷ Morrison, Jim. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. September 18th, 2016

⁸ Morrison, Jim. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. September 18th, 2016

alternative music is the heavier distortion of the guitar. Without this main aspect, grunge music would not have been created.

It is really a mystery as to why this music became so widespread but it may have something to do with the messages and meaning of the music. Morrison states, “Grunge was more simple and to the point. It would be like I feel this way about myself or this issue, repeat it, so on and so on and so forth, the end... They left the songs open to more interpretation for the listener.”⁹ Even though the songs weren’t as technically musically intricate as classic rock songs, they were more open with their emotions and ideas. This might have been a reason as to why the music was so well liked by the public because everyone pulled their own ideas and developed their own emotions through the lyrics.

As with all new trends or styles not everyone is going to enjoy or agree with it. The same goes with genres of music or artists. Some people didn’t favor this alternative music as much as others. Morrison says, “ Right yeah I would say the religious groups of course but you know it's always about censorship. There's a lot of vulgarity in the grunge music and in other rock music too. Of course parents don't like their young teens listening to you know depressive music or you know lyrics that are negative in someway so there's always that censorship that needs to be addressed.”¹⁰ Many of the lyrics of grunge music didn’t always focus on good topics or were very positive. Especially since the majority of the audience were teens, it makes sense as to why some parents might have been reluctant to let their kids listen to music that could introduce them to a certain lifestyle.

⁹ Morrison, Jim. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. September 18th, 2016

¹⁰ Morrison, Jim. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. September 18th, 2016

Alternative music affected many people in more than just a musical aspect. This music had an effect on people's appearances. On this website it states some new fashion trends created through the music, "American department stores soon had sections of grunge clothing-knockoffs of the flannel shirts, combat boots, and stocking hats favoured by Seattle bands and their fans."¹¹ People changed the way they dressed based on what was popular through the music and what famous artists of these bands were wearing. Also Morrison says, "And the way teens were dressing like flannel shirts, ripped jeans, and some kids started growing their hair out that you never thought would."¹² The genre of grunge created a change in the fashion industry.

Besides the way people dressed, it also affected what people did. Many kids, mostly teens, became encouraged to start playing instruments or creating bands. As Morrison states, "I personally noticed a lot of people picking up the guitar and starting to learn these songs, like all the hit songs. So it might have inspired a lot of the youth to play some instruments, not only guitar but probably even bass and drums."¹³

This music may have had not only a positive effect but, also a negative effect. Morrison states, "...everyone knew that a lot of these bands, a couple of these big names, grunge artists were doing drugs. I hope it didn't lead many to do drugs but with all music it comes with territory. It's going to affect some. I'm sure it caused some deaths. Some overdoses and things like that but that's with all music." Since these bands were so popular and were major influences

¹¹ "Grunge." Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Accessed November 02, 2016.
<https://www.britannica.com/art/grunge-music>.

¹² Morrison, Jim. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. September 18th, 2016

¹³ Morrison, Jim. Personal interview with the author. Lancaster, PA. September 18th, 2016

in many people's lives, this may have lead to people following what they thought was, "the cool thing," because big name artists were doing it.

The fame of alternative music didn't last long like some other genres of music did or still have. The book *Grunge is Dead: The Oral History of Seattle Rock Music* states, " While the movement didn't turn out to be as long lasting as many figured it would, what it packed into was a four-year period (1990-1994) was pretty darn extraordinary,"¹⁴ The music was very short-lived for the significance of the outbreak that occurred when the music came out. As stated on this website, " Eventually, grunge faded—partly because of the death in 1994 of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain..." many believe it started to fade because of Kurt Cobain's death. Since most grunge bands did not want all the fame, they did not listen to their record labels that wanted more radio-friendly lyrics.¹⁵ Original fans of the genre became unhappy with the "grunge sound" and sales began to drop.

In conclusion it really is a mystery as to why grunge music blew up like it did. It's fame did not last long, but it reached a high potential and added another phenomenon in the evolution of music .

¹⁴ Prato, Greg. *Grunge Is Dead: The Oral History of Seattle Rock Music*. Toronto: ECW, 2009. Print.

¹⁵ By 1990 Many Locals Had Tired of the Hype Surrounding the Seattle Scene and Hoped That Media Exposure Was Dying Down.[2]. "Grunge Music." - New World Encyclopedia. Accessed November 06, 2016. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Grunge_music.

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