

# Kurt Cobain Avengers

By JUSTIN BENDELL

On my fourteenth birthday, after my guitar lesson at Tobias Music, my Mom handed me a black plastic case. “It’s not much of a surprise,” she said.

Excited, I leaned my mangy, junior-size acoustic against the counter and popped the latches of the case. Inside: my first electric guitar—black sheen, faux-pearl inlay, single-coil pickups, a shoulder strap so I could play while standing. It was perfect.

I was thick into heavy metal at the time, my bedroom walls quilted with images of long-haired drummers and guitarists from bands like Megadeth and Slayer. My new guitar became a mouthpiece for fast, demon-churning riffs in minor key. This sparked worry in my mother. She knocked on my door one afternoon. “I got you something,” she said. It was a cassette, a talisman against Satan’s seductive power—Tom Petty’s *Full Moon Fever*.

“This is um . . . great. Thanks,” I said.

I listened to it once, loud enough for her to hear it. But soon I returned to the squall of Marshall stacks, blitzkrieg

double-bass, the apocalypse howls; it was this noise that defined me.

But something happened that I could not have foreseen. In 1991, Seattle grunge broke into the mainstream, due in part to the success of Nirvana’s album *Nevermind*. Catching “Smells like Teen Spirit” on MTV, I surprised myself. Nirvana’s sound was brash, angry, anxious, but without the macho-demon pretense of heavy metal; no chain-mail or spikes, just three angsty guys in jeans and flannel. This music spoke to me too. Before Nirvana, I had understood music to be binary: it was either metal or unlistenable. Kurt Cobain had transcended my sense of universal order.

My best friend Paul lived up the street. He moved to their father’s house after his mom died from cancer. At the time, I didn’t understand how a kid could live after losing his mother. Paul never talked about it, and I didn’t want to bring it up.

When he got a drum set that Christmas, we formed a band. I’d haul my guitar and amp to his garage. I knew most Nirvana songs by heart. The structure was simple: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, coda. We had our own music too, songs with pithy titles like “Fuck Censorship” and

“Plums are Fun” but it was easier, and more enjoyable, to play Nirvana.

In December, after an afternoon of practice, Paul and I got a ride to the VFW Hall in Lombard. Some punks had organized a show featuring local groups. We were not nearly ready to play live, but it was fun to check out the competition. Also, a girl from school, Journey, was coming to the show. She was a year younger, hair the color of prairie grass, blue-eyed. She carried herself with a mixture of slack and confidence, and she owned a skateboard.

A brown caravan pulled into the lot. “That’s her Dad’s car,” Paul said.

The door opened. Rosie—with her wild, red hair—hopped out, and Journey followed, her army jacket un-buttoned despite the cold. They waved to the driver, who blinked the lights and departed.

I was awkward with girls. But with Paul around, making jokes and laughing, it was much easier. We spent the show together, pogoing and making fun of the mosh pit punks. From then on, Journey and I were inseparable. Inseparable and platonic. I didn’t know how to broach the subject of “dating.” I figured that, eventually, the dating part would just happen.

I’d walk Journey home from school, pulling her along on

her skateboard. If the skateboard’s wheel hit a pebble I’d steady her—her hands in my hands. This physical contact sent goose bumps up and down my arms. The fact is I loved her. Everyone knew this. Occasionally she’d hang out with a guy from school and I’d worry, but it was never serious—I thought of it as a test that I was passing. Then Journey started going out with new people. A guy here, a guy there. In summer I spent every day at her house, a white clapboard across from a tree-lined park, but her nights were her own. Rosie told me that Journey had a new crush, a guy named Tim. Another crush in a series of crushes. When I’d drop by, Journey would tell me about Tim—the things he said, the hotness of his hair. She talked about him in front of me as if I was just another girlfriend. Crazy with jealousy, and fascinated by Journey’s obliviousness, I grew tired of best friend status, and tried to show displeasure in her behavior. In other words, I brooded.

“What’s wrong with you today?” Journey said. She’d been in the kitchen, pouring cereal.

“Nothing,” I said. I was slouched, my arms crossed.

“It doesn’t seem like nothing.”

“I don’t like Tim.”

“Yeah,” she said, nonchalantly. “I had a feeling. You get pouty every time I mention him.”

“You should stop seeing him.”

Journey stared at me. “You’re serious.”

“He’s not good for you.”

She laughed sharply. “Okay, Dad.”

“Seriously.”

“Seriously, where do you get off giving me life instructions?”

I wanted to say, What do you think I’m doing here every day? Can’t you see how I’m sacrificing everything for you?

Instead, I grabbed my skateboard. “I can’t do this,” I said, and walked out the door.

Later, she called. “What’s going on?” she said.

And, for the first time, I told her everything.

There was silence on her end. Her breath echoed through the wire.

She said, “But you’re like a brother. . .”

This response sent me up the wall. Caring little if I hurt her, I said some choice words and, once I got her crying, hung up the phone.

Within days, I’d returned to Paul and the band, fueled by the maelstrom inside me. We practiced daily. By autumn, we scored our first garage show. There were a couple dozen

people—hatted, scarved—standing in clusters. Paul, his blue hair pulled up, adjusted his toms. We opened the show with Aneurysm, and I lost sense of myself. We didn’t matter, only Nirvana did. Then I made the mistake of looking into the crowd. There was Rosie, but no Journey. Of course she wouldn’t be there. But that hadn’t stopped me from hoping that she’d come and, so moved by my passion on stage, declare to me her eternal, glorious love. Well, so much for that. The amps churned. I stabbed at the strings. I strummed furiously. I bled on the pick guard but refused to stop playing. I wanted to smash things, and I let it all out on my guitar. I was a maniac. And when the show ended, the crowd departed, and I felt alone.

It was a difficult semester, but the promise of a new Nirvana album and tour brightened my mood some. They’d be playing two Chicago shows in October. Paul and I waited in the cold for tickets. The shows sold out in a few minutes, but our vigilance paid off.

Our friend Diana drove us. From the backseat window I watched the night-clouds roll through the Loop. The Aragon Ballroom was packed, the air acrid with cigarette smoke. After the opening band, we pooled to the left of the stage, wild with anticipation. The sway of the crowd, the chatter and the buzz

of so many people waiting and eager. And then the house lights went black. When Cobain hit the stage I fell into a dream—my body lifted and floated across a sea of hands. It was as close as I'd come to transcendence.

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Months later, spring broke in Chicago. It was warm enough finally to melt the hold-out snow behind north-facing homes and sheds. Paul's father—an airline pilot with nonsense blue eyes—picked us up from school. Normally he greeted us with a snide comment about his Paul's day-glo hair. This day was different. He stared ahead, both hands on the steering wheel, as we climbed into the back seat. We pulled out with the buses that lurched like boxcars onto Main Street. The talk-radio was turned down—just crackle and pops of static. The silence was odd and uncomfortable. Paul looked at me, shrugged his shoulders, as if to say *who knows?* As we passed the Gyro Hut and turned left on Ogden, Paul's dad cleared his throat.

"Boys," he said, "I'm sorry I have to be the one to tell you this. . . Kurt Cobain's dead."

Silence in the backseat. Then Paul shook his head. "He's lying," he said to me. "He always does stuff like this."

Paul's father said, "I wish I was lying, son."

They dropped me off on Belle Aire Lane and I walked through my neighbor's yard. I was still processing the news, uncertain that I could trust Paul's dad. He regularly mocked our music and baggy pants and I wouldn't put it past him to play a trick on us. I paced through the forested right-of-way into my backyard. The silver maples were budding. I passed the recessed circle of earth where the pool went in summer. As soon as I'd get inside, my plan was to flip on MTV and get Kurt Loder's take. But as I turned the corner, my mom was pulling into the driveway. She stepped out of the Caravan, fumbled with the car keys. When she saw me standing under the eave, she quickly turned away, as if adjusting something. When she returned her gaze, I saw in her big brown eyes the thing that I'd been dreading. Paul's dad was telling the truth.

"Oh, honey," she said. "I'm so sorry."

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I felt it before I saw anything, the dull rumble, earth shivering like an earthquake. I imagined the New Madrid fault jiggling awake in northern Missouri and sending tremulous fingers to Chicago, leaving a patchwork of towns and fields in shambled disarray: corn stalks cracked and dangling in the roads, Fords overturned in the fields, wheels spinning.

The train rounded the bend. Paul, Dan and I waited. We let our adrenaline wash us over, double checked our sneakers to make sure the laces were tied. Our soles, smudged black from skateboard skids, found footing on the slopes of lava rock that cascaded down the sides of the embankment.

This train was engine first. As the three engines passed, we emerged from the sumac, climbed the embankment, and weighed our chances. The train throbbed along, slow enough to consider hopping, but ultimately we decided against it. As the caboose passed, its red light blinking dimly in the late afternoon sun, we collected the pennies we'd placed on the running surface. The iron wheels had flicked them into the rocks, Lincoln's face stretched beyond all recognition. A consolation prize, but something to suggest that boyish things still mattered.

I examined the lights on the signal bridge: red:red:green. Another train was coming, so we waited. Within a half-hour, a freight squealed its way to a stop. We climbed the rusty red ladder to a box car roof. There was a long line of sturdy boxes and we leapt one to the next, keeping faith in our sneakers. The box cars terminated into a string of Hopper ore cars, open to the sun and half-filled with iridescent chips of coal. We lined up at the edge, raised our fists in the air.

Dan yelled, "Kurt Cobain Avengers!" and leapt into the coal.

Paul and I laughed at him. It was a corny thing to say. But somehow, it felt right.

Paul and I shouted in unison, "Kurt Cobain Avengers!" jumping after him.

I hit the pile and slid. The coal was hard and jagged, my fingers black with char. I climbed to the next car and jumped again. I leapt from coal car to coal car—purging—freeing myself from Kurt Cobain's fate.

The train came alive, first the distant hum of engine, then a louder sound, like a car put into gear. Dan climbed up and out, balancing his Converse on the metal corner of the car, swinging his arms before him, pretending to jump. That wide-grin, big white teeth only three years stained by nicotine, raccoon rings under eyes—Dan, the burdens of hard life already creeping in. The train jerked forward a few inches, then stopped. Dan's head was thrust before him and he teetered, but his knees bent at the right time and he steadied himself.

"Whoa!" he said. He was laughing. Paul clambered out and over, clinging tight to the rust-red ladder..

The train juttet and thumped. We were rolling.

“Picking up speed!” I said. I pulled myself to the box car.

The trees and phone wires were racing past me. I blinked and then I was racing past them. Dan joined me on the box car. “It’s really moving,” he said.

Faster and faster. How fast was too fast? I could tell that Dan was thinking the same thing, though I suspect he was torn, like I was. Maybe we should see how far it will go?

“Fuck it, I’m getting off,” Dan said.

Reluctantly, I followed him down the ladder.

Every day we came to the tracks—from Cobain’s death in April until June.

“Kurt Cobain Avengers!” we shouted and leapt.

We did this over and over until our hearts were tired. Come July it was too hot, and Dan had a girlfriend. By August, Paul’s dad accepted a job flying planes in North Carolina. I was with Paul when he put his drum set into a moving box. I waved half-heartedly as he drove around the corner out of sight. In his trunk was my skateboard, but I didn’t know it then.

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I gave my electric guitar away ten years ago. But my first guitar—the mangy, junior-sized acoustic—rests on a stand

behind me. This guitar: a palimpsest of stickers, slogans, and spray paint, has endured years of selfishness and self-doubt. It has been flung into cornfields, smacked against stop-signs, burned by cigarettes. It has endured loss. I strummed it in Madison the night my best friend from college killed himself. It kept house in Miami the November I flew to Chicago to hold my mother’s hand for the last time.

It sits on its stand, weathered and worn. I think about Dan and Paul, Rosie and Journey—these names from the past. I think about Kurt Cobain, almost twenty years gone. I think about the old songs, ones I wrote, ones we played a thousand times. I can’t remember them all, but I remember some. I pick the guitar up and strum a few chords of Aneurysm. The strings fall out of tune. I retune them. I strum a few more chords and set the guitar back on the stand. It will be like this till the day I die: falling out of tune, retuning: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, coda.