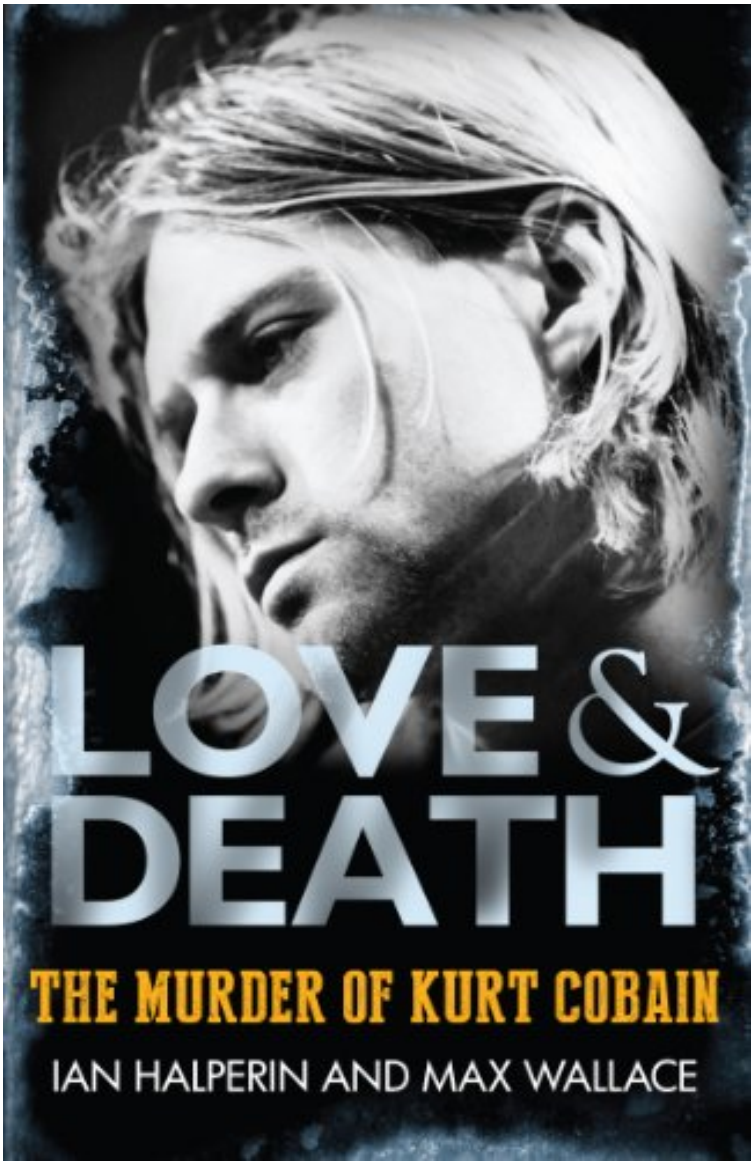
Love Death: The Murder of Kurt Cobain



Par Max Wallace, Ian Halperin
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[E-BOOK] Love Death: The Murder of Kurt Cobain

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTHE EXPLOSIVE INVESTIGATION INTO THE DEATH OF KURT COBAIN. Friday, 8th April 1994. Kurt Cobain's body was discovered in a room above a garage in Seattle. For the attending authorities, it was an open-and-shut case of suicide. What no one knew was Cobain had been murdered. That April, Cobain went missing for several days, or so it seemed: in fact, some people knew where he was, and one of them was Courtney Love. This explosive crusade for the truth paints a critical portrait of Love, and reveals for the first time the case tapes made by Love's own private investigator who was on a mission to find the truth about Cobain's death.ExtraitChapter 1It is a typically rainy day in Montesano, Washington, when we arrive for our interview with Kurt's paternal grandfather, Leland Cobain,

in June 2003. Leland and his late wife, Iris, were said to have been closer to Kurt than even his own parents, and there were reports that, shortly before his death, Kurt had made plans to go on a fishing trip with his grandfather. Although we had contacted him while we were researching our first book, Leland -- like most of Kurt's immediate family -- was reluctant to be interviewed. Now, more than nine years after Kurt's death, we had heard that Leland was finally ready to talk about his famous grandson.Most biographical accounts of Kurt's early years describe his family living in a trailer park, conjuring up images of a "trailer trash" upbringing. Indeed, the small Montesano lot where Leland resides, and where Kurt had lived on and off during his youth, is officially given this designation in the town directory, and perhaps it once served this purpose. But when we arrive, we are surprised to find that the dwellings aren't trailers at all, but rather small, prefab, bungalow-style units with well-groomed lawns and beautiful trees. Boats and golf carts are parked in many of the driveways, suggesting a more affluent community than what we had been led to expect by the condescending biographies and press accounts.Leland greets us warmly at the door of his slightly cramped two-bedroom house. He and Iris had moved in more than thirty years earlier, when Kurt was just a young child, and Leland had continued living here alone after Iris's death in 1997. Just a stone's throw away is the house where Kurt himself had lived briefly with his father after his parents' divorce. When the going got rough, however, it was his grandparents' house where he sought refuge. It wouldn't be entirely accurate to describe the house as a shrine to Kurt, but from the moment we walk in the door, his presence can be seen and felt everywhere. The first sight that catches one's eye is a framed gold record presented to Nirvana in 1993. Underneath it is a kitschy black velvet portrait of Kurt given to Leland a few years ago by a fan. The rest of the walls and bookshelves are crammed with photos of Kurt and the other grandchildren, sandwiched in between plaques and trophies commemorating Leland's achievements as a champion golfer and dartsman. More Kurt-related memorabilia is crammed in the basement, including hundreds of photos and letters sent to Leland and Iris by Nirvana fans from all over the world."I'm very proud of him," says Leland, tearing up slightly as he pauses in front of a photo of a cherubic three-year-old Kurt. "He was a good kid. I miss him." He takes us on a tour of the house, pointing out the many artifacts associated with his grandson and telling stories about the boy who had spent a lot of time within these walls. Leland is a spry seventy-nine-year-old, who wears hearing aids in both ears to remedy a deafness acquired while fighting at Guadalcanal as a young marine during the Second World War and then exacerbated by rolling asphalt for a living years later. After his discharge from the marines, he developed a serious alcohol problem, which he admits made him a "different person." By most accounts, his problems started after his father -- a local county sheriff -- was killed when his gun went off accidentally. However, his heaviest drinking reportedly started after his third son, a severely retarded boy named Michael, died in an institution at the age of six. Leland, though, soon conquered his personal demons, found religion and gave up alcohol completely. "I became a changed man," he recalls. By the time Kurt was born in 1967, he had become a respected citizen of Montesano, a regular churchgoer and, by most accounts, a pretty good father and grandfather, frequently babysitting for Kurt and his younger sister, Kim. But it was Iris, not Leland, with whom Kurt most closely bonded."They were so much alike," Leland recalls, pointing to a photo of a strikingly beautiful brunette taken just after the couple were married. "Kurt loved his grandmother so much. I think she was the only member of the family who he could confide in. I think he was closer to Iris than he was to his own mother. He got his artistic side from Iris, that's for sure."Leland takes out a box of drawings Kurt did as a child. One of them, signed "Kurt Cobain, age 6," depicts Donald Duck and shows undeniable artistic talent for one so young. "When I saw that one, I said to Kurt, 'You traced that, you didn't draw it,' and he got mad; he said to me, 'I did too draw it.'"After Kurt left his hometown for good in 1987, he kept in touch with his grandparents only sporadically. Leland takes out a Christmas card they received after Kurt moved away:Dear long lost grandparents: I miss you very much. Which is no excuse for my not visiting....We put out a single just recently and it has sold-out already....I'm happier than I ever have been. It would be nice to hear from you as well. Merry Christmaslove KurtLeland hadn't read our first book, and we had yet to tell him the subject of this new one. After a tour of the house, and an hour's worth of anecdotes about Kurt and his family while sitting around the dining room table, we are at last prepared to broach the topic we thought would be the most difficult to bring up. Two of Leland's brothers had killed themselves years earlier, fueling the most common of all the clichs about Kurt's own fate -- that he had somehow inherited the "suicide gene." It is obviously a sensitive subject, and Leland's voice chokes when he talks about the family tragedies. Finally, we ask him how he and Iris felt when they learned their own grandson had killed himself.His response is not at all what we expected: "Kurt didn't commit suicide," he declares matter-of-factly. "He was murdered. I'm sure of it." In the days and

weeks following Kurt Cobain's 1994 death, journalists and biographers descended on his hometown of Aberdeen, Washington, seeking clues to help make sense of the suicide of the town's most famous descendant -- a town Kurt had constantly scorned in his music, his interviews and his journals. So glaring was Aberdeen's sense of hopelessness that many came away feeling Kurt's eventual fate was hardly surprising, was perhaps even inevitable. The suicide rate in Aberdeen is twice the national average, and the unemployment rate staggering, since the near collapse of the logging industry years before. Drugs and other symptoms of despair were all-pervading."It's as if the town were being held accountable for Cobain's ruin -- which is not entirely unfathomable," wrote Mikal Gilmore, who visited Aberdeen a week after Kurt's death. "When you are confronted with the tragic loss of a suicide, you can't help sorting backward through the dead person's life, looking for those crucial episodes of dissolution that would lead him to such an awful finish. Look far enough into Kurt Cobain's life, and you inevitably end up back in Aberdeen -- the homeland that he fled."Now we had come to Aberdeen nine years later seeking a different set of clues.Three hours after our interview with Leland, we stumble upon an unexpectedly rich source of Cobain lore a few miles down the highway: two women in their early twenties, a stringy-haired boy of seventeen, and a baby. They are loitering outside the bus station when we stop to ask for directions, and we quickly strike up a conversation about Aberdeen's most famous native son.They are too young to have really known Kurt, but we ask them whether they ever listen to his music. "Nobody around here listens to that stuff anymore," replies the boy, who could pass for a teenage Kurt, minus the distinctive blazing blue eyes. Today, he says, hip-hop and death metal rule in Aberdeen. They make us an offer we can't pass up: "You want to see his house?" and then proceed to cram themselves in the car. The baby, wedged between his mother and a skateboard, squirms contentedly in anticipation of whatever adventure lies ahead. "Later, we'll bring you to meet one of Kurt's old friends if you want," says Autumn, the twenty-three-year-old mother. She tells us she has two more children at home, and then ventures, "You're not narcs, are you?"As we cruise through the streets of this grim town, passing churches and bars and not much else, it calls forth the description of Kurt's Aberdeen friend Dale Crover, who once said, "There's nothing to do here but smoke dope and worship Satan." Is that true? we ask our impromptu tour guides. "Pretty much," says the guy. "Oh yeah, and also skateboarding. There's always that."The carload of us arrive at a small, impeccably manicured house at 101 East First Street in a section of town the locals call "the flats." Kurt's family moved here shortly after his birth from their rented house in nearby Hoquiam. His father, Don, worked as a mechanic at the local Chevron station to support the family while his mother, Wendy, took care of Kurt, born February 20, 1967, and his sister, Kim, born three years later. Wendy had scrimped and saved Don's earnings to buy the house -- a badge of respectability heralding arrival into the middle class, and a decided step-up from her own working-class roots. She was determined that her children would make something of themselves and eventually escape the dead end that Aberdeen represented for most of the kids who grew up here.And yet Don's father, Leland, never really approved of Wendy or what he called her "social-climbing ways.""I think she thought she was better than our family," he recalls. "She was always criticizing Don because he wasn't enough of a muckety-muck. She wanted him to be making more money and she was never satisfied."Aberdeen does not celebrate its status as a cradle of the musical movement called grunge. Indeed, the first thing you notice when you drive through the town looking for indications that a superstar grew up here is that there are none, even in the museum devoted to preserving local history. There's plenty in the museum about the fact that Aberdeen once boasted more than fifty brothels servicing the loggers and sailors, until a wave of morality shut them down in the 1950s. But it's almost as if the locals are embarrassed to claim Cobain as one of their own.We ask the museum's curator, Dan Sears, Is the fact that there is not a single mention of Cobain in the Aberdeen Museum of History due to the continuous scorn Kurt heaped on the town -- a town whose population he once described as "highly bigoted, redneck, snoose-chewing, deer-shooting, faggot-killing, logger types"?"Not at all," Sears replies. "It's because my predecessor said he didn't want a bunch of long-haired hippies coming in all the time." He notes that we are the third set of visitors that day asking about Cobain. Just a few minutes earlier, he had fielded a query from a forty-year-old man and his son who had come a thousand miles to visit Kurt's hometown.Sears does recommend one Kurt-related attraction in Aberdeen that we might want to visit, but even this homage seems to have been treated with a kind of pained embarrassment. Some years earlier, a local truck driver-turned-sculptor named Randi Hubbard had constructed a 600-pound, life-size concrete statue of Cobain in the garage of her husband's muffler shop. "I think we all have a little Kurt Cobain in us," explains Hubbard, who knew Kurt when their families lived a block away from one another in Aberdeen. "He was a precious little kid when I knew him. As Kurt said, the

townspeople of Aberdeen didn't like change or culture. I wanted to put something in the entrance to the town to show the world that some of us loved Kurt."Initially, the Aberdeen City Council had approved her offer to erect the statue in a park at the east entrance of town. But then the angry letters and phone calls from local residents started to pour in, and the town councillors quickly backpedaled. A local chamber of commerce president summed up the general feeling: "There are lots of people who deserve to be honored....[But] there's a difference between being famous and being infamous."Today the statue sits tucked in among auto parts and greasy rags. Just as well; Kurt would never have approved. He didn't want to have anything to do with Aberdeen or its residents, as his bandmate Krist Novoselic made clear when he publicly threatened to smash the statue to pieces if it was ever unveiled. "If anybody puts up a statue of Kurt, I'll kick it down," Novoselic said in 1994. "He would not have wanted it. That's not what Kurt was about." (A few years later, Hubbard constructed the first sculpture -- a statue of a firefighter -- to be erected at Ground Zero after September 11.)But if the town has failed to brag about its most famous native son, it seems that everybody here has some Cobain connection and is quite willing to talk about it, as we discovered when the desk clerk of our hotel told us that she attended kindergarten with Kurt."He was a quiet guy," recalls Bobbi Fowler. "Kids used to tease him 'cause he was from a poor family. He didn't have the popular stuff other kids had. He struggled 'cause of his mom -- that was well known. She didn't treat him good. They didn't have a lot of money, Kurt's family." This didn't quite mesh with the description Kurt gave his official biographer, Michael Azerrad, in 1993. "I was an extremely happy child," he recalled. "I was constantly screaming and singing. I didn't know when to quit. I'd eventually get beaten up by kids because I'd get so excited about wanting to play. I took play very seriously. I was just really happy."From an early age, Kurt had an imaginary friend named Boddah, whom he introduced to his family and for whom he made them set an extra place at the table. When five-year-old Kurt was fingered by Aberdeen police as the prime suspect in the torture of a neighbor's cat, Boddah was blamed. But, other than a brief period on Ritalin to control his hyperactivity -- a condition that was to diminish naturally when his parents restricted his sugar intake -- by most accounts, Kurt was a typical little boy.The story goes that the clue to explain what brought this happy childhood to an abrupt crash can be found on a wall inside this house on East First Street -- where our newfound friends have taken us on the first stop of our Cobain tour of Aberdeen. Here a young Kurt had allegedly scrawled on his bedroom wall, "I hate Mom, I hate Dad, it really makes me feel so sad," after his parents' relationship started to deteriorate and he heard them fighting almost constantly. The story, like many told by his mother in later years, may be apocryphal, but it has been constantly repeated by chroniclers attempting to explain his self-destructive path, each of whom traces his downward spiral to his parents' 1975 divorce when Kurt was eight. It is the first of a long string of clichs that get trotted out, almost like a mantra, by those seeking pat answers for his eventual fate."Of course his parents' divorce had an effect on Kurt," says his grandfather. "What kid isn't affected when their parents split up? But I think the real impact, which I guess you can blame on the divorce, didn't come until a little later."Like almost everybody we talked to in Aberdeen, Leland paints a troubling picture of Kurt's relationship with his mother. "She didn't really have much use for him until he became famous. She didn't want anything to do with him. Maybe she couldn't handle him or something, although he wasn't really that much trouble."When Don finally moved out of the house shortly after Kurt's ninth birthday, Wendy invited her new boyfriend to move in, a man Kurt would later describe as a "mean, huge wife beater." Taking on what he perceived to be the father role, the boyfriend would frequently smack Kurt for the smallest transgression. His mother's failure to protect him caused the boy to withdraw into his own little world. Wendy later admitted that the man was "nuts -- a paranoid schizophrenic." At her new boyfriend's suggestion, she soon let Kurt go live with his father, who had taken a small house across the lot from Leland and Iris in Montesano.If Leland has harsh words for his daughter-in-law's treatment of Kurt, he doesn't spare his own son some of the blame. At first, he recalls, Kurt was extremely happy living with Don. "They used to go fishing and they were together all the time. They did all kinds of father-and-son things. Kurt was thriving. I don't think I'm the only one who noticed that he was ecstatic to get away from his mother. And I think Kurt was about the happiest he'd ever been."That soon changed when Don met and married a woman who had two children of her own. Kurt's new stepmother did everything she could to win his affection. But she wasn't the problem."One thing I noticed early on after Donny married this woman was the way he treated Kurt different than her kids," says Leland. "They could get away with just about anything, but if Kurt did something wrong, his father would give him a hard time. Donny never did want the divorce from Wendy, and I think he was afraid that the new one was going to leave him, so he bent over backwards to please her. She had a boy and a girl, and there could have been an apple sitting on a table and one of her

kids could pick up the apple and take a bite out of it and put it back on the table, but if Kurt did that, Donny would hit him in the head or something. I told Donny, 'You're going to lose that kid.' I said, 'Goddamit, you've got to treat him the same as you do hers,' but he denied it, and he said, 'Bull, I don't treat him any different.' I know Kurt resented that, and I think that's when a lot of his problems really began."When Kurt was young, the kids in Aberdeen and Montesano usually fell into three categories -- the jocks, the rockers and the misfits. Kurt fell somewhere between the latter two. Today, explain our young companions, there are still three distinct groups, only the qualifications are now different: you're either a "screecher" (pothead), a "tweaker" (crystal meth addict) or a junkie (heroin or crack addict).We realize Donnie Collier is definitely a screecher when the first thing he asks us is whether we have any of that "good Canadian weed." Our new friends have brought us to meet Collier at his little house in North Aberdeen because he was supposedly "real tight with Kurt." It soon becomes apparent that it wasn't so much Collier who was friends with Kurt but rather his uncle Dale Crover, a member of a local band called the Melvins, and later a Nirvana drummer.Kurt had developed a love for pop music at an early age through listening to his favorite bands, the Beatles, the Mamas and the Papas, and the Monkees, on his aunt Mary's old hi-fi. Despite, or because of, his constant drum banging, none of his relatives had ever thought young Kurt had much musical affinity. Everybody just assumed he was going to be an artist after one of his drawings made it into the school paper when he was six. But as he became increasingly alienated from his father's new family, music -- not art -- became his refuge. Don was into rock and roll in a big way, and he had joined the Columbia House Music Club ("Get twelve records for only a cent"). When the records began to arrive, Kurt discovered a heavier sound than the bubblegum pop he had always loved. It soon brought him into contact with a new circle of friends -- a group of much older heavy metal potheads who would come over to listen to and exchange records by the likes of Kiss, Aerosmith and Black Sabbath. "After they turned me on to that music," Kurt later recalled, "I started turning into this little stoner kid."By the time he got his first guitar from his uncle Chuck on his fourteenth birthday, Kurt had already decided he was going to be a rock star. When he began taking guitar lessons, he wanted to play only Led Zeppelin, recalls Warren Mason, the guitarist in Wendy's brother Chuck's band, who remembers "the little blond kid watching when we jammed." Mason still runs ads all over Aberdeen inviting locals to study with "the man who taught Kurt Cobain to play guitar."Chuck paid Mason $125 for an old Gibson Explorer and gave it to Kurt as a present. "The first lesson, I asked Kurt if he could play anything and he said yes," recalls Mason. "He played 'Louie, Louie' on one string. Kurt later admitted that a lot of his songs were based on 'Louie, Louie,' which has a one-four-five chord progression. When I asked him his goal, he said he wanted to master 'Stairway to Heaven.' His favorite band at the time was ELO." Years later, Kurt was furious when he read an interview with Mason in Rolling Stone revealing Kurt's early love for Led Zeppelin and other mainstream bands. "He was also pissed off that I said he was a nice kid," recalls Mason. Although bands like the Sex Pistols and the Ramones had already pioneered a musical revolution that would one day change his life, punk rock still had not permeated the Aberdeen scene.By the age of fifteen, unable to get along with Don's wife and his stepsiblings, Kurt was shuttling back and forth between his parents' houses. But his mother's patience with his increasingly rebellious behavior grew thin, especially after Kurt was arrested for spray-painting "Homosexual Sex Rules" on the side of a local bank -- an act more reflective of his penchant for pissing off the locals than of his sexual orientation. Wendy sent him to stay with a long series of relatives, including his grandparents, who brought him to church with them every Sunday. He didn't have much use for the sermons, recalls Leland, but he loved the music, and for a time Kurt even joined the choir, where he may have honed his soon-to-be distinct vocal abilities.And then, at the age of sixteen, Kurt Cobain discovered punk, courtesy of a friend named Matt Lukin, whom Kurt had met in the most unlikely of places. They were on the same Little League baseball team that Kurt had joined to please his father (or so he later claimed, lest anybody accuse him of being a jock). Matt was the bassist for a local band mockingly named after a mentally handicapped Thriftway employee called Melvin who liked to climb on roofs. The year before, Kurt had been in the same high school art class as the Melvins' leader Buzz Osborne, when the band had still been a Jimi Hendrix/The Who cover band. But in the interval, the band had been turned on to the angry, rebellious sounds of punk, just the right music to say "Fuck off!" to all those they had grown to detest -- the local rednecks, the jocks, the stoners and, most of all, their parents. Lukin and Osborne began to lend Kurt their precious cache of punk and new-wave tapes, along with their most prized possession, a Sex Pistols photo book. Before long, he joined the other "cling-ons" -- the nickname for the assortment of local misfits who congregated around the Melvins -- at the Aberdeen rehearsal space where the band pounded out the music that would transform Kurt's

world."This is what I was looking for," Kurt wrote in his journal after he saw the band play for the first time behind the local Thriftway. "I came to the promised land of a grocery store parking lot and I found my special purpose."Twenty years later, Donnie Collier, nephew of Dale Crover, the Melvins' drummer, takes a long hit off his pipe and proceeds to share his memories of Kurt, whom he met at the Melvins' sessions. "There was a bunch of us who'd go over after school while the band rehearsed and just hang out. Sometimes he'd jam with the band, but he still wasn't very good. They didn't pay very much attention to him, I don't think. But they were the coolest guys in town and anybody who hung around with them was automatically considered cool. At least we thought so. I think it's about the only place where Kurt really fit in. You always read that Kurt was really quiet, but I never really noticed that. There was this nerdy guy, Scottie Karate, who would come over and hang out all the time. Kurt would sort of pick on him, just rag on him constantly; he could be a bit of a bully. He was pretty nice to me though, maybe because my uncle was in the band. He used to sell me pot. Kurt wasn't a big-time dealer or anything, but he'd always have a little extra that he'd sell to make some money."Collier has run out of the homegrown he has been using to fill the pipe that has been going around the room for the past twenty minutes. He offers to take the lot of us to "Kurt Cobain Bridge," so nicknamed because Kurt immortalized it in the heartbreaking song "Something in the Way," and would later claim to have slept under it when his mother threw him out of the house. Recent accounts, fueled by the denials of Kurt's sister, Kim, have suggested the stories are a myth, that Kurt never really slept under the bridge at all, but that he had embellished the stories to make his youth seem more unhappy."Nah, the only myth is that it was the Wishkah Bridge he slept under," explains Collier, referring to the massive bridge you have to cross to enter Aberdeen. "You can't sleep under that bridge. The tide would wash you away."Instead, Collier takes us to a much smaller structure known as the North Aberdeen Bridge, and we climb down a path to the fetid Wishkah River through thorny brambles and bushes, to emerge on a spacious rocky slope sheltered by the span. "Here's where he slept," says Collier, his words occasionally drowned out by the rumbling of the cars overhead. "Just about every kid around Aberdeen ends up sleeping here at one time or another. Anybody who says Kurt didn't sleep here doesn't know what they're talking about. It's dry, it's pretty warm and you can pitch a tent. Kurt would sometimes spend a couple of nights at a time under here whenever his mother threw him out. Then, if it got too damp or miserable, he'd end up sleeping on somebody's floor. But it's a good place to play guitar. The acoustics are perfect." One of the girls, Angela, who's been with us all afternoon, tells us she slept under this bridge for five days in 1995 after her own parents banished her from the house. "It was dry, but it wasn't very warm," she remembers. "I froze my ass off." The remnants of a small cooking fire and an abandoned sleeping bag suggest that somebody has indeed been sleeping here in the not-too-distant past. But it isn't the only sign of human activity. Judging by the graffiti adorning every available inch of the concrete columns, walls and ceiling, we aren't the first to make the pilgrimage under this bridge in search of Kurt's ghost by the banks of the Wishkah."Everything I ever knew, I learned from Nirvana. Thank you Kurt!" scribbled one fan. "Kurt Lives!" another had spray-painted. Among the hundreds of sentiments paying homage to their musical hero, we immediately notice the same three-word graffito -- "Who Killed Kurt?" -- sprayed, painted and scrawled like a nagging whisper from at least ten different locations. Donnie Collier, however, doesn't give much credence to the murder theories. "When I knew him, he certainly didn't seem like the kind of guy who would end up killing himself, but who knows what happened after he left here?" He shrugs. "Nothing would surprise me about that world, but I doubt if he was murdered. I guess he just couldn't take it anymore."Autumn, the young mother, weighs in: "Who wouldn't want to kill themselves growing up here? It rains all the time and there's nothing to do. He was a junkie, and junkies die here practically every day. It's so common, the paper doesn't even bother reporting it anymore." She is holding the baby in her arms so that he doesn't accidentally step on a dirty syringe, she says, but we don't see any needles, just a lot of cigarette butts and a few beer bottles.Why do you stay here? we ask. Do you ever dream of escaping? She looks incredulous before responding meekly, "Where would I go?"As we emerge from under the bridge, the kids ask us if we want to meet Kurt's daughter. This is an odd question, since Kurt's daughter, Frances Bean, is eleven years old and is known to live in Los Angeles. "No, he has an illegitimate daughter by a local girl that he slept with when he still lived here," Angela claims. "She looks just like him, and she used to say all the time that Kurt was her dad. Most people think it's true." Skeptical, we decline the invitation. After we drop them off downtown and shell out some cash so the kids can each "get a forty" (a 40-ounce can of beer, the drink of choice in these parts), we head to a local bar where we had been told we could hook up with the one person left in Aberdeen who might be able to shed light on how Kurt himself eventually escaped from this sad, seemingly dead-end

existence. Six nights a week, each evening in a different location, Dave Reed organizes what appears to be the chief source of entertainment in these parts -- karaoke. We arrive at Trio's Bar, where the night's program is already well under way. As lowbrow as the surroundings appear, one thing strikes us immediately: the people here are having fun, the first indication since we arrived that not everybody in this town considers it a redneck backwater devoid of culture. As an overweight, middle-aged woman finishes screeching an out-of-tune version of "Brown Eyed Girl," the room erupts with cheers and encouragement.A fifty-something man sporting a purple tie-dyed T-shirt and a long beaded braid almost to his waist adjusts the mike. This is Dave Reed, the man who was said to have been like a father to Kurt Cobain during his latter teenage years. By 1984, when he was seventeen, Kurt had already experienced frequent and extended bouts of homelessness, living for months at a time in alleys, under bridges and in friends' garages. His mother had taken up with a new boyfriend -- a heavy-drinking, womanizing, hot-tempered longshoreman named Pat O'Connor, whom Kurt despised -- and she didn't want anything to do with her son. He tried living with his father for a few months, but things were no better than before.Kurt had recently made friends with a boy named Jesse Reed, the teenage son of evangelical Christians, and began a period of his life that he would not be anxious to discuss in later years. One would be hard-pressed to find any evidence in his soul-baring lyrics or soon-to-be frequent interviews about his Aberdeen youth that Kurt Cobain had found Jesus, become a born-again Christian and had even been baptized at the age of seventeen. Among the chroniclers dissecting the evolution of his drug use, few noted that he spent a portion of his teenage years lecturing friends about the evils of drugs as an abomination against Christ. It was during this period that Dave Reed and his wife, Ethel, invited Kurt to live with their family at the Reeds' large home a few miles outside Aberdeen."His family life was a mess," recalls Reed, who was a Christian youth counselor at the time. "He had big problems with his mother, and he was going through a really bad time. He and my son were always together, so I asked him if he wanted to stay with us. He jumped at the chance. I think Kurt saw me as a Ned Flanders-type guy, although I don't think The Simpsons were even airing yet. I was with the South Aberdeen Baptist Church. Kurt became a born-again Christian through my son, Jesse, and our family environment. He went to church almost every time the door was open. I was a youth group leader, and Kurt would always come to church with Jesse. For a while, he took Christian life very seriously. But mostly he was into art, horses and music."By this time, Kurt had dropped out of high school and entered what he would later call his "aimless years." For hours on end, he would sit in the local library reading voraciously or writing the poems that would eventually form the lyrics to many familiar Nirvana songs. Hilary Richrod, the reference librarian at Aberdeen's Timberland Library, recalls Kurt coming every day and reading for hours at a time: "It was hard to miss him. He usually had multicolored hair, and that kind of stuck out in a town like Aberdeen."The most significant by-product of his churchgoing period was Kurt's burgeoning friendship with a gawky teenage giant named Krist Novoselic, who attended the same church as the Reeds. Kurt and Krist had met in high school, but it was while attending the Baptist church -- which Krist joined because he was dating a Christian girl at the time -- that they actually bonded, says Reed.Jesse Reed, who was also a musician, invited Krist over one day to jam with him and Kurt. "You could say that the roots of Nirvana began in our house," says the elder Reed, himself a former musician who had played in a group called the Beachcombers with Kurt's uncle Chuck. "Kurt was really into his music; he practiced all the time and he was writing a lot of songs. He wanted to be a star. He said it all the time." A former member of the Beachcombers had gone on to become a promo man for Capitol Records in Seattle, and after Kurt learned of Reed's connection, he became obsessed with meeting the executive and launching a music career.Before long, Kurt's flirtation with Christianity waned, he resumed smoking pot and an indignant Dave Reed eventually threw him out when Kurt broke a window one night after he had lost his key. But a small miracle had happened while he was there. Kurt began to believe that he could get out of Aberdeen and that his escape route might be rock and roll. Before long, he and Krist had formed a band with a drummer friend named Aaron Burckhard, rehearsing constantly in a room above the downtown beauty salon operated by Krist's mother.By the end of our weekend in Kurt's hometown, we had come no closer to determining whether the rejection and alienation of his dysfunctional youth had led inexorably to his self-demise. To each person we interviewed who had known him when he was young, we posed the question. Each in turn said they saw no real signs of self-destruction but blamed whatever happened after he left, perhaps unwilling or unable to indict the community to which they still clung. With the exception of Kurt's first guitar teacher, Warren Mason, who said he "just couldn't see himself doing that at that point in his life," none doubted that he had killed himself. Dave Reed tells us to look elsewhere if we ever hope to make sense of Kurt's death, saying, "It was his fame that killed him." Kurt

Cobain had always wanted to be famous. That was the one thing virtually everybody we talked to in his hometown agreed on. When he finally got his wish in 1991, it was and wasn't what he'd expected.He finally escaped Aberdeen for good in 1987, shortly after his twentieth birthday. He had moved to the state capital, Olympia, thirty miles up the road, to live with his first serious girlfriend, Tracy Marander, and discovered what would later be described as his "spiritual mecca" -- the ultrahip college town where the bohemians actually outnumbered the rednecks. By the time Kurt moved to Olympia, the band he and Krist had formed in Aberdeen had already played a few gigs under a number of incarnations, including "Skid Row," "Ted Ed Fred" and "Fecal Matter." They were beginning to attract a small following.When he wasn't practicing his music, Kurt continued to dabble in art, creating surreal landscapes covered with fetuses and mangled animals or, memorably, a collage of photos of diseased vaginas that he'd found in medical textbooks.With money Kurt saved from a part-time janitorial job, the band was able to record a demo at the studio of a former navy engineer named Jack Endino, who was impressed by Kurt's distinctive vocals and the band's hard-edged sound. Endino passed the demo to a friend named Jonathan Poneman, the head of a new Seattle indie label called Sub Pop. Around this time, the band finally settled on a permanent name. The story goes that Kurt had discovered Buddhism after watching a TV show about Eastern religions and was enchanted by the idea of transcending the cycle of human suffering. He especially liked the name the Buddhists gave to the concept of ultimate enlightenment: Nirvana.By this time, he had also discovered a new drug. Since he was a teenager, Kurt had experienced intermittent stomach pains that would send him into paroxysms of agony without any warning. He saw an endless series of medical specialists, but doctors were at a loss to explain what was causing the problem, which he later described to Details magazine: "Imagine the worst stomach flu you've ever had, every single day. And it was worse when I ate, because once the meal would touch that red area, I would hyperventilate, my arms would turn numb, and I would vomit." He had been offered heroin on a number of occasions, but he had always refused, in part because he was afraid of needles. For the most part, he still confined his drug use to pot, Percodan and magic mushrooms.By the time he moved to Olympia, the stomach pain was unbearable. A local heroin dealer called Grunt told him that opiates were the ultimate painkiller. Krist Novoselic, who was himself battling alcoholism at the time, later recalled telling Kurt he was "playing with dynamite" after Kurt called to tell him he had just done heroin for the first time."Yeah, he did it a few times back then, because he said it was the only thing that could get rid of the pain," confirms Kurt's best friend, Dylan Carlson, whom he first met in Olympia and who was himself a junkie. "But it wasn't a habit or anything, at least not back then."Things were looking up. When Kurt heard that Sub Pop had agreed to record the band's first single, "Love Buzz," he ran into the streets yelling, "I'm going to be a rock star! Nirvana rules!" An album followed, titled Bleach, after the substance junkies employ to clean their needles so they can be reused. Bleach was recorded for a grand total of $606.17 at Endino's studio. By this time, the struggling Sub Pop cofounders, Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pavitt, already deep in debt, had decided that if the Seattle Sound, or "grunge" as it would soon be known, was going to find a wider audience, it would be necessary first to create a buzz in the UK. That's how Seattle's most famous rock-and-roll descendant, Jimi Hendrix, had first made a name for himself two decades earlier.In the United States, alternative music was still a fringe movement, confined to college radio stations and seedy clubs. The Sub Pop founders were determined to change that, borrowing money to fly in Everett True of the influential London music magazine Melody Maker to showcase their label's talent. They couldn't possibly have imagined how much this gambit would pay off. True would later become known as the "godfather of grunge" for his series of articles profiling Sub Pop and the burgeoning Seattle music scene. It may even have been True's seal of approval that started the train rolling for Nirvana, which he described in an article as "the real thing. No rock star contrivance, no intellectual perspective, no master plan for world domination....Kurdt [sic] Cobain is a great tunesmith, although still a relatively young songwriter. He wields a riff with passion." The music press descended on the city to see what all the fuss was about, and grunge, as the local music paper The Rocket described it, had soon "surpassed the status of a happening regional scene to become a worldwide fashion craze."The mainstream music industry began to pay attention. A R reps swept through town, cash and contracts in hand, looking to capitalize on what everyone was sure was the next wave in music. Although a number of critics were decidedly unimpressed with Bleach -- Rolling Stone described it as "undistinguished...relying on warmed over 70's riffs" -- others declared Cobain a genius. Kurt was loving every second of it, recalls his best friend, Dylan, himself a struggling musician: "He kept saying they were going to be bigger than the Beatles. Everybody knew they were getting signed, and believe me, they were getting off on it. When you dream of being a rock star and it finally happens, I guess nothing really beats it."

When Nevermind, Nirvana's second album, vaulted past Michael Jackson's Dangerous in December 1991 to occupy number one on the Billboard charts, music journalists scrambled for an explanation. How could a supposedly alternative band sell three million albums in four months? A year earlier, the band had signed an unprecedented deal with Geffen Records that gave Nirvana complete creative control. It wasn't the million-dollar advance that other labels were offering, but Kurt and his bandmates were ecstatic. They had been spared the noose of corporate rock they all feared when the majors came courting following the explosion of the Seattle music scene during the late 1980s. They would be able to make the kind of album they wanted to make, not the overproduced commercial "crap" they had so often scorned -- at least in the company of their indie rock friends. They could hand in a sixty-minute tape of the band defecating and Geffen would have to release it, Kurt joked. What they actually did instead was go into the studio and record an inspired punk ode to the band's pop roots, an album that would soon be recognized as a masterpiece. It still sounded like noise to most people over thirty, the feedback and hard-driving guitar drowning out the catchy musical bridges unless you listened closely enough."We got more attention [than other alternative bands] because our songs have hooks and they kind of stick in people's minds," said Kurt, attempting to explain the album's success. Indeed, each member of Nirvana claimed the Beatles as his favorite group, and it showed. But it was the lyrics -- on topics as daring and diverse as rape and religious zealotry -- that tapped into the angst of an American youth alienated by a decade of Republicans in the White House and the recently fought Gulf War, which some theorize readied a generation for the rebellion of alternative music. The angry, culture-shifting single "Smells Like Teen Spirit," played ad nauseam on rock radio and MTV, was instantly hailed as the anthem of Generation X, and Cobain its voice. "This was music by, for, and about a whole new group of young people who had been overlooked, ignored or condescended to," wrote Michael Azerrad.Still, this kind of success wasn't supposed to happen. Had Nirvana sold out? It was a question being asked by many of Kurt's old punk rock friends, and he was acutely sensitive to it. He had a simple explanation: "We didn't go to the mainstream, the mainstream came to us." Later he would tell interviewers that he hated the album, that it was the kind of album he himself would never listen to and that it was "too slick-sounding." But the poppy hooks were no accident. Nirvana had unstinting creative control over Nevermind. Kurt's entourage -- who knew he listened to his favorite album, Abba Gold: Greatest Hits, almost constantly while touring -- were well aware just how absurd his protestations were.The most ironic by-product of the album's success was the acquisition of a brand-new fan base largely consisting of what Kurt would describe as the "stump dumb rednecks that I thought we had left behind in Aberdeen." Indeed, the crowds at the band's sold-out concerts were almost indistinguishable from the fans at a Guns n' Roses concert. So embarrassing was this turn of events that Kurt would use the liner notes of his next album to warn the homophobes, the racists and the misogynists in Nirvana's audience "to leave us the fuck alone."As if to underscore Leland's claim that his mother didn't have any use for Kurt until he became famous, Wendy wrote a letter to the local Aberdeen newspaper shortly after Nevermind hit the charts, sounding like a doting mother whose son had just left the nest for the first time. "Kurt, if you happen to read this, we are so proud of you and you are truly one of the nicest sons a mother could have. Please don't forget to eat your vegetables or brush your teeth and now [that] you have your maid, make your bed." The irony wasn't lost on Kurt, who was struck by the hypocrisy of the sudden attention from Wendy and his other relatives, most of whom had wanted nothing to do with him only a few months earlier. He had left Aberdeen and his family behind for good, and no amount of sucking up would make him forget two decades of rejection.rAt the height of his band's success, Kurt clearly identified with his favorite Beatle, John Lennon, who knew as well as anybody the price of fame. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Kurt talked about this bond with Lennon: "I don't know who wrote what parts of what Beatles songs, but Paul McCartney embarrasses me. Lennon was obviously disturbed....I just felt really sorry for him...his life was a prison. He was imprisoned. It's not fair. That's the crux of the problem that I've had with becoming a celebrity -- the way people deal with celebrities."The next chapter in Cobain's short life was to invite new comparisons between himself and his musical idol. When George Harrison was asked how he first met Yoko Ono, he replied, "I'm not sure. All of a sudden she was just there." Kurt's bandmates, Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic, would tell similar stories in later years about the bleached blonde who started to appear at Kurt's side shortly after Nevermind was released. Perhaps that's why Grohl and Novoselic both called her Yoko -- at least behind her back."This book is valuably different in tone to everything else you'll read on the subject....Right though it is to celebrate this man's talent and his life, it's undoubtedly just as valuable to learn a lesson from the tragic

confusion around his death." -- The Guardian (London)