



NIRVANA AND THE SOUND OF A GENERATION

Bleach, Nirvana's debut album, turns 32

MUSHFIQUE FAHIM

Many iconic albums can be mentioned when trying to explain what 'Grunge' music is. Pearl Jam's *Ten*, Badmotorfinger by Soundgarden, Alice in Chain's *Dirt* and of course the later Nirvana albums among many others. But a description will never fully do because grunge is more of a feeling. A discontent in your stomach, a bad taste in your mouth, a forlorn feeling in your heart. And the first record that really 'felt' grunge and took a generation by shocking delight was Nirvana's debut album *Bleach*.

Bleach came out 32 years ago from Sub-Pop Records. The record features a 23 years old Kurt Cobain, Krist Novoselick on bass and Chad Channing behind the drum kit. Melvin's Dale Crover had also rehearsed with Nirvana and ended up drumming in the final mix of *Floyd the Barber*, *Paper Cuts* and *Downer*. Upon release, *Bleach* failed to garner any significant critical acclaim and didn't even crack the *Billboard* 200 albums chart. But now in retrospect, the album has a legacy of its own comparable to the status of its monumental follow-ups *In Utero* and *Nevermind*. Today, *Bleach* remains the highest-selling record to ever come out of Sub-Pop. Even though immediate fanfare was almost nonexistent, it put Nirvana on the map for an entire generation that was looking for a sound that fits their chaotic time.

Bleach is an extremely raw album, anxious in nature and utterly restless. What makes it the definitive Seattle grunge record is the lack of polish. It's not like producer Jack Endino had much of a choice. Nirvana was a struggling group with hardly the means for a well-produced album. As a result, the record is punctured with distortion, feedback and noise. But Kurt liked the dark, muddy sound. At the time of its release he said about other albums, 'There's no energy. It's too programmed and fake, you hear too much. I want a little mud in my music.' And this disregard for glossing things up and the tendency to say things as they are, make music that went hand in hand with the bleak, mindless and numbingly mechanical nature of the world is what resonated with the youth of the Pacific Northwest. A band had come about that wasn't afraid to scream about the oppressive feeling that pervaded society.

The album opens with *Blew*, a track that remained a concert staple for Nirvana. Krist Novoselic starts with a growling, killer bassline that sets the mood for the rest of the album before Kurt bursts into the first verse on top of a dirty guitar riff. The fame that disconcerted Cobain later in his career was yet to find him and he was free to indulge in his dark, fearless, arrogant

and often enigmatic songwriting. Worn out by the stress of life and embracing carefree resignation, he sings, 'And if you wouldn't care I'd like to leave/ And if you wouldn't mind I'd like to breathe.' The record continues with the same neurotic energy as *Floyd the Barber*. In the song, Kurt uses the innocent setting of *The Andy Griffith Show*, a 60s TV program about an idyllic family to expose how shamefully society crawled to hide behind a facade. Next comes *About A Girl*, a relatively softer, ballad-like number that was written about Kurt's girlfriend at the time. As the group was constantly pressured to make a heavy album, Kurt was conflicted about putting the song on the record. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, he admitted, 'Even to put *About A Girl* on *Bleach* was a risk.'

Paper Cuts and *Sifting* are two slower-tempo, dizzyingly heavy songs that ride on drawn-out, drawling, filthy guitar riffs. In between jarring riffage, the words to *Paper Cuts* paint a dismaying picture of domestic, parental abuse. Showing zero interest in compromising the horror of victims, Cobain sings, 'My whole existence is for your amusement/ And that is why I'm here with you,' Disenchanted with the fears of high school and showing a total apathy towards a system that bullies and encourages bullies, Kurt's razor-sharp voice screeches, 'NO RECESS',

in the chorus of *School*. In *Sifting*, he simply denies that teachers and preachers alike had anything to offer him as he groans repeatedly, 'Don't have nothing for you.'

The record never deviates from a grinding, murky sound that sets the stage for lyrics that lay bare despair, guilt and disillusionment. *Big Cheese* was a ruthlessly angry reply to the pressure the group was facing from Sub Pop chairman Jonathan Poneman. Kurt said, "I was expressing all the pressures that I felt from Jonathan Poneman at the time because he was being so judgemental about everything we were recording.' He screams in agony at the hypocrisy of men who run the world as he accuses them of being, 'Sickening pessimist hypocrite master/ Conservative communist apocalyptic bastard.'

Bleach is a record of outrage, anxiety and apathy. It doesn't have a flowery side and it's not sorry. Because of its unmatched authenticity, the album is relevant to the aimlessly meandering youth today who are rendered neurotic, passive, depressed and disenfranchised by society. The unapologetically distorted guitar, relentless bashing of drums, grumble and moan of the bass blended with the very real pain and aggression of Kurt's voice create a sound that still fills the heart longing just to be itself.