

When the light's out

Twenty years after Kurt Cobain blew his brains out, the iconic musician's legacy is stronger than ever. **loaded** talks to American music journalist Carrie Borzillo about her book on Cobain, his drug abuse and crazy conspiracy theories...

On April 5, 1994, 27-year-old Kurt Donald Cobain sat alone in the room above his Seattle garage. He wrote a final, emotional letter to imaginary childhood friend 'Boddah' and told his wife of two years Courtney to look after their pride and joy, 18-month-old Frances Bean. He then picked up a loaded shotgun, placed it across his lap and kissed goodbye to life as he knew it. He wouldn't be found for three days. His violent suicide was an incredibly unsettling way to die, but it secured his - and Nirvana's - place in the vaults of rock and roll history.

Two decades on and not everyone is convinced. Kurt may have left behind a musical legacy that us mere mortals can only dream of, but conspiracy theories continue to gather in the deep, dark recesses of the internet, with many calling for the case to be reopened and Courtney Love tried for murder. To stop the online pestering, the Seattle police department recently released a batch of undeveloped,

previously unseen photos that include an eerie snapshot of his final written words. But this routine look into what is effectively a cold case is still not enough for many internet commenters who won't be happy until they see a picture of the blond singer with a bullet in his head. Some people are never satisfied.

"It's so silly! People have funny imaginations, but no, there was never any inkling that anything like that was ever even remotely close to being true. I think when someone is not just a rock star but a rock icon like Kurt Cobain is - was - that there's always conspiracy theories. He's up there with Elvis Presley and Jim Morrison, you know!" Say hello to Carrie Borzillo, American music journalist and author, whose book, *Nirvana: In The Words Of The People Who Were There*, has just been reissued. Originally published in 2000, the book is far from just cashing in on the tragedy, as Borzillo

hopes to raise money for the American Foundation For Suicide Prevention.

"It's a great cause and I feel very strongly about mental health in this country," she tells **loaded**. "A lot of our problems in this world can be solved with proper treatment, and it's an organisation I feel does a really good job."

Hailing from Connecticut, Carrie Borzillo was the youngest ever journalist to serve as an editor at *Billboard* magazine after cutting her teeth in music journalism at the tender age of 17. She has three books and numerous TV and print credits to her name (*Rolling Stone* and *MTV* just for starters), but confesses to being rather intimidated by the idea for her first book - even as a longtime Nirvana fan.

"It was frightening!" she tells **loaded**. "The publisher called me and asked 'Do you want to write this book?' which is so not the way



things usually work! I wasn't that young, but still, for your first book you feel like you have no idea what you're doing. And then when they told me the format, I just went 'what? No! There's no way I can do this!' It felt overwhelming. As a music journalist of course I loved and was familiar with every nook and cranny of Nirvana's career, but as a professional I was never one of these people who was like a total fanatic that could recite every lyric from every song. So I was tempted just not to do it as Nirvana has such a strong fan base that you don't want to upset."

"A LOT OF PEOPLE WOULD LIKE TO POINT THE FINGER AT THE RECORD LABEL FOR PUSHING HIM TOO HARD"

It's no surprise this first book was a daunting prospect. Starting with the birthdates of the individual band members and ending with Kurt's shocking death, this is a Nirvana fan's bible. In fact, to call it comprehensive would be an insult. Set out as a rock and roll diary of sorts, *Nirvana: In The Words Of The People Who Were There* tracks early gigs (good and bad), first guitars and demo recordings as well as European tours, weddings and babies. It also charts the surprising confusion over what Nirvana would play at their famous and

incredibly well received MTV Unplugged appearance. So where do you begin when it comes to recording the day by day events of a band who packed in so much from their early beginnings in 1987 to the tragic events of '94?

The "insane process," as Borzillo calls it,

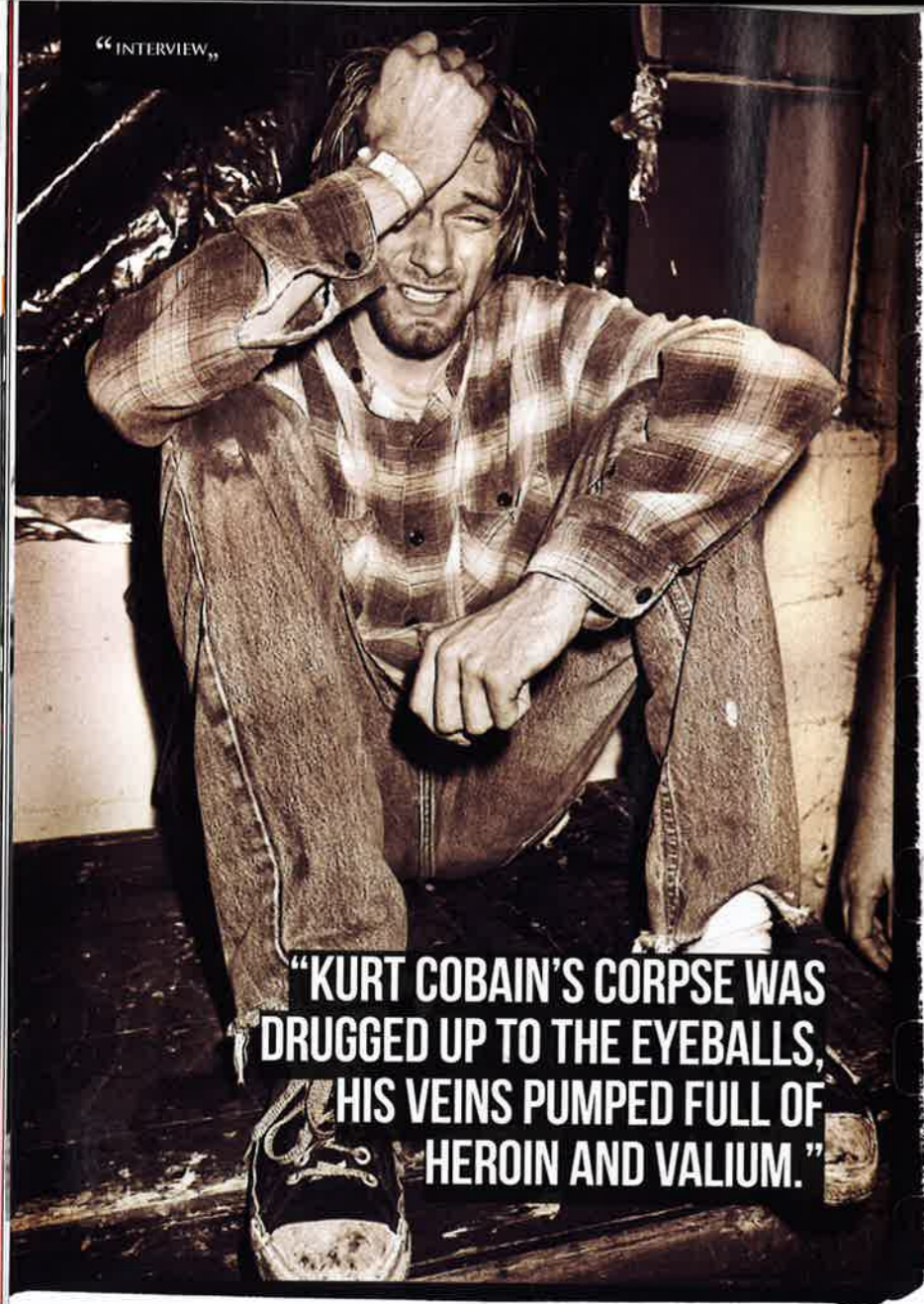
required a scary amount of detailed research. "The process itself started with a timeline. I started with a lot of online research to just getting dates down, and then I was reading everything I could read. The liner notes of every single album, you'll go through the thank yous, you just get that list of everybody who ever touched anything that Nirvana did and you just start making calls. If I was given that book now, via social media I would be able to find probably even a hundred more people that I can talk to. Actually, I was going through my boxes of notes, and there's faxes! So it

made it a lot harder, but back then I had to use like faxes and phone calls and literally knock on people's doors. But it got done."

But Borzillo's door knocking skills were put to good use years before she was handed the assignment. Invited to Seattle for the sixth birthday of Nirvana's label, Sub Pop Records (currently the home of Fleet Foxes and Flight Of The Conchords), Carrie was on the

scene when the news broke. "I was arriving just at that time and had all these messages on my phone. And the second I saw that, 'You've got 12 messages,' my heart sank. I knew something had happened and of course the taxi driver was like, 'Have you heard the news?' For me, it was like the same as when John Lennon died for that generation of people. It was that moving and that big and you will always remember where you were when you heard the news."

A weekend of celebration and partying immediately turned into on the ground



“KURT COBAIN’S CORPSE WAS DRUGGED UP TO THE EYEBALLS, HIS VEINS PUMPED FULL OF HEROIN AND VALIUM.”

reporting for the journalist, also attending the public vigil for Kurt with an estimated 5,000 fans at the Space Needle,

“I saved some of the candles that were handed out at the vigil. It was overwhelming and moving and emotional and I was just sitting there like, ‘I can’t believe I’m here,’ I guess in the moment you never realise how big it is, and I can’t believe it’s been 20 years, but it just takes on more meaning as the years go on that you’re there and part of a very big piece of rock and roll history.”

Cobain’s death sent shockwaves through the music industry, but an extra layer of intrigue and immortality was added on his entry to the infamous ‘27 Club’. Most recently joined by Amy Winehouse after she passed away in 2011, the ‘club’ (though probably not somewhere you want to end up) is formed of musicians who, yep, you guessed it, died at the tender age of 27. The most notable members include Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and The Doors’ Jim Morrison, all of who died from drug-related complications. But none of these artists have affected today’s generation

quite like Nirvana; a simple Google search will bring up t-shirts featuring their famous cross-eyed insignia for toddlers and even newborns. But what is it that continues to make the band so relevant?

“Oh my God, it was just something that hit you in your soul, like just so deeply. The very first thing I noticed and heard was just the immense amount of pain and emotion in Kurt’s voice. And not just in his voice, but in every lyric he wrote and every guitar note that he played there was just this extremely deep sense of impending doom to me.”

But Borzillo believes Nirvana’s continuing relevance has a

us, you know? And I think if he was this happy go lucky guy and he just died in a car accident, then I’m not sure it would connect in the same way.”

So what pushed Kurt over the edge, leading the Grammy-winning front man to pull the trigger? After toying with recreational drugs from the age of 13, Cobain had developed a heroin addiction by the time he turned 24. Chronic stomach pain and severe bronchitis were soothed by his reliance on hard substances, but his need to self-medicate was slowly driving a wedge between the band. Things hit the skids in the summer of ‘93 when Kurt was wheeled out on a New York stage after a heroin overdose, the audience none the wiser. But a night in Germany on Nirvana’s 1994 European Tour saw him overdose on rohypnol. Courtney Love would later refer to this as Kurt’s first suicide attempt. An intervention soon after successfully saw Kurt enter a Californian rehab centre, but he soon hit the ground running, jumping over the wall and legging it back to Seattle. The rest, as they say, is history.

Coming from a family with a history of suicide and mental illness, was Kurt truly doomed from the start? Carrie certainly seems to think so.

“When you look at his childhood, he’d moved around a lot and he was troubled



trigger? After toying with recreational drugs from the age of 13, Cobain had developed a heroin addiction by the time he turned 24. Chronic stomach pain and severe bronchitis were soothed by his reliance on hard substances, but his need to self-medicate was slowly driving a wedge between the band. Things hit the skids in the summer of ‘93 when Kurt was wheeled out on a New York stage after a heroin overdose, the audience none the wiser. But a night in Germany on Nirvana’s 1994 European Tour saw him overdose on rohypnol. Courtney Love would later refer to this as Kurt’s first suicide attempt. An intervention soon after successfully saw Kurt enter a Californian rehab centre, but he soon hit the ground running, jumping over the wall and legging it back to Seattle. The rest, as they say, is history.

Coming from a family with a history of suicide and mental illness, was Kurt truly doomed from the start? Carrie certainly seems to think so.

the public investigator Love hired to find her husband after he escaped rehab – believe Cobain would have been too incapacitated to lift the gun, let alone fire it.

“When they did the toxicology report, they said that nobody with that amount of heroin in their system could not just have pulled the trigger, but put their paraphernalia away,” Borzillo tells loaded. “What people don’t understand, is that when you are such a high performing junkie like he was, you’ve been doing high levels of heroin for so long that your tolerance is upped. He was that much of an A+ junkie that yeah, that amount of heroin in anybody else would have probably killed them instantly, but not with Kurt, which makes it even more sad because it shows just how deep his addiction to heroin was. But yeah, the theories were insane. They were funny to hear about, but I never entertained any of them. A lot of people would like to

“HIS DEATH SENT SHOCKWAVES THROUGH THE MUSIC INDUSTRY”

“When you look at his childhood, he’d moved around a lot and he was troubled from the get-go. In small little rural towns or working class towns, the first thought isn’t, ‘oh, you’re depressed, you need to see a psychiatrist.’

point the finger at the record label for pushing him too hard when they knew he was a junkie, or management for making him stay on the road when he knew he was troubled, or Courtney Love for everything Courtney Love has done, but you can’t point fingers to all those people. Kurt unfortunately

signs, if he was treated for his demons when he was a child, he would be a completely different person. I think he was doomed and it was nobody’s fault. Nobody could save him.”

Kurt Cobain’s corpse was drugged up to the eyeballs, his veins pumped full of heroin and valium. Many people – including Tom Grant,

was a troubled soul and I would be shocked if he had ever lived past that age. Once you add his tragic suicide, and not just a suicide, but a really violent, violent destructive way to end your life, it just adds to that deep sense of, ‘oh my God, this guy is in trouble from day one.’ But because it was so horrific and so sad, and he suffered from depression and he suffered from drug abuse and he suffered from a bad marriage to Courtney Love, that just sticks with us.”

Fourteen years after the initial publication of her book, Carrie has a hard time separating herself from the events of 1994. But it’s clear she doesn’t want to be seen as capitalising on Kurt’s death. “The book’s done very well. It’s been released in many different countries and languages. I made a decision that I’m going to buy copies of my own book myself and then sell signed copies of it, with the proceeds going straight to the American Foundation For Suicide Prevention. This is a topic that is very serious to me, I don’t know how much I’m going to raise for the organisation, but any little helps! In this day and age, mental health awareness and depression is way more in our faces and that’s good. Today you see the signs, you send people to therapy, and back then you didn’t. I always wondered if it was today, if he had help, would it have been different?”

Unfortunately we will never know, with Kurt’s suicide note delivering his tragic belief that ‘it’s better to burn out than to fade away’ (a line from Neil Young’s ‘Hey Hey, My My (Into The Black)'). As Borzillo so perfectly sums it up, “a good album, a good band whose music is going to stay with us forever.”



Nirvana: In The Words Of The People Who Were There is available now.