


I would like to be paid like a plumber

Pitching Nirvana



Shaun Usher
Mar 28

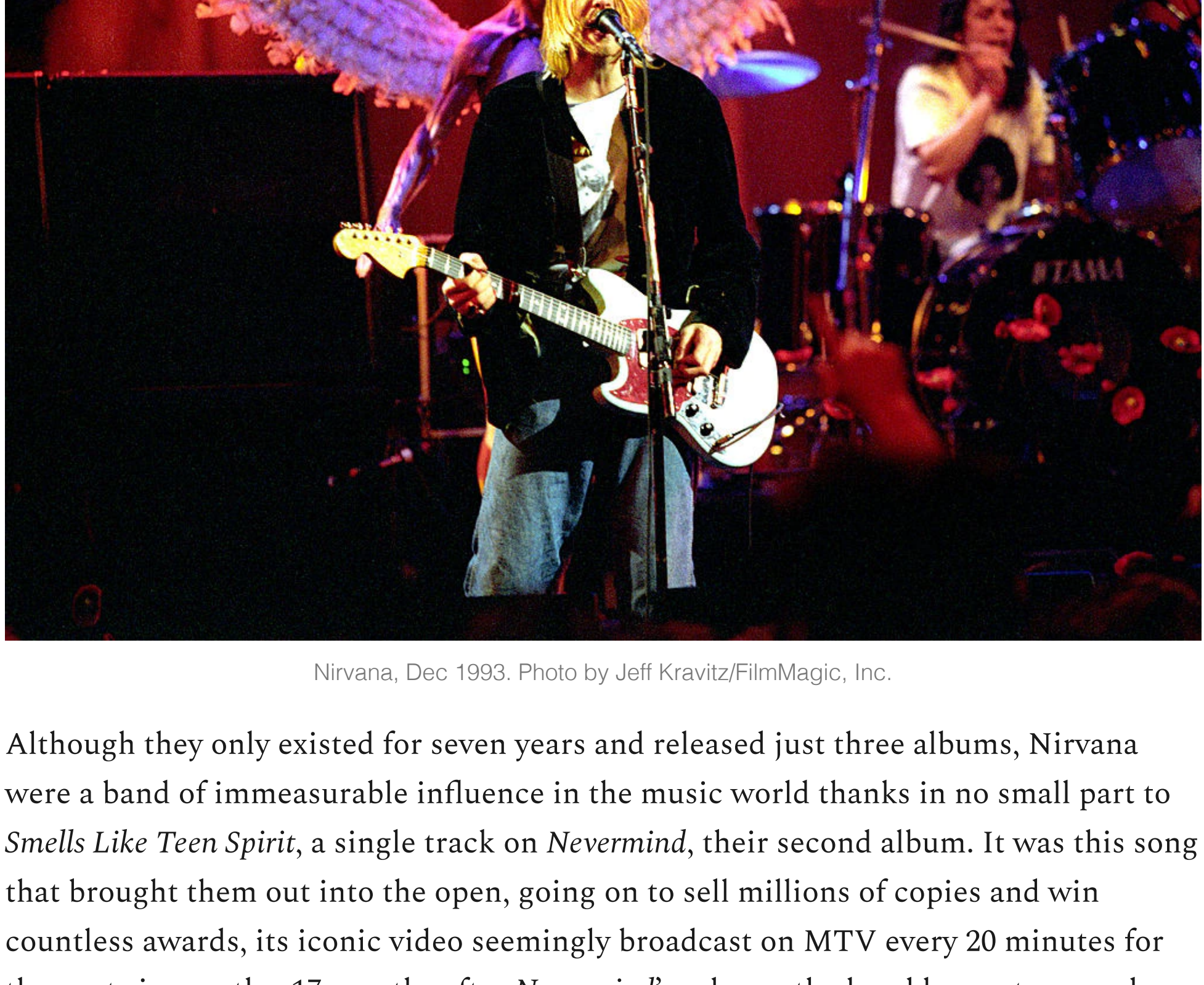
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Nirvana, Dec 1993. Photo by Jeff Kravitz/FilmMagic, Inc.

Although they only existed for seven years and released just three albums, Nirvana were a band of immeasurable influence in the music world thanks in no small part to *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, a single track on *Nevermind*, their second album. It was this song that brought them out into the open, going on to sell millions of copies and win countless awards, its iconic video seemingly broadcast on MTV every 20 minutes for the next six months. 17 months after *Nevermind*'s release, the band began to record what would be their final album, *In Utero*—produced by Steve Albini, outspoken engineer extraordinaire. In November of 1992, shortly before they formally agreed on his involvement, Albini wrote to Nirvana and laid bare his philosophy in a pitch letter that is fascinating from start to finish.

Kurt, Dave and Chris:

First let me apologize for taking a couple of days to put this outline together. When I spoke to Kurt I was in the middle of making a Fugazi album¹, but I thought I would have a day or so between records to sort everything out. My schedule changed unexpectedly, and this is the first moment I've had to go through it all. Apology apology.

I think the very best thing you could do at this point is exactly what you are talking about doing: bang a record out in a couple of days, with high quality but minimal "production" and no interference from the front office bullletheads. If that is indeed what you want to do, I would love to be involved.

If, instead, you might find yourselves in the position of being temporarily indulged by the record company, only to have them yank the chain at some point (hassling you to rework songs/sequences/production, calling-in hired guns to "sweeten" your record, turning the whole thing over to some remix jockey, whatever...) then you're in for a bummer and I want no part of it.

I'm only interested in working on records that legitimately reflect the band's own perception of their music and existence. If you will commit yourselves to that as a tenet of the recording methodology, then I will bust my ass for you. I'll work circles around you. I'll rap your head with a ratchet...

I have worked on hundreds of records (some great, some good, some horrible, a lot in the courtyard), and I have seen a direct correlation between the quality of the end result and the mood of the band throughout the process. If the record takes a long time, and everyone gets bummed and scrutinizes every step, then the recordings bear little resemblance to the live band, and the end result is seldom flattering. Making punk records is definitely a case where more "work" does not imply a better end result. Clearly you have learned this yourselves and appreciate the logic.

About my methodology and philosophy:

#1: Most contemporary engineers and producers see a record as a "project," and the band as only one element of the project. Further, they consider the recordings to be a controlled layering of specific sounds, each of which is under complete control from the moment the note is conceived through the final six. If the band gets pushed around in the process of making a record, so be it; as long as the "project" meets with the approval of the fellow in control.

My approach is exactly the opposite.

I consider the band the most important thing, as the creative entity that spawned both the band's personality and style and as the social entity that exists 24 hours out of each day. I do not consider it my place to tell you what to do or how to play. I'm quite willing to let my opinions be heard (if I think the band is making beautiful progress or a heaving mistake, I consider it part of my job to tell them) but if the band decides to pursue something, I'll see that it gets done.

I like to leave room for accidents or chaos. Making a seamless record, where every note and syllable is in place and every bass drum is identical, is no trick. Any idiot with the patience and the budget to allow such foolishness can do it. I prefer to work on records that aspire to greater things, like originality, personality and enthusiasm. If every element of the music and dynamics of a band is controlled by click tracks, computers, automated mixes, gates, samplers and sequencers, then the record may not be incompetent, but it certainly won't be exceptional. It will also bear very little relationship to the live band, which is what all this hokey is supposed to be about.

#2: I do not consider recording and mixing to be unrelated tasks which can be performed by specialists with no continuous involvement. 99 percent of the sound of a record should be established while the basic take is recorded. Your experiences are specific to your records; but in my experience, remixing has never solved any problems that actually existed, only imaginary ones. I do not like remixing other engineer's recordings, and I do not like recording things for somebody else to remix. I have never been satisfied with either version of that methodology. Remixing is for talentless pussies who don't know how to tune a drum or point a microphone.

#3: I do not have a fixed gospel of stock sounds and recording techniques that I apply blindly to every band in every situation. You are a different band from any other band and deserve at least the respect of having your own tastes and concerns addressed. For example, I love the sound of a boomy drum kit (say a Gretach or Camco) wide open in a big room, especially with a Bonhammy double-headed bass drum and a really painful snare drum. I also love the puke-inducing low end that comes off an old Fender Bassman or Ampeg guitar amp and the totally blown sound of an SVT with broken-in tubes. I also know that those sounds are inappropriate for some songs, and trying to force them is a waste of time. Predicating the recordings on my tastes is as stupid as designing a car around the upholstery. You guys need to decide and then articulate to me what you want to sound like so we don't come at the record from different directions.

#4: Where we record the record is not as important as how it is recorded. If you have a studio you'd like to use, no hag. Otherwise, I can make suggestions. I have a nice 24-track studio in my house (Fugazi were just there, you can ask them how they rate it), and I'm familiar with most of the studios in the Midwest, the East coast and a dozen or so in the UK.

I would be a little concerned about having you at my house for the duration of the whole recording and mixing process if only because you're celebrities, and I wouldn't want word getting out in the neighborhood and you guys having to put up with a lot of fan-style bullshit; it would be a fine place to mix the record though, and you can't beat the vitties.

If you want to leave the details of studio selection, lodgings, etc. up to me, I'm quite happy to sort all that stuff out. If you guys want to sort it out, just lay down the law.

My first choice for an outside recording studio would be a place called Pachyderm in Cannon Falls, Minnesota. It's a great facility with outstanding acoustics and a totally comfy architect's wet dream mansion where the band lives during the recordings. This makes everything more efficient. Since everybody is there, things get done and decisions get made a lot faster than if people are out and about in a city someplace. There's also all the posh shit like a sauna and swimming pool and fireplaces and trout stream and 50 acres and like that. I've made a bunch of records there and I've always enjoyed the place. It's also quite inexpensive, considering how great a facility it is.

The only bummer about Pachyderm is that the owners and manager are not technicians, and they don't have a tech on call. I've worked there enough that I can fix just about anything that can go wrong, short of a serious electronic collapse, but I've got a guy that I work with a lot (Bob Weston) who's real good with electronics (circuit design, trouble shooting and building shit on the spot), so if we choose to do it there, he'll probably come along in my payroll, since he'd be cheap insurance if a power supply blows up or a serious failure occurs in the dead of winter 50 miles from the closest tech. He's a recording engineer also, so he can be doing some of the more mundane stuff (cataloging tapes, packing stuff up, fetching supplies) while we're chopping away at the record proper.

Some day I'm going to talk the Jesus Lizard into going up there and we'll have us a real time. Oh yeah, and it's the same Neve console the AC/DC album Back in Black was recorded and mixed on, so you know its just got to have the rock.

#5: Dough. I explained this to Kurt but I thought I'd better reiterate it here. I do not want and will not take a royalty on any record I record. No points. Period. I think paying a royalty to a producer or engineer is ethically indefensible. The band write the songs. The band play the music. It's the band's fans who buy the records. The band is responsible for whether it's a great record or a horrible record. Royalties belong to the band.

I would like to be paid like a plumber: I do the job and you pay me what it's worth. The record company will expect me to ask for a point or a point and a half. If we assume three million sales, that works out to 400,000 dollars or so. There's no fucking way I would ever take that much money. I wouldn't be able to sleep.

I have to be comfortable with the amount of money you pay me, but it's your money, and I insist that you be comfortable with it as well. Kurt suggested paying me a chunk which I would consider full payment, and then if you really thought I deserved more, paying me another chunk after you'd had a chance to live with the album for a while. That would be fine, but probably more organizational trouble than it's worth.

Whatever. I trust you guys to be fair to me and I know you must be familiar with what a regular industry goon would want. I will let you make the final decision about what I'm going to be paid. How much you choose to pay me will not affect my enthusiasm for the record.

Some people in my position would expect an increase in business after being associated with your band. I, however, already have more work than I can handle, and frankly, the kind of people such superficialities will attract are not people I want to work with. Please don't consider that an issue.

That's it.

Please call me to go over any of this if it's unclear.

[Signed]

If a record takes more than a week to make, somebody's fucking up.

Oi!




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1 Fugazi's third album, *In on the Kill Taker*.

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Alex Kirk Mar 28 ♥ Liked by Shaun Usher

Albini referenced the Jerky Boys crank call tape making the rounds in the early 90s: "I'll work circles around you. I'll rap your head with a ratchet..."

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Denise Lindgren McCabe Mar 28 ♥ Liked by Shaun Usher

What a class act. What music is all about.

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