

Nirvana – Smells Like Teen Spirit

Written by bluesever

Wednesday, 02 March 2011 22:36 - Last Updated Tuesday, 17 March 2015 17:46

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Kathleen Hanna, the lead singer of the group Bikini Kill, gave Cobain the idea for the title when she spray painted "*Kurt Smells Like Teen Spirit*" on his bedroom wall after a night of drinking and spraying graffiti around the Seattle area.



Bikini Kill

In his pre-Courtney Love days, Cobain went out with Bikini Kill lead singer Tobi Vail, but she dumped him. Vail wore *Teen Spirit* deodorant, and Hanna was implying that Cobain was marked with her scent. Since they had been discussing anarchism, punk rock, and similar topics, Cobain interpreted the slogan as having a revolutionary meaning.

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(Cobain didn't know it when he wrote the song, but *Teen Spirit* is a brand of deodorant marketed to young girls. Kurt thought Hanna was complimenting him on his rebellious spirit. Sales of Teen Spirit deodorant shot up when this became a hit, even though it is never mentioned in the lyrics.)

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" is a song by the American rock band **Nirvana**. It is the opening track and lead single from the band's second album,

Nevermind

(1991). The unexpected success of

"Smells Like Teen Spirit"

in late 1991 propelled Nevermind to the top of the charts at the start of 1992, an event often marked as the point where alternative rock entered the mainstream.



Nirvana

This was the first "Alternative" song to become a huge hit. Since "alternative" implies lack of popularity, people started referring to the genre as "Modern Rock." It helped ignite the "grunge" craze, characterized by loud guitars, angst-ridden lyrics, and flannel.

In a January 1994 Rolling Stone interview, Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain revealed that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was an attempt to write a song in the style of the Pixies, a band he greatly admired. He explained: *"I was trying to write the ultimate pop song. I was basically trying to rip off the Pixies. I have to admit it. When I heard the Pixies for the first time, I connected with that band so heavily that I should have been in that band— or at least a Pixies cover band. We used*

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their sense of dynamics, being soft and quiet and then loud and hard."



Kurt Cobain

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" is written in the key of F minor, with the main guitar riff constructed from four power chords (F5–Bflat5–Aflat5–Dflat5) played in a syncopated sixteenth note strum by Cobain. The guitar chords were double-tracked because the band *"wanted to make it sound more powerful,"* according to Butch Vig, producer.

The song's chord progression has been described as *"an ambiguous, harmonically dislocated sequence,"* and *"it is the asymmetrical nature of Cobain's riff [. . .] that makes it so great."*



Nevermind cover

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The song begins with Cobain strumming the main riff, adding distortion when the rest of the band joins in. During the verse Cobain plays a sparse two-note guitar line over Novoselic's eighth note bassline, which outlines the chord progression. In the pre-chorus, Cobain begins to play the same two notes on every beat of the measure and repeats the phrase *"Hello, hello, hello, how low?"*

Cobain then resumes the main guitar riff for the chorus, where the band plays loudly and Cobain yells the lyrics. The first and second choruses both end with a brief four-bar interlude where Cobain shouts

"Yeah!"

twice over a new riff.

After the second chorus, Cobain plays a 16-bar guitar solo that almost completely restates his vocal melody from the verse and pre-chorus. The band extends the third and final verse and chorus as Cobain sings the refrain *"A denial"* repeatedly. At this point Cobain's vocals become strained and his voice is almost shot from the force of yelling. The song ends with the feedback of the guitar.



Nirvana

The lyrics to "Smells Like Teen Spirit" were often difficult for listeners to decipher, both due to their nonsensicality and because of Cobain's slurred, guttural singing voice. This problem was compounded by the fact that the Nevermind album liner notes did not include any lyrics for the songs aside from selected lyrical fragments.

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Kurt Cobain

"Teen Spirit" is widely interpreted to be a teen revolution anthem, an interpretation reinforced by the song's music video. In an interview conducted the day Nevermind was released, Cobain stated the song was about his friends, explaining, *"We still feel as if we're teenagers because we don't follow the guidelines of what's expected of us to be adults [. . .] It also has kind of a teen revolutionary theme"*. As Cobain did more interviews, he changed his explanation of the song and rarely gave specifics about the song's meaning.

Cobain has said, *"The entire song is made up of contradictory ideas [. . .] It's just making fun of the thought of having a revolution. But it's a nice thought."* Drummer Dave Grohl has stated he does not believe the song has any message, and said, *"Just seeing Kurt write the lyrics to a song five minutes before he first sings them, you just kind of find it a little bit hard to believe that the song has a lot to say about something. You need syllables to fill up this space or you need something that rhymes."*



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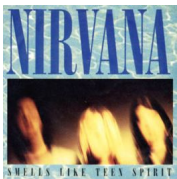
Nirvana

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" was first performed live on April 17, 1991 at the OK Hotel in Seattle, Washington. The performance is featured on the DVD of the 2004 boxset *With the Lights Out*, while shorter clips are included on the *Nevermind Classic Albums DVD*, as well as the documentary film *Hype!*. As the song's lyrics had not yet been entirely written, there are notable differences between it and the final version.



Kurt Cobain

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" has been covered by numerous artists. Tori Amos covered this in 1992. She was on tour when Cobain died in 1994 and performed her version 2 days later at a show in Dublin. Patti Smith also recorded the song for her covers album *Twelve*.



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Smells Like Teen Spirit, Single

"Smells Like Teen Spirit" was Nirvana's first and biggest hit, reaching number six on the Billboard Hot 100 and placing high on music industry charts all around the world in 1991 and 1992.



Kurt Cobain - Smells Like Teen Spirit, lyrics

*Load up on guns and bring your friends
It's fun to lose and to pretend
She's over-bored and self-assured
Oh no, I know a dirty word*

*Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello*

*With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain us*

A mulatto, an albino

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*A mosquito, my libido
Yeah, hey, yay*

*I'm worse at what I do best
And for this gift I feel blessed
Our little group has always been
And always will until the end*

*Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello*

*With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain us*

*A mulatto, an albino
A mosquito, my libido
Yeah, hey, yay*

*And I forget just why I taste
Oh yeah, I guess it makes me smile
I found it hard, it's hard to find
Oh well, whatever, nevermind*

*Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello, how low?
Hello, hello, hello*

*With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain us*

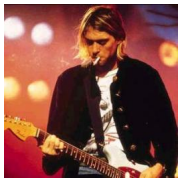
*A mulatto, an albino
A mosquito, my libido*

*A denial, a denial
A denial, a denial
A denial, a denial
A denial, a denial
A denial*

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Kurt Cobain