

IN UTERO



In Utero is Nirvana's fourth and final studio album, it was released in 1993. It went Platinum in the United States, Canada, and Britain. Kurt Cobain, Krist Novoselic, and Dave Grohl recorded it at Pachyderm Studios in Minnesota. The record was recorded over a two week period; Steve Albini was hired by the band to produce and record the record. It was the goal of Albini and the three members of Nirvana to create a record that sounded nothing like their second album *Nevermind*, which they considered to be a little too 'radio friendly' and 'easy listening'. They wanted *In Utero* to have a less polished, more primal sound, something to take Nirvana back to its beginnings in the Seattle grunge scene. In order to achieve such a sound, instruments and vocals were recorded independently in the studio's kitchen, using up to thirty microphones to capture the desired echo. After the mixing and layering of each recording was finished Albini stated that he felt more like an engineer than a producer. They

achieved their goal, as *In Utero* is arguably one of the most abrasive, raw sounding works Nirvana has produced, and as is Nirvana's custom, the lyrics almost never have one solid interpretation. There are twelve regular tracks and one bonus, in order they are: "Serve The Servants", "Scentless Apprentice", "Heart Shaped Box", "Rape Me", "Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge On Seattle", "Dumb", "Very Ape", "Milk It", "Pennyroyal Tea", "Radio Friendly Unit Shifter", "Tourette's", "All Apologies", and lastly the bonus track "Gallons of Rubbing Alcohol Flow Through The Strip".

All Nirvana albums have their share of dark jokes and jadedness, but with Kurt Cobain's suicide on April 5th, 1994, less than seven months after the release of *In Utero*, many followers of Nirvana have interpreted the album as a kind of suicide note. It may have been easy to pass over initially after its release, but after Cobain's death it was impossible to ignore the amount of bitterness hidden in the lyrics. Take the opening line of the opening song "Serve the Servants" for example: "Teenage angst has paid off well, but now I'm bored and old". What could that possibly mean, other than that Kurt Cobain had become disillusioned with the grunge scene and no longer related to the audiences and fans that he had helped to create? With lyrics that include "She eyes me like a Pisces when I am weak, I've been locked inside your heart-shaped box for weeks, I've been drawn into your magnet tar pit trap, I wish I could eat your cancer when you turn black", "Heart Shaped Box" is another track that has caused much lyrical debate. Kurt Cobain claimed that it had been written about children with cancer, but there are many other theories.

Some fans say it has no meaning at all, that's it's simply a nonsense song. The most popular opinion however is that the song was written about women, in specific women who use sexual appeal for their own gains. It has even been speculated that it was written about his wife Courtney Love. The fifth track, "Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle" was written about an actress from Seattle whose career began in the 1930's. Frances Farmer was considered to be rebellious and radical for her time, she routinely spoke out against being cast in roles simply for her appearance and the studio's frequent attempts to glamourize her. Due to her behavior she was hospitalized against her will several times. It is more than likely that Kurt Cobain felt some sort of kinship to her; they were both artists who were trying their best to keep society's materialistic desires from affecting their work. Cobain references the "Disease covered Puget sound", implying that Frances Farmer's revenge is the decline and spoiling of the city that mistreated her. Like much of Nirvana's work, the seventh track "Very Ape" makes several jabs at society's darker, uneducated side. "Very Ape" is supposedly written about the people Kurt Cobain grew up around in Aberdeen. "I take pride as the king of illiterature, I'm very ape and I'm very nice" is a reference to the lack of knowledge he saw around him, to the point that people seemed ape-like. The tenth track "Radio Friendly Unit Shifter" is somewhat of an irony within itself. "Radio Friendly" refers to something that can be played on the radio without causing any upset or offence, and a "Unit Shifter" is a song that sells albums by itself. Radio friendliness was the last trait that Nirvana desired for *In Utero*. The last track (short of the bonus) is "All Apologies", it is definitely the tamest song on the album sound wise, and however it has also been connected

to Cobain's suicide note. There is speculation that it was made the last track for a reason, that Kurt Cobain wanted it to be a sort of sign-off. The line "What else could I write, I don't have the right" bears a striking resemblance to part of the note which stated "I haven't felt the excitement of listening to as well as creating music along with reading and writing for too many years now. I feel guilty beyond words about these things." This has been interpreted to mean that Cobain didn't consider himself worthy to create songs anymore, and that was something he couldn't bear.

Compared to *Bleach*, *Nevermind*, and *Incesticide*, I have always found that *In Utero* had the rawest emotion of all their studio albums; it was purely Nirvana being Nirvana, regardless of their fans and the record company's demands. They played what they wanted exactly how they wanted it to sound. Dave Grohl, Krist Novoselic, and Kurt Cobain all poured their hearts into this album, Kurt Cobain especially as it was one of his last works of art. In an interview with *Musique Plus* he stated that *In Utero* would mark Nirvana's end as the torchbearers of grunge, I would argue that it had the opposite effect. He struggled with his own success for some time, and through *In Utero* we get a glimpse of how this changed his world.

Falon Lancey