



SOUND AND VISION

Cobain: Montage of Heck

Pop time runs differently to clock time; it's elastic, stretching like blown bubble gum and imploding to nothing. It hardly seems possible that Nirvana was in the wider public consciousness for barely two-and-a-half years before singer-guitarist Kurt Cobain's death in 1994. The two decades since seem at the same time like nothing – the language of rock music has barely moved on in the meantime, instead regressing and digressing – and also like a lifetime. For a band so intent on vandalising the safe consensus of mainstream pop culture to become so huge today is all but unimaginable.

At one point in Brett Morgen's *Cobain: Montage of Heck*, Kurt Cobain's mother describes the fear she felt as she listened to an advance copy of the band's major-label debut *Nevermind*. She was afraid, she explains, because she knew what was coming next (megastardom). It's easier to believe, though, that she was responding to the sheer violence that poured out of Cobain and bandmates Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic. Cobain dreamed of being a neighbourhood threat: as Morgen reveals, Jonathan Kaplan's *Over the Edge* (1979), in which a town's teenage population lock their parents in the high-school gym and run amok, was one of his favourite films.

Montage of Heck is the first film project about the singer to have the full cooperation of his family and widow Courtney Love, and Morgen takes maximum advantage. It swims with family photographs and home movies, capturing Cobain as tow-headed toddler, unable to switch off a hyperactive mind, and as gangly adolescent, still pre-punk and freshly shampooed in baseball tees and bell-bottoms. Interviews with Cobain's mother and father map out the complex currents of guilt, shame and rejection their divorce set off, with the teenage Kurt pinballing from household to household in a spiral of antisocial behaviour. Access to his music allows *Montage of Heck* details such as an isolated vocal track of Cobain singing 'Territorial Pissings', revealing a throat-shredding attempt to yowl his way out of the constraints of language. The film's title comes from a home-recorded cassette collaging together squealing electronics, TV samples and heavily treated vocal wanderings.

Above all *Montage of Heck* makes use of access to Cobain's extensive journals: pages of doodles, daydreams, draft lyrics, resolutions and life-in-a-band shopping lists. *Montage of Heck* is arguably as much a film adaptation or animated edition of the journals as it is a biopic of Cobain. At times Morgen simply highlights: words or lines appear in isolation on the screen before the rest of the page fades in – a version of the iris-in and iris-out techniques used in the silent era when directors wanted an audience to 'read' a particular detail in a frame. But there's a clear decision not to treat the pages of Cobain's journals as holy writ, to be preserved untouched under glass. Instead, Morgen and a team of animators get their hands sticky, cutting and pasting journal sections into short animated sequences. But the cumulative effect of the journal material is profound, even in small details, such as the way Cobain's anxiety about his own physical frailty manifests itself in compulsive cartoons of scrawny homunculi.

As with his Rolling Stones documentary *Crossfire Hurricane* (2012), Morgen prizes rhythm, momentum and feel above all in his storytelling and editing. *Montage of Heck* is no dutiful chronology of the band's ins and outs – even Grohl's recruitment on drums goes unflagged in the attempt to get into Cobain's head. Not that Cobain is sanitised or sanctified: the home footage of him with a pregnant Love, holed up after *Nevermind* for a months-long heroin binge, is uncomfortable viewing – ditto when he appears to be nodding out with his infant daughter on his knee (Frances Bean Cobain, credited here as an executive producer).

Cobain's death begins to exert a kind of malign magnetism towards the end, sucking the viewer's thoughts forwards to the question of how Morgen will handle it, and past events such as the recording of the group's last studio album, the scouring *In Utero*, and the becalmed blues of their MTV Unplugged session. The answer is an intertitle, stating the bare facts of Cobain's death in Seattle in April 1994, before the credits roll. Conspiracy theories about Cobain's death still circulate, a can of worms that Nick Broomfield in his 1998 doc *Kurt & Courtney* couldn't open fast enough. Morgen's approach sidesteps this and thereby avoids any morbid notes or suicide glorification. Yet it feels abrupt compared with Morgen's approach throughout the film – exhaustive, expansive and energetic.

There are a couple of wider contexts Morgen could have done more to sketch in. One is the sheer blandness of the American pop charts at the end of the 1980s, dominated by MTV's mall-ready music culture, from the catalogue-rock complacency of Robert Palmer or Genesis to the profoundly phony rebel yells of hairspray metal acts such as Mötley Crüe or Skid Row. Terminal boredom all but summoned forth a band of Nirvana's scabrous intensity. Another is the underground culture that nourished Cobain – the mulch created as punk rotted down after its brief flowering in the US, in which all kinds of weird weeds, ugly but tough, such as Black Flag, Killdozer, Sonic Youth, Flipper, Big Black, Meat Puppets and more, were able to thrive, away from bright lights or big stages. One film about Cobain to do this was A.J. Schnack's *About a Son* (2006), which juxtaposed audio of Cobain interviews with shots of his native north-west; without permission to use Nirvana's music, it was soundtracked instead with his grunge and pre-grunge contemporaries. It's a far more austere document, lacking the verve and energy of Morgen's *Montage of Heck*, but taken as a pair the two films are likely the closest you could get to Cobain's story told in his own words.

Sam Davies, *Sight & Sound*, May 2015

COBAIN: MONTAGE OF HECK

Director: Brett Morgen

©: End of Movie LLC

Presented by: Universal Pictures,

HBO Documentary Films, Public Road Productions

In association with: The End of Music LLC

Executive Producers: Frances Bean Cobain,

David Byrnes, Lawrence Mestel

Producers: Brett Morgen, Danielle Renfrew

Written by: Brett Morgen

Directors of Photography: Jim Whitaker, Nicole Hirsch Whitaker

Animation: Stefan Nadelman, Hisko Hulsing Studio

Editors: Joe Beshenkovsky, Brett Morgen

Title Design: Andy Goldman

Colourist: Shane Harris

Music: Jeff Danna

Re-recording Mixers: Cameron Scott Frankley, Steve Pedersen

Sound Mixers: Anthony Enns, Eric Thomas

Digital Intermediate: Company 3

USA 2015©

132 mins

The screening on Tue 6 Sep will be introduced by Brett Morgen

SOUND AND VISION

The Man Who Fell to Earth

Sat 3 Sep 18:10; Sun 11 Sep 18:10; Sun 18 Sep 15:00; Sat 1 Oct 20:20

Cracked Actor

Sun 4 Sep 13:50

The Hunger

Sun 4 Sep 18:20; Thu 22 Sep 20:50; Thu 29 Sep 18:00

The Kid Stays in the Picture

Tue 6 Sep 18:00 + intro by Brett Morgen; Sat 17 Sep 20:40

Cobain: Montage of Heck

Tue 6 Sep 20:15 + intro by Brett Morgen; Wed 21 Sep 20:20

Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence

Sat 10 Sep 16:00; Sun 18 Sep 18:00; Tue 4 Oct 20:30

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me

Sat 10 Sep 20:30; Mon 12 Sep 20:20; Thu 29 Sep 20:25; Mon 3 Oct 20:20

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