

Singer-musician Chris Cornell (1964-2017) dies at 52

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It is with sadness we report the passing of singer-songwriter Chris Cornell on May 17 at the age of 52. Cornell was the former frontman of Seattle “grunge” band Soundgarden, supergroup Audioslave and creator-author of numerous solo albums.

Initial investigations at the scene of his death, a hotel room in Detroit, seemed to point to suicide. Subsequent reports have noted that Cornell had taken an extra dose of Ativan, a common anxiety medication for those recovering from drug addiction, which may have been related to his death. His family released a statement on Friday expressing their belief that he did not knowingly take his own life.

Cornell was in the middle of a North American tour. His death occurred just hours after a show Wednesday night in Detroit. His most recent solo album, *Higher Truth*, was released in September 2015. In interviews, he had discussed his intention to do another album with the other members of Soundgarden whose sixth such work, *King Animal*, was released in 2012.

Frontmen from four popular 1990s alternative rock groups have now all met untimely deaths due to suicide or drug abuse: Kurt Cobain of Nirvana (April 1994), Layne Staley of Alice in Chains (April 2002), Scott Weiland of Stone Temple Pilots (December 2015) and now Cornell. There are many other, *uncelebrated* members of that generation, needless to say, who have met a similar tragic fate.

The four, who have been described rather loosely as the musical “voices of their generation,” were born from 1964 to 1967. They came of age, in other words, in the early 1980s, during the Reagan years, and launched their music careers, in many cases, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, around the time of the crude bourgeois triumphalism (“the end of history”!) associated with the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe and Soviet Union. This was a difficult ideological and cultural moment. The complex problems of the period certainly left their mark on the artists’ subsequent development.

Cornell (born July 20, 1964 in Seattle, Washington) will be best remembered as the lead vocalist of the Seattle metal band Soundgarden. His vocals combined an R&B sensibility with a dynamic, multi-octave range. Soundgarden, formed in Seattle in 1984, at first stuck mainly to covers of Led Zeppelin. In this

early period, the band developed its signature sound through a combination of the blues-influenced style of Led Zeppelin and the slower, darker sound of Black Sabbath, while at the same time eschewing the goofy mysticism and machismo of both groups.

By 1986, Soundgarden had garnered enough of a following in Seattle to attract the attention of local radio personality Jonathan Poneman and fanzine writer Bruce Pavitt. Determined to bring the band’s music to a larger audience, Poneman and Pavitt joined forces to launch the indie label Sub Pop Records. In addition to Soundgarden, Sub Pop would go on to release music by other significant bands from the area such as Mudhoney, The Screaming Trees and, most notably, Nirvana.

The term “grunge” (meaning dirt or sludge) applied to a musical scene and its participants, coined by Mudhoney lead singer Mark Arm, says a good deal about how the musicians felt about their situation and their art. It is both an acknowledgement, so to speak, of a permanent, downward shift in the conditions of life and, at the same time, an insistence that popular music should honestly *reflect* the new, deteriorated state of affairs.

Specifically, it was the response of working class and lower middle class youth in the Pacific Northwest to eight years of Reagan and to the increasing harshness of life in the region (deindustrialization, decline in manufacturing, etc.) and an implicit—and sometimes explicit—criticism of the spiritually void character of so-called Hair Metal or Glam Metal and much of the popular music of the day.

Bands like Soundgarden, Alice in Chains and Nirvana, in their music and lyrics, conveyed an intense sense of alienation from the “mainstream,” of abandonment by society, and of family troubles and other personal traumas that resulted from the developing social breakdown.

Although most grunge bands had disbanded or faded from view by the late 1990s, they influenced modern music, as their lyrics brought socially conscious issues into pop culture and added introspection and an exploration of what it meant to be true to oneself.

Grunge fused elements of punk rock and heavy metal, such as the distorted electric guitar used in both genres, although some bands performed with more emphasis on one or the other. Like

these genres, grunge typically used electric guitar, bass guitar, a drummer and a singer.

A number of factors contributed to the genre's decline in influence. During the mid-late 1990s, many of the bands broke up or became less visible. Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, labeled by *Time* as "the John Lennon of the swinging Northwest," was especially tortured by success and struggled with heroin addiction before he committed suicide at the age of 27.

Many band members of the nascent northwestern indie rock movement came from working class backgrounds and found solace in the development of their musical talents. At its best, the music possessed a thoughtfulness and sincerity combined with a high level of technical skill; at their worst, these groups, lacking any overall perspective on the situation, grew steadily more demoralized and descended into despair or apathy.

Cornell's broad vocal range, almost unmatched by any of his contemporaries, was always his most noticeable talent, yet he was also a competent guitarist and lyricist.

Cornell was at his most lyrical early in his career in 1991 on the eponymous album from the Seattle supergroup Temple of the Dog, which featured members of Soundgarden and the soon-to-be-formed Pearl Jam. Perhaps the heroin overdose of Cornell's close friend and fellow frontman, Andrew Wood of Mother Love Bone, which brought the one-off formation together, helps account for the heightened sensitivity of the album's lyrics.

The song "Say Hello 2 Heaven" contains these lines, "I never wanted to write these words down for you / with the pages of phrases of things we'll never do." Another line from "Times of Trouble": "Did somebody leave you out on the edge / Did somebody push you over the edge / Did somebody love you and leave you for dead," is particularly chilling.

Other early work, such as Soundgarden's second studio album, *Louder Than Love* (1989), brims with raw creative energy. "Big Dumb Sex," while employing crude language in its chorus, is unmistakably a jibe at the obsession with tawdry sexual lyrical themes in popular music. Others, like "Hands All Over" invoke images of predatory US foreign policy that "turns eagles into vultures."

Cornell never had a worked out political viewpoint, but something clearly nagged at him, pushing him onto the artistic offensive. In a *Los Angeles Times* interview in 1996, he stated: "But I'm not living in a cocoon and painting it with bright colors... I am aware of what's going on around me enough to be disturbed by it at some point on a daily basis."

In addition to *Louder Than Love*, Soundgarden was able to produce three more well received records after signing with a major record label: *Badmotorfinger* (1991), *Superunknown* (1994) and *Down on the Upside* (1996). Songs like "Spoonman" and "Black Hole Sun" became alt-rock staples, but Cornell probably reached his artistic height in his evocative lyrics on "Rusty Cage": "When the forest burns along the road / Like God's eyes in my headlights / When the dogs are

looking for their bones / And it's raining ice picks on your steel shore." Johnny Cash felt compelled to do his own pared-down cover, which is commonly mistaken for the original version.

By the mid-1990s, Cornell's struggles with addiction and no doubt the industry gold rush that mined every vein of the "Seattle scene" had exhausted the band. From 1996, Soundgarden went on a hiatus that lasted until 2010.

In this reviewer's opinion, in the 2000s, Cornell struggled to find a voice in an increasingly fraught political and social atmosphere: a stolen election, unceasing wars abroad, a historic concentration of wealth into the hands of a tiny minority. Above all, the absence of a mass movement to respond to these pressures left many artists unarmed and unprepared. Many sank even deeper into self-pity or empty handwringing; others adapted as they could without resistance and their work suffered. Cornell fell into the latter category.

Audioslave, formed by Cornell and several former members of Rage Against the Machine, known for its protest music, seemed to lack much bite even if the talented artists involved could still produce listenable pop-rock with wide appeal. The band dissolved in 2007. Cornell's solo career encountered some of the same problems: a lack of spontaneity, a resignation in relation to the powers that be. Staying safely within the limits of "personal experience" took its toll on his music.

Unhappily, Cornell remained squarely in the Democratic Party orbit. He was reportedly supportive of the Obama administration's policies. In January 2013 Cornell played alongside other pop artists like Alicia Keys and Usher at the Inaugural Ball following Obama's reelection.

It must be said that Cornell never demonstrated an ostentatious lifestyle and always felt uncomfortable with wealth and success. This reviewer had the pleasure of attending his solo tour in 2016 and found him to be always sincere, humble and deeply appreciative of his admirers.

His death is a great loss to those who grew up in the 1990s and have held onto his music, in many cases, for dear life during these "Times of Trouble."



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