



Paris (and heroin) in the springtime

**Twenty years on, the real story of what
happened in Kurt Cobain's last months**



arts

Dazed, confused, angry, strung out — Kurt Cobain's last days in Paris

Tomorrow is the 20th anniversary of the Nirvana singer's suicide, aged 27. **Laurence Romance** pieces together his drug-fuelled last months in France

It is early February in 1994 and Kurt Cobain has come to Paris with the rest of Nirvana to perform several European dates. One evening he accepts an invitation from his band members and road crew to join them at a pizzeria close to their hotel just off the Champs-Élysées. But he mistakes the address and stumbles instead into a different pizza parlour where the employees, alarmed by the bedraggled appearance of the rock icon they fail to recognise, demand that he vacate the premises.

Suddenly the diminutive Cobain becomes transfixed with blind rage. He produces a bunch of money from his pockets and tosses it dramatically into the air. Then he pulls out a loaded gun and fires a round into the pizzeria ceiling before dashing out of the restaurant and hightailing it back to his room at the Warwick Hotel, where he remains in a highly agitated frame of mind. He's still seething the following day. "Paris is a city of discrimination," he keeps repeating to his new drug buddy, a heroin dealer and guitarist in a Parisian rock band who, to preserve his anonymity, we'll call Gabriel D. Cobain had overdosed at his apartment the night they met.

When Cobain arrived in France he was dazed, confused, depressed, angry and strung out. His beloved grandmother Iris had just been sent to hospital and — according to at least one biography — "the idea of her death scared him worse than [the idea of] his own". Although he was insistent about not wanting to tour to promote Nirvana's latest album *In Utero* he was under pressure to do so because they were headlining that summer's Lollapalooza Festival and \$9 million, £6 million at the time, was at stake.

Meanwhile he was especially apprehensive about the European tour — 38 dates had been booked in 16 countries over less than two months (the group ultimately completed 15 shows, including two TV appearances). And drug addicts don't like to travel, particularly through customs.

Although Cobain claimed in interviews that he'd curtailed his use of hard drugs, he was becoming



increasingly dependent on them. Recently he'd begun injecting cocaine as well as heroin. During 1993, it is rumoured, he overdosed at least 12 times, yet seemed to be in denial about the extent of his addiction.

No official doctor was employed on the tour; Cobain managed his addictions with the help of his own doctors who prescribed him opiate-based pain medication. But in Paris he got lucky. Cobain had met a French photographer named Yuri Lenquette in Australia in 1992. He had evidently enjoyed Lenquette's company because as soon as he arrived in Paris he phoned the photographer, who invited him over to his premises. Lenquette was not and has never been a user of hard drugs but when Cobain left to try to score heroin in a particularly dangerous area of the city, "I told him I was going to introduce him to someone I knew was using heroin, but who was also a regular guy. It was a more trustworthy connection than to just let him out in the streets of Paris."

Nowadays clean and sober, back then Gabriel D was selling heroin to help to pay for his own habit. "Yuri phoned and told me he needed to help out a famous American," he says. "He didn't say who. I only realised it was Cobain when I opened the door." Gabriel shared the small quantity of the drug he had with Cobain, who quickly injected it before falling into a stupor. "I thought he was going to die. He was really gone and almost fell off

the chair he was seated on. I held him up and he kept repeating, 'I never OD', probably to make me feel less alarmed and reluctant to see him again." In fact, they saw each other again five or six times that month and became "drug buddies".

"I'd score the stuff, he'd pay for the both of us and when I'd try to pay him back he'd get very offended," Gabriel says. "He'd say: 'I don't want money. Only last year I pissed away a million dollars on more than just dope and I don't even know where it went.' He had a strange way of thinking for a rock star. Like one time he was reading a letter from a female fan who wrote that his voice made her feel 'horny'. He was disgusted by that."

Lenquette confirms this: "He certainly didn't emanate superstar charisma. In fact, a year after his death my ex-business partner said to me: 'What, that scruffy little man stretched out on the sofa was Kurt Cobain?'"

On February 14, Nirvana were booked to perform at Le Zénith arena in Paris. There was a problem, however. At close to 8pm Cobain was still at Lenquette's studio. "The tour manager had been phoning me since early in the afternoon, saying, 'We know he's with you', but Cobain kept gesticulating that he didn't want to talk to him. I finally took Kurt on the back of my scooter to the backstage area. He was dragged by the road crew directly on to the stage. By the time I entered the building

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Nirvana, the final pictures: from left, Krist Novoselic, Kurt Cobain, Dave Grohl and Pat Smear

Nirvana had finished their first song."

At about 5pm the day after, Cobain informed Lenquette that he would arrive at the studio that evening with the rest of the group — Krist Novoselic and Dave Grohl — for what would become both his and Nirvana's last photo session. "They arrived at around midnight," the photographer recalls. "Kurt looked terrible. His face was covered in eczema scars. I pointed this out to him. He stood in front of a mirror and said: 'Yeah, you're right. Do you have any make-up around?' Without thinking, I passed him some face-cream that belonged to my black girlfriend. He put it on and it looked grotesque, like he was Al Jolson."

A female friend of Lenquette's was summoned to cover up Cobain's facial blemishes and the session began at 1.30am. Cobain wanted to be photographed on his own first. "That's when he pulled out his gun — a real one — and we did a 20-minute photo shoot. Kurt let me know I could use anything, even the shots with the gun in his mouth. After that I invited Krist and Dave, who'd both been drinking in the next room, to join us. I took photos of the three and then, when [second guitarist] Pat Smear arrived, of the four of them." The pictures are part of an exhibition now showing in Paris.

Lenquette recalls that the Nirvana members were friendly towards each other during the session, laughing and joking together. It provided a stark contrast from what he'd heard Cobain

muttering about his colleagues in private. "He kept saying: 'They resent me. They don't understand me.' He wanted to disband the group, to stop playing music altogether."

Cobain phoned his wife Courtney Love frequently from Lenquette's studio and the photographer would hear them screaming at each other. Each call seemed to leave him more depressed. "Yet when he talked about Courtney," Lenquette claims, "it was to give me bullshit about how she was 'the perfect wife. His daughter [Frances Bean] seemed to be the only truly positive element in his life.'"

Perpetually on the look out for more Class A drugs, Cobain invited Gabriel D on the afternoon of February 16 to his room at the Warwick Hotel, where he was registered under the alias "Grey Poupon" (a brand of mustard popular in America). The first thing Gabriel noticed on entering the premises was that Cobain had heaped his clothes into the bath. In his last months the grunge icon rarely bathed and would wear the same ragged jeans and sweaters for months. "The jeans he's wearing in the suicide photo are the same pair he wore throughout his time in Paris," Gabriel says.

A drug deal had been set in motion but there was a delay. Meanwhile, Nirvana had a gig to play that night at the Salle Omnisports in Rennes and time was tight. "Still, Kurt wouldn't leave without [the drugs]," Gabriel says. "Standing outside Cobain's locked



Yuri Lenquette and two of the pictures he took of the gun-toting Cobain

door, someone in his entourage was screaming at Kurt that he had to take a plane, a train or a taxi and Kurt was screaming back: 'I don't want your f***ing planes, trains and taxis! F*** you!' while kicking the door."

Eventually the deal went down — five grams of heroin, five of cocaine — and Cobain and Gabriel set off for Rennes, 216 miles away, four hours behind schedule. "I'm scared of becoming a junkie again," Cobain confessed at one point. It was a strange thing to say when only ten minutes earlier he'd had a loaded syringe sticking out of his arm.

At the time, Nirvana and their road crew travelled in two separate

“ He taunted his management: ‘So if I die do we still have to play?’

buses, a "non-smoker" one for Novoselic and Grohl and the second for the "smokers": Cobain, Smear and the cellist Melora Creager. In Cobain's coach an empty baby's cradle was on display, but he never discussed family issues with Gabriel, who recalls: "He talked mostly about music. He wanted to create the perfect rock song, an ideal blending of melody and energy."

In his autobiography *Harmony in My Head*, Steve Diggle of the Buzzcocks, the band Cobain had chosen as a support act for Nirvana on some of the European shows, relates bonding with him on coach rides where they'd snort cocaine and discuss "the finer points of Steely Dan" (Cobain had lately become a fan of the distinctly un-punk-like jazz-pop duo). Diggle remembers him as "quite laid back. He didn't appear to be the uptight character he was made out to be." Gabriel cautiously concurs: "He could be sociable but only in one-on-one situations. If there were more than two people in a room he'd clam up."

Except when it came to Nirvana. After the Rennes show, Cobain invited Gabriel to board the non-smoker bus with him. He was planning to release a video compilation of live footage and together they watched tapes of Nirvana performances. Cobain did most of the talking and scribbled notes. For someone privately planning to dissolve the group, he still behaved like their creative wellspring.

For their parts, Grohl and Novoselic

were both growing increasingly ill at ease about their leader's lifestyle choices. Gabriel: "They erected this wall of indifference, like 'We'll play with you but we don't want to know about your problems.' The last image I have of Kurt," he concludes, "is of him on the bus reading a battered English language copy of *The Trial of Gilles de Rais* by the French writer George Bataille." This master of "transgressive literature" fascinated Cobain, who had recently asked Gabriel's girlfriend to translate passages from another of Bataille's books for him. Its title? *Le Mort* (the Dead Man).

After the last French concert in Grenoble on February 18, Cobain's mood swings went from bad to worse. In Milan a week later he told Novoselic that he wanted to cancel the remaining dates. "He gave me some absurd reason for why he wanted to blow it off," says Novoselic, who reminded him that a cancellation would incur six-figure fines from promoters. Cobain then taunted his management: "So if I die, do we still have to play?" On February 27, Nirvana played their penultimate show, in Slovenia. Several of Novoselic's relatives attended. The bassist later observed: "He hung on there for me, but I think his mind was made up."

On March 1, Nirvana arrived in Munich. Early that morning, Cobain phoned Lenquette and Gabriel in a panic and begged them to jump on an aeroplane, asking the latter to smuggle in some heroin for him. Both refused. That evening, Nirvana played their last full concert, in a converted aircraft hangar called Terminal I. Just before performing, Cobain visited the support act, his old Seattle compadres the Melvins, and told guitarist Buzz Osborne that he was going to disband Nirvana, fire his management and get divorced. "I should be doing this solo," he concluded. Osborne realised: "He was talking about his whole life."

Nirvana's Munich concert dragged on for little over an hour. Cobain, suffering from bronchitis and laryngitis, could barely sing at all. Then came the attempted suicide in Rome on March 4, followed on April 5 by the definitive self-obliteration in his Seattle home. From extinguishing his voice to blowing his brains out, Kurt Cobain had finally attained nirvana in the Buddhist sense of the term.

Laurence Romance is a Paris-based journalist who translated the journals of Kurt Cobain into French. *The Last Shooting: Kurt Cobain is at the Addict Gallerie, Paris until June 21*

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