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Kurt Cobain's *Journals*: An Expansion on the Thoughts of an Artist

“If you read you’ll judge.” This is a hand-scribbled message written on the front of Kurt Cobain’s *Journals*. Published posthumously in 2003, *Journals* is a first-hand look into the mind of the brooding and confused rock star. As the vocalist and songwriter for the multi-platinum grunge band *Nirvana*, Cobain inherited the attention of many individuals worldwide. But the discomfort and perplexity he found in his fame were an overwhelming distress which ultimately contributed to Cobain’s decision to take his own life in 1994. While he never intended for these writings to be available to the public, Cobain’s journals are a literary connection that expose the emotions of the struggling musician to the enthralled and concerned public he left behind. Though the anthology does not act as a precise road map of Cobain’s mind, it does serve as a tool which enhances a better understanding of the feelings he had regarding art, notoriety, and criticism in the media. By allowing readers a closer, more intimate view into Cobain’s world, *Journals* helps to partially quell the confusion and speculation surrounding his suicide by communicating the discord between Cobain as an artist and the sources which he felt impeded upon his artistic happiness.

One of the main themes that pervades *Journals* is an emphasis on the significance of art. As a musician and poet, Cobain continually conveys an acute understanding of the importance of each of these elements within his life. However, when Cobain discusses his perspective of art, he repeatedly addresses the dissonance he feels between his personal expressions and the interpretations of his work. Cobain writes:

“When I say I in a song, that doesn’t necessarily mean that person is me and it doesn’t mean I’m just a storyteller. It means whoever or whatever you want because everyone has their own definition of

specific words and when you're dealing in the context of music, you can't expect words to have the same meaning as in everyday use of our vocabulary" (Cobain 120).

Through this passage readers see that Cobain desired each individual to allow personal experience to construct their own interpretations of his material, without hypothesizing that the message of the piece is relevant to specifically him. Because Cobain was much attuned to the criticism and conjectures revolving around the meaning of his lyrics, he consistently felt awkward justifying the context in which they were contrived. Songs such as "Polly" and "Rape Me" developed intense translations rooted in violence and drug use, which Cobain later addressed as entirely off the mark of what the songs were actually written about. The amount of controversy that cultivated around the incorrectly interpreted pieces of work resulted in Cobain feeling suppressed and restricted in his full creative capacity. He further writes, "I feel this society has lost its sense of what art is. Art is expression and in expression you need 100% full freedom and our freedom to express our art is seriously being fucked with" (Cobain 120). Cobain is quick to acknowledge the backlash the band received regarding the content of their music and how it dramatically affected their ability to fully articulate their creative passions. Noting the disparity Cobain highlights with his use of the word society and the disagreement he feels regarding its position, readers see a clear dichotomy between Cobain as a musician and his acknowledgment of the world's inability to fully absorb and appreciate the basis of his work. In each of these excerpts, Cobain communicates a strong sense of adversity between his goals of creation and expression and the skewed interpretations by an audience he did not feel qualified to critique his art. As one who was heavily entranced by the energy emitted and captured through the creation of music, this division of mindsets indubitably had an immense impact on Cobain's desire to move forward with his craft, resulting in a clear "me versus them" mentality.

Alongside of his elaboration on art, Cobain also continually addresses his fame and its overall affects. With the rapid success of the band's single, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," Nirvana was instantly thrust into the ears and minds of a burgeoning generation. But becoming an overnight phenomenon was not an easy transition, and Cobain was ultimately left disenchanted by the amount of notice he garnered. In one segment of *Journals*, Cobain reflects on celebrity, asserting:

"It's true in a sense that you can make a comfortable living at it. But besides financial security it really isn't that wise of a profession. I feel like I'm being evaluated 24 hours a day. Being in a band is hard work and the acclaim itself isn't worth it" (Cobain 117).

Though Cobain maintained the inherent desire to continue creating and performing music, the notoriety surrounding his art stifled his motivation by polluting the sanctity of his passion. Because Nirvana's unique sound and prolific lyrics offered a fresh perspective embedded in a new musical movement, the public naturally became infatuated with the group. But in many cases, this infatuation overstepped boundaries that left Cobain feeling overly exposed to the public. In the book, Cobain notes that over the course of a thirteen month period, he coped with the theft of four notebooks which contained several years' worth of poetry, personal writings, and lyrics. Along with these intrusions, Cobain routinely discovered that pages of his journals had been ripped out during his stays in hospitals and hotels. He writes, "But the most violating thing I've felt this year is not the media exaggerations or the catty gossip, but the rape of my personal thoughts" (Cobain 263). Repeated infringements to Cobain's personal privacy resulted in a severe disconnect between himself and the population outside him. He drifted far from the idea of community and further into a world of isolation, continually struggling with the consequences of solitude and depression.

Another facet of stardom that Cobain addresses in his writings is the conflict between the band's achievement of global recognition and his own opinion of success. Overwhelmed with the notion of fame, Cobain analyzes pop culture's influence on America and the apparent desire for instant, self-indulgent success. He states:

“The conspiracy towards success in America is immediacy. To expose in great repetition to the minds of small attention spans...Here today, gone tomorrow because yesterday's following was nothing more than a tool in every individuals need for self-importance, entertainment, and social rituals” (Cobain 111).

Cobain argues that the American ideal for success circulates around a yearning to obtain ephemeral status on an ever-changing social scale. This viewpoint added to Cobain's uneasiness with his band's popularity because he felt the rise in status subsequently pulled them away from the values that surrounded Nirvana's genesis and categorized them as a group who was only interested in fame. Dealing with large record labels and mass media publications were further aspects that contributed to Cobain feeling out of his element. He was also plagued by the distance fame was putting between Nirvana and their primary fans. Cobain writes, “I can't handle the success....The guilt...I feel so incredibly guilty...for abandoning our true comrades...The ones who have been into us since the beginning” (Cobain 195). When Nirvana instantaneously became rock stars, Cobain was unable to accept the change because it was an extreme contrast to all he had known. With his new position, he was no longer able to maintain a connection with the friends and fans he knew well before his success. His failure to adapt to the magnitude of Nirvana's notoriety also further obstructed Cobain's ability to remain happy creating music. Deeper in the book, he writes about his decreasing desire to learn and experience new things because the impetus that drove his love for music became distorted by the peripheral attributes that success came to offer.

Perhaps the most apparent subject matter within *Journals* is Cobain's disdain for the media's criticism of him and his work. One of the main topics Cobain addresses are the accusations purporting his addiction to heroine. Though Cobain acknowledges drug-use in his writings, he retorts that the much-publicized decline in his physical appearance was the consequence of excessive touring and an undiagnosed stomach condition. He speaks to the media in his journals, writing:

“I am the product of seven months of screaming at the top of my lungs almost every night...seven months of answering the same questions over and over. The cherub, little scruff you've grown to know from the back of the Nevermind album is proof that film adds ten pounds to your body, because I've been the same bird weight since I've had the dreaded gut rot” (Cobain 195).

Although he frequently writes about the drawbacks of both fame and touring, Cobain's elaboration on his stomach condition offers readers a never-before-seen perspective of the physical trouble that incessantly plagued him. Detailing several instances in which he was inundated by the condition, Cobain discusses at length how doctors were unable to accurately diagnose his disease, leaving him in a chronic state of discomfort. While his stomach condition created immense pain, it also affected his desire and ability to eat. Cobain notes that he frequently endured extended periods of starvation because he was incapable of ingesting or holding down sustenance. The result was his emaciated physical state, compounded with an overwhelming insecurity with his body's appearance. Cobain highlights that a main contribution in his choice to use heroine was the pain he suffered during episodes of stomach complications. He explains, “After protein drinks, becoming a vegetarian...and doctor after doctor I decided to relieve my pain with small doses of heroin for a walloping 3 whole weeks...It was a stupid thing to do and I'll never do it again” (Cobain 193). Passages like this offer vital insight to readers, giving much needed clarification of Cobain's decision to engage narcotics. It

shows that although Cobain employed the use of heroine, there were other factors that greatly contributed to the decline of his health. Because of the media's emphasis on Cobain's heroine use, his stomach condition was often overlooked as a major contributor to the weakening of his physical state. Although Cobain owns up to using heroine, he repeatedly acknowledges his error in judgment and highlights both the moral and physical dilemmas drug-use caused him to face.

In addition to discussing his stomach condition and drug-use, Cobain addresses the media's criticism and representation of both Nirvana and their material. Feeling a deep-rooted disparity between journalist viewpoints and his own, Cobain describes his disapproval of the media's credibility, stating:

“I'm fed up with having long winded 2 hour discussions with journalists and finding that they've chosen all the unimportant, more tabloidesque quotes of the past 2 hours. Rock bands are at the mercy of the journalist and in my opinion there isn't one I can think of who deserves to own a pen” (Cobain 200).

Because of repeated instances where band members were misquoted or represented unfairly during interviews, Cobain developed a strong resentment for all aspects of the media. He further argues that journalists and major media publications remained the key contributors to the controversy and turmoil that saturated his life. A main concern Cobain focuses on is the qualification of journalists to criticize Nirvana's material. He points out their lack of experience with the subject matter and calls into question their ability to accurately discuss a topic that lies outside of their skill set. Cobain writes, “...there are those who spend years studying other people's works because they don't have a chance in hell to produce anything with a hint of talent” (Cobain 246). Cobain strongly felt that the media's representation of him and his band members was unjust because they contained no proper

experience as musicians to substantiate their arguments. The outcome of the strained relationship between Cobain and the media resulted with him moving deeper into reclusion. Since he struggled with having his persona and art intensely scrutinized, he withdrew from the public and harbored even stronger feelings of separation between his desire and his ability to compose further artistic output.

Through the publication of *Journals*, admirers are offered a deeper perspective of the struggles that significantly affected the happiness Cobain felt creating music. Though he did voice a certain degree of these thoughts while living, not until the release of his journals were fans able to read the unfiltered reflections on the true impact of his celebrity and the extreme detriment it imposed on his overall well-being. Cobain's thoughts regarding his music, fame, and position in the media afford readers the alternate side of a story that was originally rooted in speculation and hearsay. While the book does not answer all of the questions regarding his suicide, Cobain's musings substantially help temper the sting by reducing the gap between his motivation to take his own life and those who were left wondering why. Even though he is no longer here to share the gifts that inspired a generation, fans are able to continue their connection with Cobain by visiting the side of him that no amount of celebrity could expose.