

# ARTS & LEISURE

## Note Taking From Drive The Down Under growing

Upon finishing  
Gina Arnold's  
rave-up chronicle  
of American inde-  
pendent rock, -  
*Route 666: On the  
Road to Nirvana*,  
one is struck by  
three urges: (1) to  
dig out the  
*Replacements'*  
*Let It Be* and cue  
up "Unsatisfied";  
(2) to hit a used-  
record store and  
hunt down rare  
*Fugazi* LPs; and  
(3) to form a band.

Arnold's *Route 666* (St. Martin's, \$12.95) is a fan's journal and history, one that makes the reader want nothing more than to be part of that history, to have been there at the beginning—to have ridden in the Pixies' tour bus through Europe, to have seen a teenage Nirvana in 1987, to have hung out at after-show parties with a young Paul Westerberg or Jello Biafra or Michael Stipe.

Arnold takes the reader to each of the centers of alternative rock—San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Austin, Minneapolis and Seattle—recalling the years when, spontaneously, each area spawned a handful of bands whose songs and attitudes encapsulated the rage, frustration and confusion that angry young men and women were feeling.

In the beginning, there was punk rock, shattering the doldrums of the late '70s. "Without punk rock, we'd still be stuck wearing baby-blue work shirts and wide-legged jeans," Arnold writes. "Madonna couldn't be going around in her bustier, and Sonic Youth wouldn't be on Geffen. Punk rock was a Gallipoli of sorts, losing the battle, killing all the foot soldiers, and yet ultimately winning the war."  
That

have caught current superstars at the beginning of their careers.

Here she describes an early R.E.M. song: "[T]he sound of 'Wolves Lower' is so much more than its mere parts: its electrically charged howl in the midst of sonic simplicity is a classic example of that strange element, neither music nor lyrics, that rock 'n' roll sometimes evokes, some inhuman emotional presence rising up of its own accord off the vinyl, something evoked from wood and wire and four different minds in concert, something singing off the instant synapses of silences, sudden snaps between fingers and electricity, actual feelings murmured into your mind, unintelligible, yet heard by all of us as clearly as if they were being screamed in the chambers of our hearts."

And on a Minneapolis trio: "Hüsker Dü was such a powerful band, but they looked like farmers or something: two solid-looking fat guys and a total square, and the contrast was incredibly startling. They'd stand up there, the picture of seriousness, pouring wicked tick clangor out of their instruments, creating this gigan-

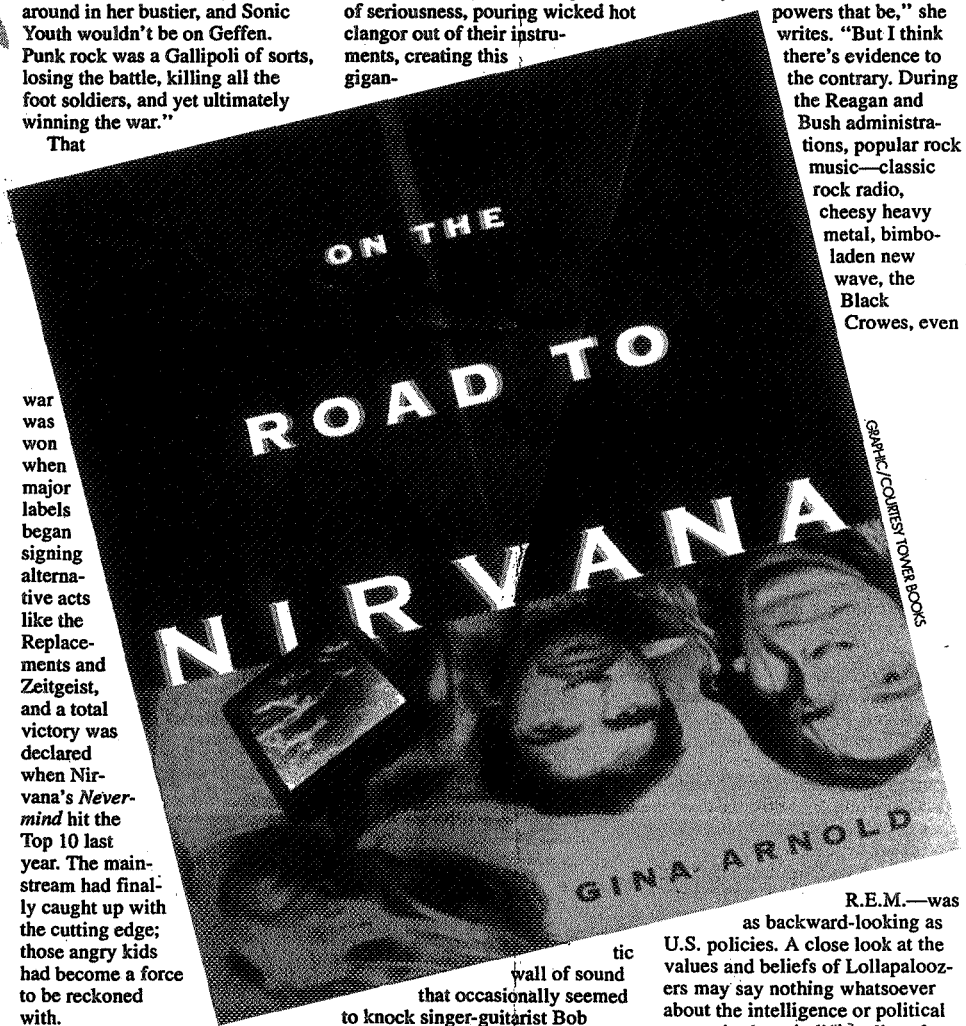
a positive orgy of anger. Atomizing, detonating, exonerating, screaming...."

Too much of this becomes exhausting; parts of *Route 666* border on overwriting. But quotes of band members and alternative-scene participants are sprinkled liberally throughout, breaking up Arnold's wall of prose and reminiscence.

Her chronicle, partially an autobiography, is admittedly slanted toward her own experiences and those of her sources, and she falls all over herself with affection for her favorite artists: "Fugazi is the greatest live band playing today"; "Hüsker Dü's brilliance cannot be equaled"; the Pixies were "the best band on the planet at the time."

But her enthusiasm is undeniably catchy. Arnold truly believes America is better off for the revolution capped by Nirvana's success.

"OK, so a world made of kids who have slightly better record collections than before is not necessarily one that will defeat the powers that be," she writes. "But I think there's evidence to the contrary. During the Reagan and Bush administrations, popular rock music—classic rock radio, cheesy heavy metal, bimbo-laden new wave, the Black Crowes, even



war was won when major labels began signing alternative acts like the Replacements and Zeitgeist, and a total victory was declared when Nirvana's *Nevermind* hit the Top 10 last year. The mainstream had finally caught up with the cutting edge; those angry kids had become a force to be reckoned with.

Arnold is remarkable at capturing what few rock journalists can: the feel of hearing an album for the first time, of introducing a friend to a favorite band, of being among the first to

tic wall of sound that occasionally seemed to knock singer-guitarist Bob Mould off his feet. He'd lunge this way and that, caught up in the act of building big noise. It was like he was trying to liberate every particle of sound on the planet, hurling meaning and music together in

R.E.M.—was as backward-looking as U.S. policies. A close look at the values and beliefs of Lollapaloozers may say nothing whatsoever about the intelligence or political correctness or individuality of new American youth. But their taste in new music does, I think, at least signify a more forward-looking mindset."

—MATTHEW BUDMAN