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Nirvana

Nirvana - In Utero, A Classic Album Under Review [DVD]

UK release date: 26 November 2006

by **Jon Langmead**

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Sexy Intellectual

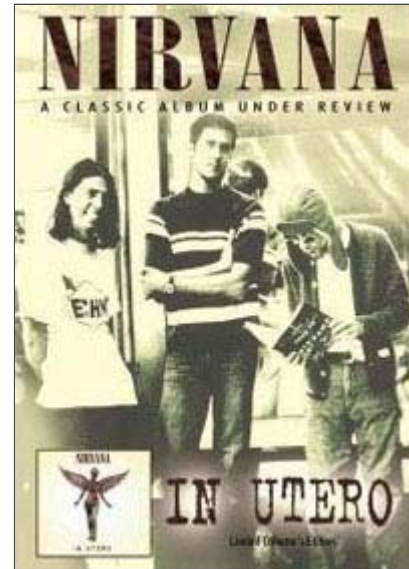
In Utero: A Classic Album Under Review takes an almost strictly cliff-notes read on Nirvana's final studio album. That the album warrants a focused discussion on its creation and impact, both at the time and ongoing, is without debate. That these collected critics and writers find so little new to say about the band and their work is surprising and disappointing.

The tone is set all wrong in that too many of the voices here, all middle-aged white men, still seem to have the pain of teenage humiliations bubbling right to the top. (Nirvana appealed to bullies too, remember?) They offer too few specifics and rehash oft-repeated insights about the band. Partially because so much of what they say seems to be hued so directly from popular Nirvana mythology, they sound rather empty at best, embarrassingly self-important at worst. Listening back, though, you remember how so many of the oft-repeated insights are core truths to getting at the band.

For a lot of people who had only been exposed to commercial radio, the onset of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" really did blow things open in a lot of very tangible ways. Dave Grohl really is an amazingly powerful drummer who belongs in the same breath with some of rock's most influential players. His playing is key to the band. (Compare the direct and single-minded attack of his playing on *Nevermind* and *In Utero* to the playing on *Bleach* and you'll realize that Butch Vig and Steve Albini aren't the only reasons for the sonic differences between the band's Geffen and Sub Pop output).

Kurt Cobain really did express an amazing amount of anguish and alienation that ultimately resonated and connected with people on many different levels. *In Utero* really was the band's stab at an anti-commercial follow-up to their impossibly successful previous album. Anyone who has paid any attention to Nirvana already knows all this and it's almost impossible to talk about the band without coming back to a lot of these points. Here, though, these well-understood points makeup almost the entirety of the story.

After 10 years in a Cobain-less world there should be something more to say. While the music may not have dated (at least the critics here seem to think that it hasn't), so much of the hyperbole around grunge has, and



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poorly. Calling a pointedly abrasive song on a pointedly abrasive album "Radio Friendly Unit Shifter" is hopelessly corny. Still, it's cited here as an example of Cobain's "famous" sense of irony. It's irony in its simplest form, though, and may be more of an example of Cobain's directness. The growth of alt-country (here represented by Will Oldham) as a reaction to the notion that Nirvana did all that could be done with rock music is mentioned as a lasting influence. But if Nirvana took rock songwriting as far as it can go, it's only because no one brilliant enough has come along to make it all fresh again.

In Utero is also cited as a touchstone for successful bands who long to make a "difficult" album (here represented by Radiohead's *Kid A*). If there is truth to this it's only in retrospect and especially in the given example, because everyone was much too busy at the time of *Kid A*'s release trying to parallel it to *Metal Machine Music* and *Pet Sound* to draw any lines between it and *In Utero*. And no one gets into the fact that a large number of people who had their ears turned on by Nirvana probably haven't listened to the band in 10 years, or that a lot of the remaining people either formed or gravitated toward bad bands who have played a major hand in returning radio to the state it was in before Nirvana came along. And while Nirvana may have brought *loudquietloud* to a mass audience, most people who care will tell you that the Pixies are a much more important band. So where in the picture does this leave a lonely little power trio from Washington?

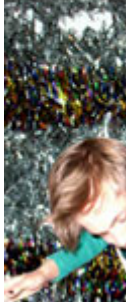
The Guardian's Andrew Mueller offers the most thoughtful insights. He nails "Smells Like Teen Spirit" as a teenage anthem not about rebellion or revolt, but instead about withdrawal. He gives an even-handed assessment of Steve Albini's considerable reputation and singles out "Heart Shaped Box" as the definitive Nirvana song. Besides Mueller, the best moments are from non-critics. Kill Rock Star's Slim Moon states plainly that it's the expressiveness of Cobain's voice that made Nirvana special and it's as close as anyone here gets to addressing why Nirvana and why not everyone else. When discussing *Nevermind*, Engineer Jack Endino (he recorded both *Bleach* and early versions of some of the songs that made it onto *In Utero*) sums it up as an album recorded and engineered to sound like a pop record by a rock band. Indeed, Mueller is a more than welcome face whenever he appears, given a bit more weight to a conversation that otherwise adds little more than common knowledge to the overall dialogue.

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— 20 December 2006

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