

# SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT

## NIRVANA

APPEARS IN  
ROCK & POP  
2018

⚡ Released: 1991   ⚡ Album: Nevermind   ⚡ Label: DGC Records

### ABOUT THE SONG

Nirvana's Kurt Cobain was attempting to write the 'ultimate pop song' when he came up with the guitar riff that would become 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'. He wanted to write a song in the style of The Pixies, telling *Rolling Stone* in 1994: 'I was basically trying to rip off The Pixies. I have to admit it.' The title came after Kathleen Hanna, lead singer of Bikini Kill, spray-painted 'Kurt smells like Teen Spirit' on his bedroom wall. Teen Spirit was actually a brand of deodorant.

The first single from Nirvana's second album *Nevermind*, 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' was a surprise hit. The label had anticipated that 'Come As You Are', the follow-up single, would be the song to cross over to a mainstream audience. 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' was first played on college radio before rock stations and MTV picked it up. It is widely praised as one of the greatest songs in the history of rock music.

“ WITH THE LIGHTS OUT,  
IT'S LESS DANGEROUS  
HERE WE ARE NOW,  
ENTERTAIN US  
I FEEL STUPID AND CONTAGIOUS ”

### RECORDING AND PRODUCTION

Cobain began writing 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' a few weeks before Nirvana were due in the studio to record *Nevermind*. After presenting the main riff and melody of the chorus to the rest of the band, they jammed around the riff for an hour and a half. Bassist Krist Novoselic slowed the verse down and drummer Dave Grohl created a drum beat and as a result, 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' is the only song on *Nevermind* to give songwriting credits to all three band members. The track was recorded in May 1991 at Sound City studios in Van Nuys, California with producer Butch Vig, who moved a guitar ad lib into the chorus and trimmed the length of the chorus. It was recorded in just three takes with the band deciding to keep the second one. The guitar chords were double-tracked to give the track a more powerful sound.

### COMPOSITION

'Smells Like Teen Spirit' is based on a four-chord pattern. The quiet-loud dynamic contrasts of the song became a characteristic feature of the Nirvana sound. It has been said that the guitar riff resembles Boston's 'More Than a Feeling', and even Cobain called the riff 'totally clichéd'. It is this guitar riff alongside Cobain's gritty vocal that made the song Nirvana's first big hit.

### AWARDS

- ⚡ **Best Single**  
NME Awards 1991
- ⚡ **Best New Artist in a Video**  
MTV Video Music Awards 1992
- ⚡ **Best Alternative Video**  
MTV Video Music Awards 1992
- ⚡ **Best Single Ever**  
NME Awards 2000



## THE VIDEO

Directed by Samuel Bayer, who said he thinks he was hired because his test-reel was so bad he'd bring a punk quality to the production, the video is based around a school concert that descends into anarchy. Influenced by the Ramones' film *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, it features the band playing at a pep rally in a high school gym to an audience of bored students. The chaos at the end of the video was real. The extras, fans that had responded to a flyer, had sat through so many replays of the song that when allowed to mosh, they couldn't contain their frustration and smashed the set. Cobain was so meticulous about the video that he personally oversaw a re-edit after being dissatisfied with Bayer's version.



## THE ALBUM

*Nevermind* was produced by Butch Vig, best known as the drummer of Garbage. It was released in September 1991 by DGC Records, who had low commercial expectations. However, due to the surprise success of the single 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', by January 1992 it had replaced Michael Jackson's *Dangerous* at the top of the Billboard 200 chart. Three other successful singles were released: 'Come As You Are', 'Lithium' and 'In Bloom'. *Nevermind* has sold more than 30 million copies and has been credited as partly responsible for bringing alternative rock and grunge to a mainstream audience.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Formed by Kurt Cobain and Krist Novoselic in Aberdeen, Washington, USA in 1987, Nirvana established itself in the late 1980s Seattle grunge scene. The band went through several drummers, including Chad Channing, before Dave Grohl joined in 1990. Although Nirvana only released three full-length studio albums over their seven-year career, they are regarded as one of the most influential and important bands in rock history. Cobain was often referred to by the media as the 'spokesman of a generation' and Nirvana was considered the flagship band of Generation X. Nirvana is one of the best-selling bands of all time, having sold over 75 million records worldwide. *In Utero*, the group's third and last album, released in 1993, was critically acclaimed, but featured a less mainstream sound.

Since the band's split after Cobain's death in 1994, various posthumous releases have been issued, overseen by Grohl, Novoselic and Cobain's widow, musician and actress Courtney Love (singer and guitarist of alternative rock band Hole). Novoselic continued to play in various bands and became active in music politics. Grohl went on to find success with Foo Fighters, Them Crooked Vultures and Queens of the Stone Age.

## MORE TO EXPLORE

**Songs:** 'Come As You Are', Nirvana (1991), 'Lithium', Nirvana (1991), 'In Bloom', Nirvana (1991), 'More Than A Feeling', Boston (1976). **Albums:** *Dangerous*, Michael Jackson (1991), *Nevermind*, Nirvana (1991), *In Utero*, Nirvana (1993).

**Artists & collaborators:** Butch Vig, Chad Channing, Courtney Love, Dave Grohl, Foo Fighters, Hole, Kathleen Hanna (Bikini Kill), Kurt Cobain, Queens of the Stone Age, Samuel Bayer, The Pixies, Them Crooked Vultures.

**Trinity Rock & Pop syllabus:** Bass, Grade 4, Drums, Grade 6, Guitar, Grade 4.

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