

# Why There Was No Grunge Breakthrough in Estonia

*Aimar Ventsel*

*University of Tartu*

*E-mail: aimar.ventsel@ut.ee*

**Abstract:** Grunge is the term used for a type of music that appeared after the sensational breakthrough of American alternative rock band Nirvana with their album *Nevermind* in 1991. As is usual in the music business, record companies started to promote similar bands. This article is about the grunge subculture in Estonia in the early 1990s and is based on personal memories and discussions with people who embraced the style. The aim is to show that grunge in Estonia was a vivid example of glocalisation, where a globally known phenomenon becomes a local variation with significant differences to the way in which it is understood and interpreted in the country of origin. Simultaneously, I discuss why grunge was never so popular in Estonia. The reason for this was that the early 1990s were a time when a lot of Western pop culture – both clothes and music – was suddenly available and young people faced multiple choices. Grunge, as a downshift culture, did not fit with the post-Soviet ethos and rush towards consumerism.

**Keywords:** grunge, subculture, Nirvana, Estonia, youth culture, glocalisation.

Grunge is the term used for a type of music that appeared after the sensational breakthrough of American alternative rock band Nirvana with their album *Nevermind* in 1991. Suddenly the album and especially the song “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was broadcast extensively on radio and received frequent air play on the television music channel MTV. As is usual in the music business, record companies started to seek similar bands and promoted them. Because Nirvana was from the Seattle, on the northwest coast of the USA, record companies,

music producers and talent scouts focused on the alternative music scene there and found several bands who became famous in the first years of 1990s. So the expression ‘Seattle sound’ was created, which was later equivalent to the term grunge with both terms often used simultaneously. This article is about grunge subculture in Estonia in the early 1990s and is based on personal memories and discussions with people who embraced the style. The aim is to show that grunge in Estonia was a vivid example of glocalisation, where a globally known phenomenon becomes a local variation with significant differences from the way in which it is understood and interpreted in the country of origin. Simultaneously, I discuss why grunge was never so popular in Estonia. The reason for this was that the early 1990s were a time when a lot of Western pop culture – both clothes and music – was suddenly available and young people faced multiple choices. Grunge, as a downshift culture, did not fit with the post-Soviet ethos and rush towards consumerism.

The idea to write this article was born in the Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change Facebook group. On 20 November 2021 I posted a video to that group titled “WHAT \*ACTUALLY\* KILLED GRUNGE? (It wasn’t Courtney Love)”<sup>1</sup> that had been uploaded to the YouTube channel The Punk Rock MBA, a channel run by Finn Mckenty where he posted short videos explaining the rise and demise of certain music styles or bands, among other things. The reason I posted this video was that Mckenty’s explanation of the style and popularity of grunge was very Western-centric. I commented on the video, writing that grunge was never a big movement in Estonia and initiated a discussion on the glocalisation of subcultures, marketing strategies of music and style and the political meaning of youth subcultures and their music. The idea that the fate and transformation of grunge style and subculture in early 1990s Estonia serves as an example of the difference between youth subcultures in East and West Europe then circled in my head all these years and is presented in this paper. I will come back to that video and discussion below.

Academic literature includes published research on Eastern European subcultures. On Yugoslavian DJ culture have written Zubak (2016), east German punk, blues and rock culture Westhusen (2005a, b), Estonian punk and Estrada (Ventsel 2016, 2019), or music journalism in the East Block (Reti 2016). There is also abundant research on subcultures in Eastern Europe after the fall of Socialism showing how the socioeconomic and political environment after the transition to capitalism and democracy also affected local subcultures. These

studies are great examples of glocalisation, i.e. how local forms of subculture do not automatically repeat the ideologies and practices of Western, mainly Anglo-American, subcultures. There are several academic schools that are engaged with theorising youth subcultures. The subcultural school of the 1980s argues that youth subcultures are an expression of the class conflicts then present in society (Hall and Jefferson 1986; Hebdidge 1979). In the 1990s a post-subculture theory was developed that states that youth subcultures are less class based resistance than just a consumer choice (Williams 2006, 2011). As I demonstrate below, there is certain element of truth in both schools. Nevertheless, consumption was very important in identity building for post-Soviet Estonian youth.

## Punk and grunge

There is a debate among those with an interest in Anglo-American punk as to where this phenomenon was born. Americans tend to argue that it was in New York, British punks are convinced that it was London. Either way, punk as a style, music and subculture appeared in mid-1970s and spread quickly globally. Already from the beginning the punk scene was divided into subscenes. One of the first big divisions, which came in the 1970s, was between the working class and art school punks. The USA became the birth place for fast and aggressive hardcore punk music, with post-punk, Oi!, ska-punk, etc., appearing in the early 1980s. It seems that stylistic and regional variations were especially big in the USA. From the early 1980s there were regional sonic divisions between the east and west coasts, which both had distinctive sounds. Moreover, in the USA, many big cities have their own sound, for example New York City hardcore (NYHC), Washington D.C. hardcore or Los Angeles and San Francisco punk. In the USA, the understanding of punk, especially punk music, has always been broader than in the UK. While in the UK punk bands tended to blend in Jamaican music like soul, reggae or ska, American bands mixed in also jazz, swing or African music. In the 1980s and 1990s Seattle was a not very wealthy, somehow isolated industrial city on the northwest Pacific coast. The city's alternative culture is deeply rooted in and influenced by punk, and local punk music developed its distinctive depressive and aggressive undertone, with noisy distorted guitars and subtle usage of guitar effects. Song lyrics were often about alienation, or social or psychological issues and the problems of young people.

One of the big contributions of punk to youth culture has been focus on the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. Since many record labels either did not show interest in punk artists or wanted to dictate their sound and appearance, or music magazines did not cover punk music or events at all, punk artists started to establish their own small record labels to release music, and enthusiasts started alternative subculture journals, known as fanzines (a portmanteau of ‘fan’ and ‘magazine’). DIY already existed in the sixties, but was made into a conscious strategy by the punk movement. This was not different in Seattle. In the 1980s the Seattle punk/alternative scene was small, close knit, and centred around a few small clubs and one small alternative independent music record label, Sub Pop. Sub Pop mainly released music from the north west of the USA and promoted it nationally as well as at the local level, for instance through local college radio. Although the record label apparently started to use the term grunge as a definition of the Seattle area alternative bands, this music was known, at least in Europe, as ‘northwest coast hardcore’ or ‘northwest coast punk’. Sub Pop producer Jack Endino described grunge as “seventies-influenced, slowed-down punk music” (Kallen 2012: 73; Azerrad 1992). Simultaneously, grunge’s sound was distinctive because “it killed the guitar solo (Buyers 2008). In the abovementioned video “WHAT \*ACTUALLY\* KILLED GRUNGE? (It wasn’t Courtney Love)” Finn Mckenty argues that grunge music combined indie rock’s melancholy, punk’s energy and metal music’s power. Indeed, the sounds of pre-*Nevermind* Seattle grunge bands had different influences. Alice in Chains had more indie influences, Soundgarden’s music was faster, more robust and powerful, and in Pearl Jam’s music one hears more hard rock influences. Nirvana’s debut album *Bleach* (Sub Pop 1989) and early Hole (fronted by Courtney Love) has influences from early punk and new wave, whereas in some of his early interviews Kurt Cobain (Love’s husband) described Nirvana as a punk band.

What distinguished grunge from prior youth styles, was its clothing. The clothing commonly worn by grunge musicians were a “mundane everyday style”, in which they would wear the same clothes on stage that they wore at home. This contrasted sharply with punk style with its leather jackets, chains, semi-military outfits and mohawks. The grunge look typically consisted of second-hand clothes or thrift store items and the typical outdoor clothing (most notably oversize flannel shirts which became a symbol of grunge) of the region, as well as a generally unkempt appearance and long hair (Misiroglu

2015: 343). In the US grunge style, according to Finn Mckenty, Dr. Martens boots, band T-shirts and ripped jeans were popular. Women sported a look that was called 'kinderwhore' or a sexualised look where girls combined different clothing they picked up in the second hand shops – underwear, old fur coats, heavy make-up, 1970s leather boots, so-called Peter Pan collared dresses. It was a combination of a childlike appearance and a somehow tattered and worn down outlook. Simultaneously, this kinderwhore look was a feminist statement where young women refused to dress 'modestly' or as 'good girls'. Grunge initiated a feminist movement called 'riot grrrls', including a wave of feminist all-women bands such as Babes in Toyland, L7, Bikini Kill or early Hole. Both male and female grunge musicians and fans wore long hair, often unkempt and dyed. Another element that was part of the grunge style were piercings, especially nose and ear rings.

After the massive breakthrough of Nirvana's *Nevermind* the commercialisation of grunge began. Most major grunge bands such as Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana were signed to major record labels. Grunge fashion began to break into mainstream fashion in mid-1992 for both sexes and peaked in late 1993 and early 1994. I agree with Finn Mckenty that in one-and-a-half to two years grunge lost its rebellious subcultural nature, was watered down by the mainstream music and fashion industry and lost its appeal as an 'authentic' youth style and anti-consumerist movement. The final demise of grunge was Kurt Cobain's suicide in April 1994 when the subculture lost its frontman and style icon.

## Grunge and Estonia: Why did it not happen?

In Europe, in the early 1990s, grunge took the youth by storm. I remember going to Denmark in the early 1990s, and then moving to Berlin in 1994, where most young people dressed in the grunge style sporting Dr. Martens boots, nose rings, flannel shirts, ripped jeans and long hair. I recall talking about the popularity of grunge later with one of my friends who is originally from Seattle. When he moved to Germany in the early 1990s, he was surprised by the popularity of the 'Seattle sound' in Europe. As he told me, the grunge scene remained marginal in Seattle even in the years when grunge bands performed globally in stadiums and sold millions of albums. In Seattle, few people were aware the

success of Nirvana in the 'outside world'; the most popular music of the region was rock and more commercial metal such as Metallica.

The failure of grunge to become a mass movement in Estonia is related to the post-Soviet reality, the transformation of society and the socioeconomic situation, and the very different ideologies that existed in Estonia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although grunge was modestly popular in Estonia, there were never the grunge bands or distinct subculture that we know from Western Europe.

Western fashion was not unknown to Estonians, especially the young people. I heard in the Soviet era from visiting Western relatives that Estonians tend to dress with more fashion consciousness than people in the West. The reason for that was most likely easier access to Western goods than in other parts of the Soviet Union, and the will to stress Europeaness as a form of passive resistance to the Soviet regime. In 1986, new Soviet leader Gorbachev began his perestroika policy which also included slow but progressing liberation of the private economy. Suddenly private entrepreneurship was allowed and the opening of private cafes, shops and other enterprises followed. Travel to Western countries also became incrementally easier. Western private companies and institutions showed more interest in being active on the other side of the Iron Curtain and more and more of them gained ground in the Soviet Union, including Estonia. Apart from education and political institutions, who created their networks and opened offices in Estonia, several Western charities also appeared. This is a very important factor to take in account because many Western initiatives that entered Soviet Estonia were charities, often Christian associations. Some of the humanitarian help delivered to the people of Estonia was used clothes collected in Western countries. What was for Western people a gesture of humanitarianism and help for people who struggled with late Socialism and early post-Socialism, was welcome access to fashionable Western clothes for Estonians.

When Estonia declared its independence in 1991, the work and activities of Western charities intensified. Simultaneously private entrepreneurship increased and clubs and discotheques appeared, along with private ownership of radios. This was the time of increasing popularity of Polish pirate audio cassettes, which were sold in every market. Private television channels and providers also appeared at this time enabling access to music television channels, especially MTV and VH1. I recall how young people were glued to their TV screens when MTV showed an alternative music programme titled "120 Minutes", in which

punk, grunge or new wave videos were shown. This programme was recorded to VHS tapes and watched later or distributed among friends. This meant that finally young people in Estonia had access to Western youth culture, both music and clothes. Here lies the reason for the modest reaction to grunge in Estonia.

The underlying driver of this different response to grunge was that basically all Western music, which had hardly been heard before, flooded in at once, so the distinctions weren't nearly such an issue. There was just too much coming in within a short time span. One suddenly had an abundant choice of music and styles, decreasing the overall presence and importance of grunge. Without any doubt, there were plenty of young people who enjoyed contemporary commercial music such as dance, pop, rap and some electronic music. Tartu became one of the epicentres of the Estonian alternative music and was overwhelmed with fresh and old music. There was a group of young people at the Pallas art school in Tartu who enjoyed contemporary alternative noise music such as Sonic Youth. Simultaneously a group of young people appeared dressed in black who were fans of Depeche Mode but also some dark music like Klinik or Front 242. They called themselves futurists but were actually part of global goth subculture. This time was also the beginning of the electronic dance music scene, as part of which some DJs started to organise the first raves, where they played acid house music. This all overlapped with the increasing popularity of folk punk and the introduction of British ska music. For metal fans new music styles appeared like trash and death metal; at the same time the Estonian metal scene was blooming and new bands mushroomed, releasing their music on cassette. Almost simultaneously to grunge the global popularity of the Brit pop started, and had echoes in Estonia. In the early 1990s several Estonian 'indie' bands (Dallas, Borax, etc.) sprung in front of the audience, finding their inspiration in shoegaze or Britpop. To make things worse, several Western libraries wanted to get rid of their vinyl collections and sent dozens of boxes as humanitarian help to the library at the University of Tartu. These boxes contained classic punk, jazz and reggae records, and suddenly young people were able to dig into music history and fill the gaps in their knowledge. It is not an overstatement to argue that in the early 1990s, young music fans had too much new and old music to listen to and make sense of.

One can argue that, culturally and historically speaking, people from the 'Eastern block' simply didn't have an awareness of the distinctions between different musical styles and their respective ideologies because the way these

differences had worked themselves out over time in the Western context wasn't experienced by people in Eastern European countries. The standard academic approach to Western youth cultures is that these groups had their own social bases. In early post-Soviet Estonia, society was still relatively egalitarian and social distinctions, especially among young people, were not big. The flow of these types of music and subcultures was massively 'compressed' for eastern audiences. It took a huge amount of time and energy to orientate oneself and make sense of the various music styles. Young people were mainly unaware of the background of the music they were listening to; its roots, its connections, history, meaning, context, etc. It took some time for nuanced understandings of differences to develop in Eastern Europe, and, of course, it happened in a different context.

Another aspect of grunge that absolutely failed to find any understanding was its anti-consumerism ideology. In 1991–1992 one was able to choose between some limited offer of new fashionable Western clothing in new private shops and boutiques. What turned out to be popular was buying second hand Western clothing either in charity shops or markets. For young people, it was more affordable and accessible. I mentioned above that Seattle youth bought their clothes in second hand shops as an anti-consumption political statement. In Estonia, in the first years of independence, buying second hand Western clothing was a sign of conscious consumption. For example there were places where one could pick up, if lucky, brand clothing for little money. Second hand clothing offered an opportunity to create one's authentic style because one could find items no one else had. Therefore, Polish pirate cassette tapes and Western second hand clothes stalls at the market gave to a young person an illusion of being part of global contemporary youth culture (cf. Luvaas 2009 and Hannerz 2015 on similar processes in Indonesian indie and punk music). In general, in Estonia being part of a subculture was not understood as an anti-system, anti-consumer statement but an elitist step to demonstrate one's knowledge of contemporary Western trends and styles.

In such a 'supermarket of styles' (Polhemus 1997) grunge did not succeeded in finding its socioeconomic niche, although as a subculture grunge did form in Estonia. The music was played on the radio, videos were shown on music television channels and the print press published articles on grunge artists and style. One reason for the failure was that grunge offered very little in the way of a distinct authentic subcultural identity. Ripped jeans were hugely popular in

Estonian alternative circles, long hair on men was sported by metal and indie/Brit pop fans, Dr. Martens boots were either not on sale or too expensive for a young person to afford. The symbol of Grunge, flannel lumberjack shirts, were popular but were soon adopted by mainstream youth and TV personalities. Elements of the grunge look – the same flannel shirts – were popular among punks, as were jeans shorts, although these clothing items were also popular in the metal scene. The music was liked by punks, metal fans and indie youth.

In Estonia, US grunge existed in a very different context from its place of origin. Its protest appeal and outsider ideology were never understood by Estonian youth in the early 1990s. Logically, highly modernist, hedonist and escapist Brit pop gained more popularity because it directly addressed the thirst of Eastern European youth for Western consumer culture, a culture they had gained access to only a short time previously. The rougher side of punk and metal reflected the socioeconomic and political transition. Estonian punk still had a strong outsider/outcast ideology from the Soviet period offering social space for youngsters who did not fit in a society where everywhere seemed to be possessed with making money and buying new Western consumer goods.

## Conclusion

Finn Mckenty says in his abovementioned video that grunge was a reaction to boring mainstream pop music and rap. We can say that in Estonia, the massive influx of Western mainstream and alternative music in the early 1990s hindered the rise of grunge as a subculture. It is natural that all the small genres, movements, strains of expression, are inevitably turned into something else, generally something broader and less nuanced, in the perception of the people who didn't create it, and the further they are from its context in place or time, the more this is the case.

Estonian society was in transformation in the early 1990s. The Estonian Republic declared its re-independence in 1991, although many Socialist era structures and institutions still existed and shaped people's everyday lives. Simultaneously, in Estonia a wild entrepreneurial capitalism bloomed that expressed itself in an abundance of small kiosks, shops, clubs and cafes. These places were also a space for youth subcultures: one suddenly had places to

hang out and meet people who listened to similar music and looked similar. These new spaces were also places for the exchange of music and other trends.

Grunge, a short lived early 1990s alternative rock subculture from the northwest of the USA, gained huge popularity with the iconic album *Nevermind* by Seattle band Nirvana. The music as well as the clothing style established a subculture with a distinct identity. In the northwest of the USA the grunge scene was an anti-consumerist, feminist, slightly environmentalist subculture based on the DIY ethos and strategies. In the Seattle area, grunge was a scene for local non-conformist youth who lived in a rather poor industrial environment. Grunge music addressed social issues like disenfranchisement, suicide, rape, support of women or mistrust of authority. In Europe, after the breakthrough of *Nevermind*, grunge became a short lived popular youth trend as part of which many young people sported long hair, nose rings, Dr. Martens boots and flannel shirts.

In Estonia, grunge surprisingly never established itself as a subculture. The failure of grunge to gain ground serves here as an example of glocalisation. The late 1980s and especially early 1990s were a time when Estonia was opening its cultural space to Western youth and pop culture. The influx of the Western music and styles was enormous and grunge was just one of them at a time when new trends and music styles seemed to appear with a speed that one was hardly able to follow. Grunge as a music and style was well known in Estonia although it was not able to offer distinct social and political identity. Grunge's melancholy, addressing of social issues, anti-consumerism and feminism did not fit the Estonian youth world of cheerfulness as young people discovered new music and fashion. It is certainly not wrong to argue that Brit pop's hedonism better suited the zeitgeist of the era, which is one reason why grunge was just one music and fashion style among many. The weak resonance of grunge in Estonia was caused by the different context. Feminism and environmentalism were not important issues after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and an anti-capitalism stance would have been strange in a society that was rushing towards capitalism. The symbol of grunge, wearing second hand clothes, had a different meaning in Estonia. Charity shops and second hand market stalls were for young people a source of affordable Western clothing with which they could create a new identity that linked them to the West. In hindsight, one could argue that competition in the 'supermarket of styles' was too strong and grunge didn't gain ground. Instead of carving a subcultural niche, grunge was

annihilated between different alternative rock styles such as punk, indie and metal. Grunge in Estonia is a good example how a global cultural phenomenon is absorbed by other subcultures that already have stable scenes and networks.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TATBS3hV4Mo>.

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**Aimar Ventsel** is Senior Research Fellow in Ethnology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tartu, Estonia. His main research areas are the Arctic cultural space, social anthropology, punk culture and underground music.

E-mail: [aimar.ventsel@ut.ee](mailto:aimar.ventsel@ut.ee)

ORCID: 0000-0002-3242-5471