

Nick broomfield's
'kurt and courtney' –
asessement of a
documentary essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This documentary is an investigation into the complicated death of global rock superstar, Kurt Cobain. Seattle born, he was the lead singer and guitarist of Nirvana, a band that revolutionised rock in the early nineties, and for many were the driving force behind the grunge phenomena. On April 8th 1994, his body was found in a room adjacent to his garage and a suicide note had emerged. This shocked the world and speculation grew to the actual cause of death, including conspiracy theories suggesting it was his wife Courtney Love who had paid to have him killed. Director Nick Broomfield's documentary includes near the start, a video of Kurt shortly before he died. His head seems straight enough, which begs the question: how did Cobain slide from this to suicide at the age of 27? Broomfield travels around the US trying to get to the bottom of a case that detectives have devoted their lives to. There are a number of interesting findings, but the strength of this documentary is more attributed to the various character profiles that it illustrates than unearthing any groundbreaking new evidence. It is a reflexive documentary. There is no attempt to hide the crew from shot. Often Broomfield talks to the cameraman and occasionally to the camera; Broomfield himself involved in production.

It is Broomfield's creation. It must be his passion that drives the film, his intention to question and to doubt accepted versions of events. It is this that makes his documentaries so interesting, and places him as auteur. Owen Gleiberman of 'Entertainment Weekly' has called his style 'guerrilla vérité'.

I particularly like this phrase, because it describes how Broomfield thrusts himself into a situation, and is to some a nuisance that will just not go away. Through a series of interviews, Broomfield strives to make conclusions. His favourite question is undoubtedly, " Really?" In ' Kurt and Courtney' I lost count after nearly thirty times. Not bad considering there are only a dozen interviews. This shows how surprising some of the revelations he discovers are.

He questions Tom Grant, a detective who has spent most of his recent life engaged in the case for murder. They often find they have used the same sources, and their findings overlap a great deal. It is Grant that points Broomfield in the direction of the interviews that we see. Read about the creative treatment of actuality A comic moment is the interview of El Duce, the lead man in a Seattle based underground rock group. Spliced with an exhibition of his erotic music video, he tells Broomfield of how Love offered him \$50, 000 to kill Cobain. Some would say that he isn't a reliable source, but he has passed a lie detector test. Unnervingly, we later discover that he has been killed, throwing a sinister feel over the whole film and posing even more questions. There is an interview with Love's father, Hank Harrison, who surprisingly has very few positive remarks to make. He talks of her arrogance and her lust for fame and money.

Victoria Clarke is a reporter that tells Broomfield how Courtney had attacked her, highlighting her temperament. And then there is the Nanny at the Cobain residence who is frightfully nervous. She tells how Courtney has threatened her; she is visibly scared on screen. This selection of interviews goes a long way in showing to the audience the type of character that Love
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is. It paints a picture of a self-obsessed, power hungry woman who will stop at nothing to get her own way.

The reason for this particular presentation might have something to do with the way Love consistently tries to stop the documentary from being made. It was supposed to feature 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'; probably Nirvana's most famous song, and also a song from Love's band, Hole. But as the copyright is held by Love, she exercised her right to withhold them as she could see the release of this film as possibly damaging. Broomfield jokes it's a strange documentary, in that little of the subject's work or images can be shown.

Love's actions however, gave the film a great deal more free advertising, which inevitably boosted its global release patterns. Comparatively Kurt comes across as shy and kind, his legend idyllic, with him as the victim. The fact that he might actually have committed suicide is not explored that deeply, but interviews with his friends Dylon Carlson and Alice Wheeler, suggest that he was not this way inclined. Equally the fact that he could have been murdered was not examined inside out. There are just a lot of opinions that help create a sense of the truth, which will never become crystal clear. Another issue is that Kurt was drugged when he died.

So part of the film explores the possibility that he couldn't even have picked up a gun in his condition. He visits a British doctor who shows him slides of a man who has taken twice the amount Kurt did, standing on one leg, debunking the entire myth that it would be impossible. This may well have been one of Broomfield's biggest mistakes, as the toxicity of methadone compared to Kurt's choice heroin, are uncertain. An interesting though not

entirely enlightening sequence comes when Courtney is in attendance at the American Civil Liberties Union dinner.

Broomfield takes to the stage and begins highlighting Love's hypocrisy by even attending such an event, based on his findings of her character. He is dragged from the stage before finishing. The film's original backers were Showtime (who also own MTV). Love apparently asked the bosses of MTV personally if they'd ask Showtime to stop funding the film. She succeeded and so BBC funded the rest of the film. The conversations between Broomfield and his producers are in the film in the form of telephone calls.

This shows the struggle that the film was to make and the efforts being made to stop it. A portion of the documentary is filmed from a car. As with a lot of Broomfield documentaries, he directs the capture of landmarks, important road signs and the general ambience of the places visited, often using this opportunity to discuss what he has found and what his next actions will be. This technique gives the feeling of a road movie. A journey with pit stops that bring inerrant danger.

Another of Broomfield's techniques is the use of tight close-ups of interviewees, as the camera really gives them a grilling. These are held for a long time, and though this can sometimes make for dull viewing, it allows you to get inside the person, to read them as well as listen to them.

Broomfield often appears in the shots, especially at the start of interviews and when arriving at a new location. He can practically always be seen wearing his blue/green jacket, and sporting headphones and a levels box, while grasping his microphone. He is his own sound recordist.

This trait allows us to become part of the production team, and appreciate that everyone is working toward this production. He doesn't know what he is to film until he gets there, and there is no hierarchy between cameraman and presenter. The camera is exclusively hand-held, and quite often shaky; the zooms are rarely smooth either. It is gritty, real action. A convention suited to this mode of documentary film, where the action can be moving or still.

And where travelling is fundamental, a tri-pod is never a necessity. The actual subjects of the film are not interviewed (though one is dead). Instead Broomfield finds characters close to the pair, whose responses to questions can provoke certain ideas. Their objective views are what craft the story, and the way we are supposed to think about certain situations and characters. The interviews are often informal, recorded almost anywhere.

I believe Broomfield is more concerned with content than with style. The director does use a certain amount of voice-over. I feel this is because off-camera he thinks of interesting insights that ought to be included in order to improve the viewing experience. He takes this opportunity to narrate questions. Parody and irony are his strong points, and he often uses these to make a point. In this production he rarely goes where he is not wanted.

The only real example is when he goes on stage at the ACLU dinner. In other films Broomfield's style is often one of intrusion and surprise. While investigating the 'badlands' of the West Coast in 'Biggie and Tupac' the danger seems even more prevalent. He even visits a prison to conduct an interview. I feel that the film is very effective.

You can't really expect it to unearth the real truth. He can only challenge what has been suggested and accepted. Some of it is pointless, like the sequence when he goes to the wrong apartment, but equally some is riveting like the El Duce scene. Even if you don't like Nirvana or conspiracy theories, there are a great number of wholly interesting characters that make this documentary a winner.

Its unintentional publicity made it well worth the most talked of film at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival. There is no story, and no ending, but sometimes to journey is better than to arrive.