

## The New Courtney Love?

Published in Venus Zine, Summer 2008

Remembering the love of her former persona, in all her hard-rockin' feminist glory

by Genevieve Diesing

Courtney Love is back. Her latest album, *How Dirty Girls Get Clean*, is due to be released sometime in the summer of 2007, and her autobiographical book, *Dirty Blonde*, has received an almost universally positive welcome from critics. Love seems to be climbing her way back to the top of the heap she's been under for the past few years, but I'm not sure if I'm ready for her return.

My association with Love began when I was 16. I was on my way to a Chicago area music festival in 1999 with my friends, where Hole was playing on their *Celebrity Skin* tour. My friend Natalie played the album during the ride there, but nothing prepared me for Hole's performance. Even from my distant hilltop seat, Love's energy was vibrantly evident. Wearing purple fairy wings, she screamed and sang in the bright May sun, and frequently bent down to reach into the thrashing crowd.

Upon Natalie's urging, I purchased Hole's previous and more contentious album, 1994's *Live Through This*. Natalie — who was well acquainted with my limited musical collection and fondness for trendy pop — had her doubts about my even liking the record. "It's really hard," she warned.

But I surprised Natalie and even myself with how much I enjoyed it. It was my first exposure to such angst-ridden, socially controversial music. *Live Through This* was released on April 12, 1994, four days after the discovery of Kurt Cobain's suicide, and the lore surrounding the album's songs as well as the myth that Cobain had penned its lyrics gave it a mystifying aspect. There was a quality about the sound of Love's powerful screams and abstract lyrics that awoke something inside me. The record was less complex than *Celebrity Skin*, but it seemed more uninhibited and honest — traits of Love I would come to admire in her public persona.

The glimpse I got of Love came at a time when the media seemed in awe of her. Having discovered Love post-nose job, I watched her win awards for her personal style on VH1 and listened to journalists rave about her brilliant performance as the drug-addled wife of Hustler's founder in *The People vs Larry Flynt*. She was establishing herself as an actress, coasting on the success of *Celebrity Skin*, and reveling in her most favored period of the public eye. In this light, Love could get away with saying things like "Tell Alanis she sucks," while the incessant commotion of scandal following her was reduced to a dim hum.

To me, Love embodied toughness and defiance. Even as a Versace-wearing, Golden Globe–nominated Hollywood-makeover success story, Love managed to maintain that acid-wit and righteous demeanor that seemed so authentic and appealing.

In a way, Love served as my first tangible introduction to feminism, as one of the rare women in rock and Hollywood who had the balls to speak her mind and (usually) get away with it. Love spoke intelligently and often critically, unafraid of whom she pissed off. Sure, she was unconventional, but my fellow admirers and I saw her as misunderstood.

At that point in our lives, girls such as me were coming of age and saw little of the so-called women's movement that existed in our society. We needed a gutsy and conscious woman like Love to look up to and to help us develop our concepts of women and their place in the world. For many women my age (I'm 24), Love was the first publicly exposed female who symbolized insubordination and intellect. It was essential to our concepts of feminism, a subject about which she deemed important and often had something to say, that she existed.

Love's effect on her fans was reminiscent of the influence of the beloved Cobain. She seemed to us this tragic, romantic figure who emanated talent and integrity. "I am the girl you know can't look you in the eye," Love wailed in "Miss World" from *Live Through This*, and we, to our parent's irritation, wailed enthusiastically along with her.

Hole became, to us, a portal into the punk and harder rock genres of music, and the radicalness of all of it resonated with the suppression we felt in our small-town lives. When other kids became aware of Dave Matthews and drinking, my friends and I dissected the different camps of riot grrl culture (we asked questions like "Is it OK to like Hole and Bikini Kill despite their rivalry?") and debunked the different conspiracy theories regarding Cobain's death.

Love's antics didn't make us flinch — if anything they made her cooler. We took it personally when we heard (as we so often did) criticisms of Love. When there were claims that Kurt Cobain had written most of the lyrics to *Live Through This* or that Billy Corgan was the unrecognized mastermind behind *Celebrity Skin*, our tempers inflamed.

From reading Love's biographies (the unauthorized as well as the flattering versions — such as Simon and Schuster's 1998 *Courtney Love: The Real Story* and Pocket Publishing's 1996 *Queen of Noise*) — and gobbling up every interview with her I could find, I felt like I knew and understood her. She had lived a rags-to-riches tale of the punk rock variety, and her mental keenness and penchant for drama made her a character in what seemed like a very public stage show. That Love fought tooth and nail to rise up and make it after all meant more to me than her empowering anthems or inspiring rebelliousness. To an impressionable teenager grappling with social hierarchies and cementing her concept of her own potential in the world, this effect was profound.

Maybe it was the fact that my friends and I had built Love up to an impossible ideal — or perhaps we had just waited too long for Hole's next album — but there came a certain point when we started to question Love.

After Hole broke up in May 2002, Love seemed to slowly recede from her sharp-tongued, public persona into just a string of stunts and court dates. Her creativity faded from sight, her performances in mediocre films like *Julie Johnson* in 2001 and *Trapped* in 2002 were uninspiring, and her drug abuse and legal trouble — the latter, which involved her daughter, Frances Bean — made us feel like we were somehow growing out of her.

And then, *America's Sweetheart*, Love's first solo album, was released in 2004. It was pop. Really bad pop. What was worse, the album's cover featured the "new" Love — now in an even more evolved state of plastic surgery, heavily airbrushed, and semi naked and tied up. What kind of defiance of the objectification of women in rock was this?

I remember Natalie — who was visiting during a college break upon the album's release — said she'd read that the record was produced and co-written by the same woman who worked for Pink and Christina Aguilera. "Now I wonder if Kurt did write the lyrics to *Live Through This*," Natalie said bitterly, and I remember feeling a pang of similar doubt in my stomach.

Since that time, I've gone through a process of re-examining Love. I came to grips with the realization that no matter how much she influenced me, she is a real person, and a real person with real issues. She wasn't worthy of idolization or imitation, but in the grand scheme of things, she taught me a lot.

Now Love is back again in the public spotlight and apparently sober, and I look at her with mixed emotions. She's been featured in what seems like every major magazine, looking back at me from glossy covers with her dramatically altered face. In interviews she comes off as repenting and enlightened, genuinely inspired and trying to win us over, all over again. Although I haven't read her new book or heard her upcoming album, I know that if anyone has the ability to achieve this goal, it's her.

So, I hope the new album is good, and I hope she stays sober. But most of all, I hope she stays gutsy and keeps fighting. More girls like me may need her someday.