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CHRIS CORNELL

HOW A GRUNGE GOD BECAME
A GUITAR-SMASHING HIP-HOP HEAD

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STORY BY
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WITH A NEW HIP-HOP-INSPIRED ALBUM, CHRIS CORNELL SEEMS TO BE RUNNING FROM HIS ROCK BAND PAST. BUT THE FORMER SOUNDGARDEN FRONTMAN IS SO MUCH MORE COMPLICATED THAN THAT (WHICH YOU WOULD KNOW IF YOU FOLLOWED HIM ON TWITTER).



chriscornell My wife picks great hotels. This one reminds me of our apartment in Paris, minus the french speaking ghosts.

In the seventh floor of Seattle's slick new Four Seasons hotel, Chris Cornell's wife, Vicky, and security man, Leroy, are settling into a warm, posh suite with a stunning view of the Puget Sound. It's an appropriate place to meet Cornell as he passes through his native city; the flashy, expensive high-rise mirrors the slick electronic beats and arrangements of his new Timbaland-produced album, *Scream*. Next door, the Lusty Lady, Seattle's perennial peep house, exudes a dark, loud, unapologetic grittiness that is a ringer for early Soundgarden records. The two extremes live side-by-side, pleasing some and offending others.



"I FEEL LIKE THIS ALBUM IS ACTUALLY A YEAR OR SO TOO EARLY. I KEEP HEARING A LOT OF SONGS AND BANDS THAT ARE DOING SIMILAR GENRE MIXING, REALLY GRAVITATING TOWARD A LOT OF ASPECTS OF MUSIC THAT ARE ON [SCREAM]"

Vicky Cornell is svelte, wearing a black yoga outfit and huge sunglasses she says both protect her eyes from the rare spring sun (barely muted by a huge sheer curtain) and keep those tired eyes hidden. Her voice is strong, her laugh delivered in a businesslike fashion. It's no surprise that she looks like a celebrity snapped by paparazzi while out for coffee; married to one of the music world's most storied—and, more recently, polarizing—figures, Vicky has seen her share of the spotlight glare.

The Cornells are a month into a tour supporting *Scream's* March 10 release, and Vicky says she's wiped out. Her husband, somewhere behind a closed side door, is presumably even more exhausted. Neither has had a moment to unpack or personalize the room; the towering, barrel-chested Leroy, reminiscent of actor Tommy "Tiny" Lister, quietly moves the couple's untouched luggage from the sterile dining area into another room and then disappears. Vicky, who helps manage her husband's image, wrinkles her nose and says that she doesn't like the photo of Cornell *Sound* is planning to run as a cover shot. And then the man whose image she faithfully promotes and protects opens the door and enters the room.

Chris Cornell looks almost exactly like he did in the early 1990s, when Soundgarden was one of the biggest bands in the world. The crow's feet around his bleary, red-flecked eyes are the only real sign that the 44-year-old has been a rock star for more than two decades. His half-unlaced black boots, worn jeans, black tee and multiple manly necklaces could be vintage 1991. His shadow-goatee and hair—a wild, curly black mop that he runs a hand through when looking for words—shout to those shaggy Seattle glory days as well.

Appearance aside, much has changed for Cornell since he ruled the music industry with Seattle contemporaries Kurt Cobain and Eddie Vedder. Soundgarden splintered in 1997. In 2001, Cornell moved to Los Angeles after forming Audioslave with former members of Rage Against the Machine. Cornell divorced former Soundgarden manager Susan Silver, and then met Vicky in 2003. The two made a second home in Paris and had a child (Cornell's second) the next year. Cornell left Audioslave in early 2007 and released his second solo album, *Carry On*, that summer. This March, two events challenged his local status as a revered rock god—one symbolic, the other concrete. His former Soundgarden bandmates, fronted by Tad singer Tad Doyle, played a short "reunion" set at Seattle's reincarnated Crocodile club, declaring themselves Tadgarden. Then his fan-confounding, club-friendly album *Scream* was released, an album that makes no pretense about its artist's shift. The cover, after all, features a pile of smashed guitars while the album contains only one guitar-driven track.

Chris Cornell, it seems, has become a different man.

Half an hour after settling into a fatigued sprawl on a cushy chair and ottoman, Cornell perks up at this assertion. He sets down the Diet Coke he's been sipping between galloping soliloquies and scoots to sit on the edge of the footrest, eyes suddenly wider and engaged. His ever-so-gravelly voice picks up in volume. "I will get into interviews where the interviewer will literally start with,

'So, you're kind of this grunge pioneer—and now this.'" Cornell spreads his arms out in a questioning gesture and issues the first of many hearty but fleeting laughs. "What happened?"

chris cornell That which doesn't kill us makes us sick for a while (sometime a long while) and leaves us, at least for a time, a little bit weaker.

What happened is that Cornell decided he wanted to do something more than play guitar and sing in a rock band. Accordingly, his first solo album, 1999's *Euphoria Morning*, was a slower, more melancholy affair. "It wasn't the kind of music I've always wanted to do," he says. "It was more, 'I've just been in a band called Soundgarden for 14 years, and whatever I do on this album, I want it to not be like that.' [*Euphoria Morning*] is not like anything I'd done before it. It's not like anything I've done since. And it's not like anything anyone else has done, really. It's pretty different."

Different has driven all of Cornell's post-Soundgarden career decisions. And it hasn't always garnered success. "When *Euphoria Morning* came out, I didn't feel 100 percent supported by Soundgarden fans, by critics, radio people or anyone," he says. "I felt that took about five or six years. And now I'll do interviews and some people will say, 'You put out the widely, critically acclaimed *Euphoria Morning*.' But that wasn't the way it was." He laughs, a big hand palming and dribbling an invisible basketball. "A lot of people frowned at me when I put that out." The album peaked at No. 8 on the Billboard chart—in Norway. Here in the U.S., it sputtered out at 18, well below the two-spot scored by Soundgarden's 1996 swan song, *Down on the Upside*.

Many more Cornell fans welcomed Audioslave's birth and its hit-single producing 2002 debut two years later. But with that band, the musician again avoided rehashing sounds or approaches from his past. "That's one of the reasons I refused to play guitar with Audioslave. I was encouraged to do it by [producer] Rick Rubin and [bassist Tim Commerford]," he admits. "To me, that didn't make any sense. If I'm going to write a rock riff, and I'm singing over it, how is that different than 'Rusty Cage'? My musical role was bringing key changes and different chordal events into songs. It wasn't bringing big riffs and stuff like that, because I wanted to be respectful of that [Soundgarden] period."

Though commercially successful, Audioslave ran its course in three albums, partly because Cornell's longing for musical independence had grown too strong. His taste of creative rule and self-paced production on *Euphoria* made working with a band a difficult, complex task, and it limited his range. So with 2007's *Carry On*—featuring "You Know My Name," the theme song for the latest in the James Bond franchise, *Casino Royale*, and a bluesy version of Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean"—Cornell stretched his legs again. He toured behind the record, too, to places he'd never been with bands—South Africa, South America and Iceland.

Carry On, featuring blues, acoustic folk, complex orchestral arrangements and a little funk—sometimes all in one song—may have suffered from such freedom. The record, which barely touched Cornell's solo album. With the help of *American Idol* contender David Cook, though, Cornell's "Billie Jean" cover found a massive audience. As a promise of those new, young, pop-oriented listeners closer to Chris Cornell's career more dramatically than ever before.

Chris Cornell If there were life after death, how would you want it to be???

Cornell was playing festival shows on another continent when he started getting calls about Cook's televised take of his version of "Billie Jean." The sudden uproar intrigued the singer. "I wanted to get someone to do a crazy remix of my version," he recalls. "Just twist the song even more. And I never did do that, because I got on the phone with Timbaland. I found out that he had produced some stuff from Missy Elliott years back that I thought was amazing. It was commercial hip-hop that I really liked. He was the first person I talked to."

Turns out that the genre that inspired Cornell's collaboration with sought-after producer Timbaland had piqued his creative interest years earlier. "My door into hip-hop was really the trippy side, almost the stoner music side of it," he says. "There used to be this cable access hip-hop show in Seattle—I don't remember the name of it. Me and my buddies would watch it. You'd never see any artist that you'd ever seen before, and you'd never see

that video again. They were all amazing, and it was always kind of trippy and inventive."

News that Cornell and Timbaland had joined forces hit the Internet in early 2008. Reaction from bloggers and journalists alike was—to be kind—extremely skeptical. Outlets from *The Stranger* in Seattle to *Rolling Stone* were dubious about the pairing's musical prospects; a writer for MTV's website called the move "oddball" and "bizarre." And though both musicians were taking a chance in the artistic mash-up, Cornell took almost all the heat for it. His own site's message boards lit up with scorching remarks ("Chris working with Rihanna? Why not? Chris working with Eminem? Why not? What's the limit?") and debates on the motives behind his latest musical direction ("The answer to the question: money"). Across the web, fans poured out their betrayed hearts, claiming Cornell's upcoming album was nothing more than a bid to stay relevant ("He assumes that since Timbaland's name is attached to it, the music will sell like hot cakes."). Over and over again, Cornell was accused of selling out. Timbaland, a previous collaborator with everyone from Jay-Z to Madonna to Justin Timberlake, received no such withering criticism.

"That was sort of a given," Cornell says about the backlash, slowly leaning back in his chair. The flak seems to bore him. "It's all kind of based on time, really: the concept of time and the trajectory of someone's career. What does it mean? What will it mean?" Timbaland's career path wasn't changing with *Scream*; he was doing more of the same with a different artist. Cornell was the one putting his reputation on the line. Cornell leans forward again and continues: "In a sense, I feel like this album is actually a year or so too early. I keep hearing a lot of songs and bands that are doing similar genre-mixing, really gravitating toward a lot of aspects of music that are on [*Scream*]."

Chris Cornell and co. visit with the singer's former Soundgarden bandmate Kim Thayil and Queensryche's Chris DeGarmo backstage at Showbox SoDo.



"I'M NOT TRYING TO FIND MY MUSICAL IDENTITY, BECAUSE THE MOMENT I FIND IT I THEN BECOME A PAINTER OR A NOVELIST OR SOMETHING."

Such confidence is often seen as pure, unbridled ego by Cornell's detractors. But it's an attitude appropriate for someone who's never compromised in his musical endeavors. *Scream* and its artwork—Cornell smashing guitars—are, he says, "definitely an unapologetic statement. One thing [the album] really proves [is that] if I look at my abilities and my potential and my tools as a songwriter, singer, musician and record producer as being a circle, *Scream* makes that a lot bigger,"—he spreads his hands wide for emphasis—"just in terms of the learning process and being involved in it, and the fact that I did it. And it's something that I existed in authentically. That's a big thing."

chriscornell Feeling still more love for "scream" this record is a little early in the big picture but everyone will see musicians follow. they will

Cornell's involvement in *Scream*'s production process was, not surprisingly, unlike any previous recording experience he'd had. "There wasn't a lot of me and Timbaland in the studio making the album at the same time. There was a lot of him bringing in ideas and talking to me about where he thought it should go, and then me writing and recording my parts. If you can imagine what a T. Bone Burnett album experience might be like," Cornell laughs, "this is probably the exact opposite."

The unlikely duo respected each other's instincts, too. Timbaland didn't direct the singer, and Cornell didn't tell his producer what to do. "Ever," Cornell says as he shakes his head. "I wanted to sort of rinse myself of any of the knowledge that I have or that I rely on to write and record albums. I wanted to basically go in ignorant, like being thrown into the deep end of the pool not knowing how to swim. There were a lot of leaps of faith and trust that had to happen. We both had a lot at stake, I think."

But with Cornell's rep already suffering from his rock-lite *Carry On* and the news of his teaming with producer du jour Timbaland, the stakes were unquestionably higher for the singer. Proof of that came this spring, when *Scream* was finally released (its original late 2008 street date was bumped back twice)—and was quickly bashed by another famous contemporary musician.

trent_reznor You know that feeling you get when somebody embarrasses themselves so badly YOU feel uncomfortable? Heard Chris Cornell's record? Jesus.

Via a Twitter post, Nine Inch Nails mastermind Trent Reznor suddenly became Cornell's most brutal critic. The public slam instantly spawned Internet buzz, but Cornell, another adoptee of the mega-popular social mechanism, avoided direct confrontation, but the hurt was apparent. Rather than calling Reznor out by name and engaging in a protracted battle of 140-character insults, he simply tweeted, "What do you think Jesus

would twitter?" "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," and "Has anyone seen Judas? He was here a minute ago." When asked about Reznor's swipe, Cornell is frank with a transparent, backhanded compliment. "At least he's honest about who he is," he says. "He is perfectly happy going on and publicly criticizing not just something I did, but other people and the way they are. I could sit at the computer and do that nonstop, but years ago I chose not to do that. It doesn't make you feel good as a person." The musician wrinkles his nose like his wife did earlier.

chriscornell you are entitled to your opinion but a lot of people love it. sellout move is reunite with your old band for coachella money

Twitter has become a daily source of positive energy for Cornell. It gives him a forum to project his image the way he wants it to be seen to more than 350,000 followers—through random thoughts that read like lyrics, pictures taken from the stage during his shows, and constant replies to his curious, starstruck, sometimes rude followers. "As a guy who has fans, I can actually have a certain amount of dialogue that's not really possible in any other form," Cornell says. "A lot of interesting questions can only be asked in a short number of words, so every day I can go on and quickly answer them. It allows me this ability to be, to some degree, really in touch with fans. It's also a way that fans can get the sense that you're a normal person."

But what truly makes Cornell feel connected to fans is playing live. He perks up again when talking about his tour late last year, when, in Seattle, Timbaland opened and the duo performed *Scream* straight through from start to finish. Cornell really gets animated about his current tour, a showcase for songs from all of his projects—Soundgarden, Temple of the Dog, Audioslave and each of his solo records. The *Scream* tunes not only "naturally" fit right in, he says, but they also "create more of a dynamic set." He scoots to the edge of the ottoman again, a wide grin scoring lines in his face. "Whatever the feeling is that's created when I do songs from *Scream* lingers into the other music a little bit." He absently runs his hand through his hair. "In a good way."

But isn't a lot lost in translation when Cornell and his touring band—guitarists Yogi Lonich and Peter Thorn, bassist Corey McCormick and drummer Jason Sutter—play those beat- and loop-driven songs live? The question finally elicits a sense of vulnerability in the musician—but just briefly. "The only fear I had in the middle of making the album was, 'What am I gonna do live?'" he says. "How is the hell is that going to work?"

At Seattle's Showbox SoDo several hours later, *Sound* hears how Cornell and co. solved the problem: The band plays *Scream*'s songs as if they were written for heavy guitar chords and foundation-cracking live drums. And Cornell is right about their affect; after opening the set with the first two tracks from *Scream*, "Part of Me" and "Time," there is an intense, pounding energy that is carried into "No Such Thing" (off *Carry On*) and the rest of the two-hour show. The vibe keeps Cornell and his guitarists roaming the stage, climbing speaker stacks, waving their

arms overhead, an... at the sold-out crowd. The singer's voice... noticeably suffered since his early Sound... days, rips at the air like a billion razor-sharp...

Even for those... familiar with Cornell's new material—and these... at the show, given all the closed mov... the audience during those first two songs—the band's alchemic transformation of *Scream*'s R&B beats to live rock is effective. Those fans not singing along still hop and nod to the heavy percussion, some probably hearing the tunes for the first time. But when the band later nails Soundgarden's "Outshined" and "Rusty Cage," everyone in the place gets down. Girls swirl manicured nails dangerously around their heads. Guys howl and thrust devil horns and PBR tallboys at the ceiling. The cavernous room explodes with thousands of voices shouting Cornell's lyrics in unison. Clouds of pungent pot smoke rise and expand above the crowd. By the time the band revisits the new album's title track, it's a full-on chorus sing-along: "Why you keep screamin' at the top of your head?" It's easy to imagine Cornell thriving from the energy reflecting back at him, not regretting a single creative decision he's made.

As handily as he and his live band transform *Scream*'s songs into rock numbers, though, Cornell's most lasting sonic accomplishments may always be his earliest. After the lights go up at Showbox Sodo and the crowd begins filing out into the quiet night, groups of Gen-X guys shout the choruses of "Black Hole Sun" and "Hunger Strike." A beer-soused dude asks another if he saw Soundgarden guitarist Kim Thayil outside the Showbox before the show. Then, without a wink or any physical cue, they spontaneously shout in unison, "I'm gonna break my rusty cage ... and run!"

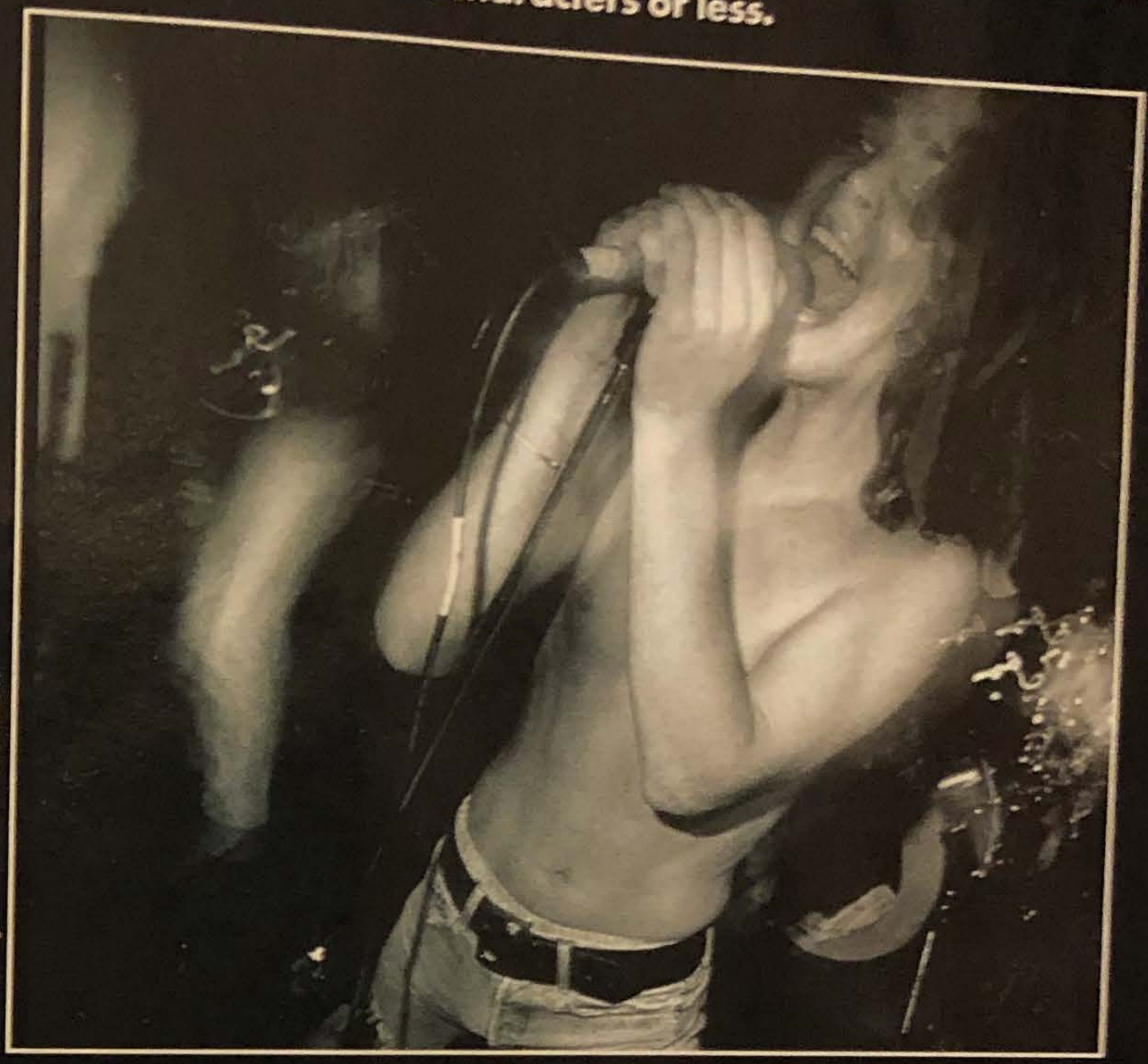
chriscornell thanks, im not going anywhere. besides I get a kick out of the haters taking time out of their lives to talk about me.

Back in his Four Seasons hotel room before the show, Cornell scoffs at the idea that he's found his true musical self with *Scream*—or with anything else he's recorded. "It's just another step in a lifetime of experimenting with music," he says, sipping a second Diet Coke. "I'm not trying to find my musical identity, because the moment I find it, I then become a painter or a novelist or something." He laughs and shrugs. "When will I stop being able to create something that is new and fresh, regardless of what someone else thinks I should be doing?" Cornell asks rhetorically. Prompted to speculate on his next sound, the man cracks a sarcastic grin. "What would be surprising at this point?"

TWEETGARDEN

Chris Cornell constantly posts observations, thanks to fans and love notes to his wife on Twitter. In turn, *Sound* asked some of his Northwest rock contemporaries (and a couple grunge-era scholars) to share their thoughts and memories about the man in 140 characters or less.

Photo by Charles Peterson



"Back in 1990, we once sat on a couch together and played side 1 of Rush's 2112 from memory on acoustic guitars."
 Van Conner
 guitarist, Screaming Trees
 guitarist and vocalist, VALIS

"Chris Cornell rules. Give a listen to 'Slaves and Bulldozers' to sample Mr. Cornell's super-human vocal strength!"
 Greg Prato
 author, *Grunge is Dead: The Oral History of Seattle Rock Music*

"Chris Cornell is a daring artist. I very much respect his charting of new musical waters."
 Dave Krusen
 original drummer, Pearl Jam;
 drummer, the Kings Royal

"Cornell rose from being a lowdown car-prowling street urchin to being a serious and productive artist. The world is a better place for it."
 Peter Blecha
 author, *Sonic Boom: The History of Northwest Rock*

"Chris is the man siren of our age. Keep screaming, baby!"
 Kevin Wood
 axeman, All Hail the Crown
 brother of the late Andrew Wood

"Chris sings with his entire mouth. An ever unfolding lotus flower vibe and special lip noises."
 Steve Fisk
 producer, Soundgarden's *Fopp* EP

"I was gonna talk shit, but here is the bottom line: *Badmotorfinger*. Next time he wants to do a dance album he should call a brother up."
 Shawn Smith
 solo artist and vocalist, All Hail the Crown