



## On the Road to Fame?

Kurt Cobain could not have dreamed what he was starting once he began writing the songs that later appeared on *Nevermind*. The extreme success of Nirvana totally rearranged the rock landscape, and five years later is still a huge influence in the A&R departments of the giant USA record companies, where the endless search for 'the next big thing' continues.

When the grunge phenomenon exploded in 1992, nearly all examples of the shamelessness of 80s-style heavy rock were mercilessly swept aside. Bands like Motley Crue, Warrant and Poison were rendered obsolete, as a new generation of music fans elected fresh heroes. And suddenly it was all go. The big American record companies worked themselves into a frenzy, searching all points of the compass and everywhere in between for the next Nirvana. On their quest, they snapped up hordes of soulless wannabes — who even on a good day wouldn't have been invited out of the practice room if it weren't for 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' (take a bow, Stone Temple Pilots, Candlebox, Everclear, Stillskin, Collective Soul, Counting Crows, Alice in Chains, Soul Asylum), and prayed for the moment when their new signings would surpass the landslide commercial success of Cobain, Grohl and Novoselic.

These days the bandwagon may have slowed, but the jumpers are still around. It seems almost every week there's a grunge-by-numbers debut album, courtesy of a Stateside group content to have embraced a particular look and sound in order to be famous. But just occasionally there are exceptions to the fools, when a major gets it right, and signs a new band with good songs, who aren't Johnny-come-lately, company puppets.

Christian Lane (guitar/vocals), Tommy Furar (bass), and Mark Doyle (drums) are Loud Lucy, the Chicago-based pop outfit whose first album,

*Breathe*, was released by Geffen Records in the USA last October. Listening to Lane speak about his band, one gets the impression of a trio of music devotees, to whom everything else is just industry bullshit. When asked what a young band on a major label needs to do to break in the States, Lane doesn't mention MTV support, the cover of the *Rolling Stone*, hi-rotate radio airplay, a thumbs-up from *Beavis and Butt-head*, or even payola to ensure each of those.

"God, I don't know... concentrate on the songs. I think really good, catchy songs will always be the thing that people want and look for. People buy a record only if they want to hear it again, not because of any other reason."

Loud Lucy's present line-up dates back to 1992, when Lane and Furar shifted from their neighbouring home towns, 100 miles northeast to Chicago, where they auditioned several drummers before settling on Doyle. The trio soon became regulars on the live circuit, playing every couple of weeks at a small club called Thurston's. Later that year, a friend of Lane's who regularly videotaped local gigs recorded a show by the Seattle band Skinyard, whose guitarist Jack Endino, produced much of the early Sub Pop catalogue, including Nirvana's debut album, *Bleach*. When Endino asked to be sent a copy of the video, Lane slipped Loud Lucy's one and only demo tape in with the package. Eight months passed before the producer called the video maker, and asked to be put in touch with the band.

Loud Lucy recorded a six-song demo with Endino in September 1993, and also signed with his LA management company, World's End, who promptly flicked the tape to a number of record labels, both indie and major. In addition, World's End arranged for the band to play at two annual USA music industry conferences, the CMJ Music Marathon and the SXSW Festival. Loud Lucy's appearances at both events encouraged a stampede of major label talent scouts to descend on Chicago. Noting the presence of Geffen, RCA, Maverick and Sony representatives in the city, industry mag *Billboard* described Chicago as, 'Rock's New Cutting Edge Capital'. Observing the mainstream media taking seriously the labels who were claiming credit for discovering the thriving local scene, left Lane suitably unimpressed.

"The major labels, they figure scenes out after they're already happening, and I think once it seems to them like a place is happening, it's almost like a comfort zone. They're like: 'So far two bands have come out of that area that are really good, there's got to be more. All we have to do is get one and put enough money into them, and we'll have a hit.' One weekend you can be playing in a club to all your friends, and a month later there's 12 labels there."

While other Chicago bands revelled in the attention, Loud Lucy's inability to distance themselves from the surrounding hype eventually upset their plans.

"We wanted to be on Sub Pop or Matador, but once major labels have a look at you, and it's written in the industry magazines that you're the next band that's going to be signed, people like Sub Pop and Matador are like: 'we don't want them, they're just going to jump ship anyway.' It's totally understandable, because both labels have been burned in the past."

The trio's second best choice was Geffen, whose roster at the time included Nirvana, Urge Overkill, Beck and Sonic Youth. The company's A&R rep, Jody Kurilla, won Loud Lucy over with her total lack of urgency — and it didn't hurt that she had previously managed Ween, one of Lane's favourite bands.

"When we met Jody we didn't know if she was interested in the band, as she was so casual about everything, she just wanted to get together and hang out. We invited her over to our house and we ordered pizza. I did want to be on Geffen, but all night she didn't say a thing about signing us, until the very end of the evening when she said: 'I think I could work with you guys.' She's very cool."

Loud Lucy signed a two record deal with Geffen. The label reserves the right to release a further three albums, while remarkably, the band are free to release an unlimited amount of material on any indie of their choice. It was May 1994, and Kurt Cobain was dead one month. Considering the climate at the time, and the similarities between the two bands, it's surprising Lane wasn't more concerned Geffen might attempt to market Loud Lucy as the next Nirvana.

"The thought had occurred to me, as there were other labels we talked to who said: 'We'll make you the next Nirvana,' but I honestly wasn't that worried about it. Yes, there are similarities between us and them, but Geffen made it clear they understood the differences also. I think they were relieved to have a band on their hands who were genuinely happy, who didn't have a lot of baggage as individuals, and who didn't have any major problems within the band."

Producer Brad Wood (Liz Phair, Veruca Salt) recorded *Breathe* with Loud Lucy in Chicago during February last year, and the band have toured North America non-stop since the album was released eight months ago, including six weeks supporting Alanis Morissette. The trio will remain out on the road, headlining their own shows, for the duration of 1996, although Lane says Geffen may arrange another high profile support slot for the band, in order to boost their slow album sales. *Breathe* has sold a mere 35,000 copies in America, however, Lane is not about to shed any tears. His goals for Loud Lucy are pegged on a creative rather than commercial level.

"There's been an enormous amount of expectation placed on us, but there's room to manoeuvre within those expectations because the majors don't know what's going to work. That's why there's so many bands out there right now, and no kind of quality control. All the labels are taking chances with unproven bands, hoping one will explode and make it worth their while. For as much good as they did, Nirvana raised the roof for a lot of crap to fall through as well. But it's like with anything: the bands with substance will be around, and the ones that got into it because they jumped on the look and the sound, won't be. The bands that remain might not be part of the next phenomenon — that might include us — but they'll always be there for the people that want them."

JOHN RUSSELL

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