

TUNE INTO ENGLISH

# Nirvana's Smells Like Teen Spirit

Analizziamo il brano più conosciuto della band grunge di Seattle che rivoluzionò la musica degli anni Novanta, composto tre decenni fa dall'allora ventenne Kurt Cobain e subito amato dai suoi coetanei, che ne fecero il canto del proprio disagio generazionale.

LOWER INTERMEDIATE **B1**

ON CD 17

GLOSSARY

- 1 **underground:** scena alternativa (lett. sottoterra)
- 2 **rainy:** piovosa
- 3 **to date:** uscire con, frequentare
- 4 **to be unaware:** non essere consapevole
- 5 **to rip off:** plagiare, copiare
- 6 **pixies:** elfi
- 7 **variously:** in diverse occasioni
- 8 **to make fun:** burlarsi
- 9 **disgust:** ripugnanza
- 10 **to claim:** affermare
- 11 **smash:** grande successo
- 12 **to hail:** acclamare
- 13 **anthem:** inno
- 14 **embarrassment:** vergogna, imbarazzo
- 15 **to focus:** centrarsi
- 16 **guns:** armi
- 17 **dirty word:** parolaccia
- 18 **blessed:** benedetto, fortunato
- 19 **to taste:** assaporare
- 20 **rethorical device:** figura retorica
- 21 **barracks:** caserme
- 22 **to increase:** aumentare
- 23 **scorn:** disprezzo

In September 1991 Nirvana were just another obscure **underground**<sup>1</sup> band from **rainy**<sup>2</sup> Seattle, but with the release of the single *Smells Like Teen Spirit* they were about to become one of the biggest bands in the world. Kurt Cobain, the singer of Nirvana, was **dating**<sup>3</sup> a girl who used a deodorant called Teen Spirit. One night a friend wrote the words "Kurt Smells Like Teen Spirit" on Cobain's bedroom wall. He later said he was **unaware**<sup>4</sup> it referred to a deodorant, thinking it was a revolutionary slogan he decided it made a great song title. Lyrically the song is entirely in the present simple and is largely incoherent, with no mention of the title. In a 1994 interview with *Rolling Stone* Cobain said he "was trying to write the ultimate pop song, trying to **rip off**<sup>5</sup> The Pixies<sup>6</sup>." He has **variously**<sup>7</sup> described the song as being about his friends, about **making fun**<sup>8</sup> of the

thought of having a revolution, or about expressing his **disgust**<sup>9</sup> at the apathy of his generation. He also said that the entire song was made up of contradictory ideas. Bass player Krist Novoselic **claimed**<sup>10</sup> it is about "the mass mentality of conformity", while drummer Dave Grohl said "seeing Kurt write the lyrics to a song five minutes before he sings them, you find it hard to believe that it has a lot to say." *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, the first single from Nirvana's second album 'Nevermind', became a worldwide **smash**<sup>11</sup> and was **hailed**<sup>12</sup> as an **anthem**<sup>13</sup> for Generation X. The band were uncomfortable with this and often did not play the song at their concerts, with Cobain saying that it was an "**embarrassment**<sup>14</sup>... Everyone has **focused**<sup>15</sup> on that song so much." ☒



**load up:** to 'get loaded' means 'to take drugs'. On a BBC television performance Cobain sang "Load up on drugs, kill your friends."

**oh no, I know / hello, how low:** assonance is a rhetorical device<sup>20</sup> using the repetition of similar vowel sounds to create a rhyme. When you 'feel low' you are sad, 'not in a good mood'.

**I'm worse at what I do best:** these are examples of a comparative adjective and a superlative adverb.

**gift:** this could be a present he has received or a reference to his own talent.

**I found it hard, was hard to find:** the repetition of a group of words in reverse order is a rhetorical device called 'epanodos'.

**whatever:** this is often used to show indifference or **scorn**<sup>23</sup>.

**Load up on guns**<sup>16</sup>, bring your friends

It's fun to lose and to **pretend** ←

She's **over-bored** and self-assured ←

Oh no, I know a **dirty word**<sup>17</sup>

Hello, hello, hello, how **low**

Hello, hello, hello, how **low**

Hello, hello, hello, how **low**

Hello, hello, hello

With the **lights out**, it's less dangerous

Here we are now, entertain us

I feel stupid and contagious

Here we are now, entertain us

A mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my **libido** ←

Yeah, hey

I'm worse at what I do best

And for this **gift** I feel **blessed**<sup>18</sup>

Our little group has always been

And always will until the end

Hello, hello, hello, how **low**

Hello, hello, hello, how **low**

Hello, hello, hello, how **low**

Hello, hello, hello

With the **lights out**, it's less dangerous

Here we are now, entertain us

I feel stupid and contagious

Here we are now, entertain us

A mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my **libido**

Yeah, hey

And I forget just why I **taste**<sup>19</sup>

Oh yeah, I guess it makes me smile

I found it hard, was hard to find

Oh well, **whatever**, **never mind** ←

**to pretend:** this is a false friend that means 'fingir' not 'pretender'.

**over-bored and self-assured:** prefixes can change, quantify or qualify a word. 'Over-' means 'too much' and 'self-' is a reflexive pronoun that refers to the same person that is speaking.

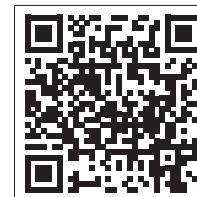
**lights out:** this refers to bedtime, often used for children or soldiers in **barracks**<sup>21</sup>.

**a mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido:** these four words are all derived from Latin and the first three are also names for cocktails... which can help to **increase**<sup>22</sup> the fourth!

**never mind:** an idiom meaning 'don't worry'. This became the title of the album featuring the song.



SCAN & WATCH



Scan this QR code with your smartphone or tablet and listen to the original song on YouTube while reading the lyrics.

**Tune into English**  
www.tuneintoenglish.com

Fergal Kavanagh runs the website [www.tuneintoenglish.com](http://www.tuneintoenglish.com), the web's largest free resource for learning English through pop music.