# Nirvana's first UK tour in 1989 revealed as a pivotal moment for grassroots grunge



In October 1989, Nirvana embarked on their first UK tour, a critical stepping stone in their ascension from an obscure Seattle garage band to global icons of grunge music. Known as the 'Heavier Than Heaven' tour, the band opened for fellow Seattle act Tad as they introduced the raw energy of their debut album, Bleach, to British audiences. At this point, the trio—Kurt Cobain, Krist Novoselic, and drummer Chad Channing—were far from the polished megastars they would soon become. Their configuration had just recently stabilised after parting ways with original guitarist Jason Everman, and the band was still finding its stride on the live stage.

Early gigs on the tour, including their debut UK show at Newcastle’s Riverside venue on October 23rd, drew modest crowds of around 150 people. These early performances were more about gritty exposure than crowd frenzy, a reality exemplified by their time playing cramped 200-capacity rooms that often struggled to fill. Indeed, the UK music press was largely indifferent to grunge at the time, favouring the emergent shoegaze and Madchester scenes over the taut, angst-fuelled sounds emanating from the Pacific Northwest. This left Nirvana to perform in venues where enthusiasm was subdued and recognition far from guaranteed.

Despite these humble and challenging beginnings, the band's performances were charged with a rawness that hinted at something special. One particularly infamous moment came on the tour’s opening night when an irate audience member threw a beer bottle at Novoselic, prompting him to smash his bass through his amp in frustration. Such tensions underscored the rough edges of a band on the cusp of greatness.

The tour’s climax came at a show dubbed ‘Lame Fest’ at the now-legendary Astoria on Charing Cross Road, a venue that would later become iconic in London’s music history. Nirvana took the stage with an assertive introduction from Cobain, declaring themselves "one of the three official representatives of the Seattle Sub Pop scene from Washington State." However, their performance quickly hit a snag as Cobain broke a guitar string early in their set. Rather than derailing the show, the band improvised and kept the energy alive, with the audience responding enthusiastically by stage diving and feeding off the unpredictable atmosphere.

Keith Cameron, a journalist covering the tour for Sounds, reflected on this pivotal concert, describing how despite equipment issues and evident band frustrations, Nirvana delivered a thrilling and electrifying performance. It was this night, Cameron noted, that made him realise there was something truly exceptional about the band—a moment when they "walked the precipice and won."

Photographer Richard Davis' recently revealed unseen images from their second UK show at Manchester's Polytechnic Students Union further capture the band’s intense presence and the intimate, raw nature of these early gigs. Additionally, live recordings from their performances in Portsmouth and Leeds offer invaluable insight into the sound and spirit that defined these formative shows, dominated by tracks from Bleach.

Reflecting on Nirvana’s early UK tour underscores the importance of local venues and grassroots gigs, which remain crucial despite the ongoing decline of small music venues globally. Although it is tempting for audiences to seek out grassroots shows simply to spot the next big star, the true value of these gigs lies in their genuine connection with music that resonates personally, regardless of commercial success. Nirvana themselves were once one of many undiscovered bands playing for modest crowds, showing that the magic of live, up-close music often defies commercial metrics and broad popularity.

Their journey during this initial tour offers a powerful reminder that while many local bands might never achieve global fame, their music can still profoundly move and matter to those who hear it. Nirvana’s 'Heavier Than Heaven' tour remains a testament to the enduring significance of grassroots music scenes and the raw potential they hold.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-show-that-turned-nirvana-into-stars/), [[2]](https://www.mojo4music.com/time-machine/1980s/mojo-time-machine-nirvana-play-uk-for-the-first-time/), [[3]](https://www.andersonandgarland.com/news-item/music-memorabilia-auction-spotlights-nirvana-in-newcastle/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-show-that-turned-nirvana-into-stars/), [[2]](https://www.mojo4music.com/time-machine/1980s/mojo-time-machine-nirvana-play-uk-for-the-first-time/), [[3]](https://www.andersonandgarland.com/news-item/music-memorabilia-auction-spotlights-nirvana-in-newcastle/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-show-that-turned-nirvana-into-stars/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-show-that-turned-nirvana-into-stars/), [[7]](https://www.live-nirvana.com/concerts/89/89-10-25.php)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-show-that-turned-nirvana-into-stars/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[4]](https://www.kerrang.com/photographer-shares-unseen-pics-from-nirvanas-second-ever-uk-show), [[5]](https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/live-recording-of-nirvanas-1989-portsmouth-gig-emerges-online-1156154), [[6]](https://www.setlist.fm/setlist/nirvana/1989/duchess-of-york-leeds-england-63d60253.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-show-that-turned-nirvana-into-stars/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-show-that-turned-nirvana-into-stars/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.mojo4music.com/time-machine/1980s/mojo-time-machine-nirvana-play-uk-for-the-first-time/> - In October 1989, Nirvana embarked on their inaugural UK tour, opening for fellow Seattle band Tad. The tour, dubbed 'Heavier Than Heaven,' began at Newcastle's Riverside venue on October 23, 1989. This marked the first time Nirvana performed outside the United States, introducing their raw energy to British audiences. The tour was a significant milestone in their rise to fame, showcasing their potential and setting the stage for their future success in the UK music scene.
3. <https://www.andersonandgarland.com/news-item/music-memorabilia-auction-spotlights-nirvana-in-newcastle/> - A music memorabilia auction in Newcastle highlighted Nirvana's first UK performance at the Riverside venue on October 23, 1989. The event featured a poster advertising the gig, which was attended by approximately 150 people. This performance was a pivotal moment in Nirvana's career, marking their first show outside the United States and setting the stage for their future success in the UK music scene.
4. <https://www.kerrang.com/photographer-shares-unseen-pics-from-nirvanas-second-ever-uk-show> - Photographer Richard Davis unveiled previously unseen photos from Nirvana's second UK show at Manchester's Polytechnic Students Union on October 24, 1989. The band, supporting their debut album 'Bleach,' delivered a raw and energetic performance. These photographs offer a rare glimpse into the early days of Nirvana's career, capturing the band's dynamic presence and the intimate atmosphere of the venue.
5. <https://www.portsmouth.co.uk/news/live-recording-of-nirvanas-1989-portsmouth-gig-emerges-online-1156154> - A live recording of Nirvana's 1989 performance at Portsmouth Polytechnic has surfaced online. The bootleg, dating back to October 28, 1989, features the band playing tracks from their debut album 'Bleach.' This recording provides insight into Nirvana's early sound and the raw energy they brought to their live shows during their first UK tour.
6. <https://www.setlist.fm/setlist/nirvana/1989/duchess-of-york-leeds-england-63d60253.html> - Nirvana's setlist from their October 25, 1989, performance at the Duchess of York in Leeds, England, is documented on setlist.fm. The set included tracks from their debut album 'Bleach,' showcasing the band's early repertoire. This performance was part of their 'Heavier Than Heaven' European tour, marking a significant period in Nirvana's rise to prominence.
7. <https://www.live-nirvana.com/concerts/89/89-10-25.php> - Live Nirvana provides detailed information about the band's October 25, 1989, concert at the Duchess of York in Leeds, UK. The page includes setlists, soundcheck details, and notes on the performance. This concert was part of Nirvana's first European tour, offering fans a glimpse into the band's early live shows and their evolving sound during this pivotal time.