

INTERVIEW

Words Graeme Green

Photograph Judson Baker/Contour Photos

ONE LOVE

Few people in this world have had to endure total meltdown quite as publicly as **Courtney Love**. Dramatic and often traumatic, her life has rollercoasted from her marriage to Kurt Cobain, to the drink and drug excesses of her rock career, to her reinvention as Hollywood's darling of the red carpet. Clean and sober for 15 months after rehab, and reunited with her daughter, now all she wants is to be understood

WHAT was the question again? "Not for the first time this afternoon, Courtney Love has drifted from the point, going off on such a lengthy series of tangents that both she and I have forgotten where we started. She talks at a tremendous, almost manic pace, sprawling, epic monologues, her mind racing to keep up with her mouth. Ask about her childhood hunger for fame and she might tell you about helping prepare Christmas dinner at a Vietnamese halfway house, meeting an acid-crazed Julian Cope and the Yakuza who stole her passport when she was a nightclub dancer in Japan.

Not that it's a bad thing. Sometimes hard to follow, yes, but Courtney has a limitless supply of never-dull stories from her distinctly colourful, dramatic and often traumatic life, from her lonely childhood and wanderer lifestyle, through her rock career and marriage to Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, with whom she had a daughter, Frances, to her Hollywood acting career. Then there's the court actions, suicides, drugs, the recent loss of \$20 million, the burnouts, the breakdowns, the rehabs...

All this in Love's suite at Claridges, perhaps London's least punk-rock venue. We're here to discuss the publication of *Dirty Blonde*, a biography of sorts that, like her husband's *Diaries*, is a collection of personal notes, letters, diary entries, emails, lists and photographs from her life. In the corner are various objects to assist her Buddhist chanting, which she does for at least one hour every day. She's wearing a low-cut white blouse and a black bra, which she threatens to spill out of every time she leans forward. At 42, she's still striking, though both wear and surgery now show on her face. She orders Lapsang tea and smokes voraciously throughout our conversation, often lighting the next cigarette off the lit stub of the last.

This visit feels very much like a time to reassert herself, paving the way for a comeback proper in 2007. The last few years have not been good ones. She's been arrested for alleged assault and, on her 40th birthday, having missed a court appearance for a separate misdemeanour, she was found in contempt of court and later sentenced to an 18-month probation and drug-rehabilitation programme. In January 2005, she regained custody of her daughter that she'd lost in October 2003. But for continued drug use in violation of her probation terms, she was ordered into a 28-day treatment programme and later six months of lock-down rehab.

This year also saw her sell off 25 per cent of Nirvana's publishing catalogue (for a reported \$50 million) to solve financial problems. "I thought I was done with drugs and all those things," she says. "But it came back, with this vast loss of money by people around me – assistants, my entourage, people with power of attorney and a boyfriend who was just a real slimebucket. I mean, 20 million dollars just gone. I didn't have money for cigarettes. It drove me literally insane."

How did someone seemingly so headstrong allow others to manipulate her? "I'm not so savvy, especially when it comes to men," she says. "I'm a f**king idiot."

Whether Love's problems are behind her for good remains to be seen. "I'm a year and three months sober, so that's good," she tells me. But today she's focused and together. In person, she's self-deprecating and funny, warm (at the start, she took me briskly by the hand and led me into her room) and very charming. Instead of the polite bland soundbites celebrities often use to promote their latest product, she genuinely engages in conversation. She's also a shameless name-dropper and, when not dropping names, her 'discretion' leaves a lot to be desired (she tells me one story about a back-breaking yoga session with a female pop singer, "perhaps the most famous pop singer in the world, who's also usually blonde, who lives in England and works out for hours each day").

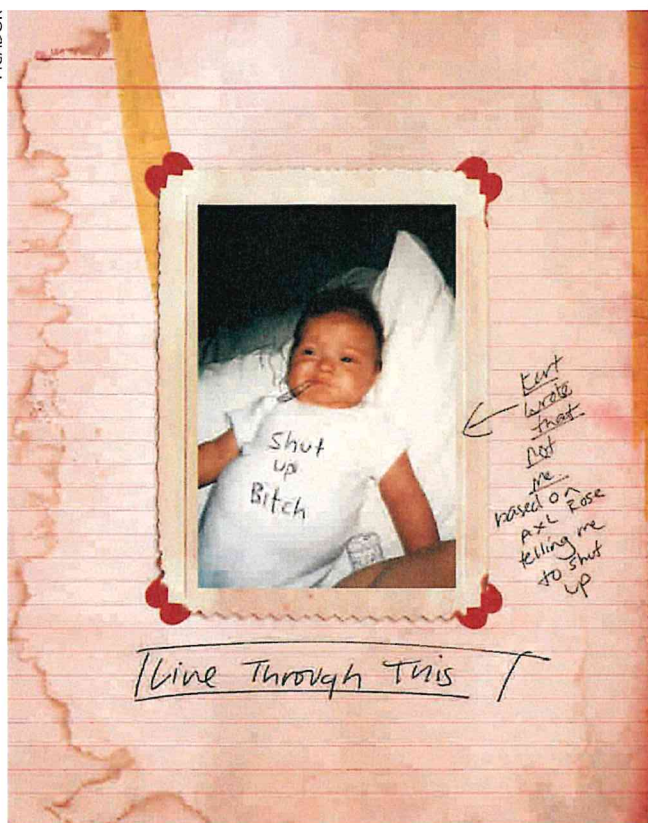
But from offhand comments and the way she interacts with those around her, there are glimpses of how 'knife-edge' her personality is, that she could quickly turn and be unpredictable, insecure, aggressive or simply a pain in the arse, none of which she'd deny.

But what's difficult to understand is why, to many, she's such a figure of hate – something Courtney refers to as "that whore/Yoko thing". Her provocative lyrics, rebel glamour and powerful rock roar, especially with the landmark *Live Through This*, made her an inspiration to millions, particularly young women. Her outstanding performance in *The People vs Larry Flynt* was nominated for a Golden Globe. Despite this, she's often labelled as talentless. Worse: a bitch, a slut and a whore. There are whole websites dedicated to personal attacks.

Clearly, there's a double-standard at work. Being gobby, sexually liberated, ambitious and occasionally bonkers are virtually prerequisites for male rock stars, yet the same 'virtues' in women are deemed distasteful. But it goes deeper. Love has been accused of being a careerist, of riding on the tailcoats of her more talented husband and, like Yoko, of being a controlling negative influence on a hallowed band. Perhaps there's some subconscious homoerotic jealousy at play, Cobain's male fans (her most vocal critics) unable to stand the thought of her sleeping with their idol. Perhaps, just as Victoria Beckham was blamed for her husband's alleged 'playing away', certain people believe a wife or girlfriend can be blamed for the choices or weaknesses of their partner.

Was she surprised by these reactions? "Maybe I was sheltered by the institutions I was in – all-girl boarding schools, having a feminist mother, being around feminists. But I just didn't expect it. I really wanted success. And that got me into trouble sometimes. But I don't think relegating me to who I was married to or who I was dating is fair."

No one would suggest Love is an angel. Her behaviour has often been erratic and incredibly irresponsible, famously accused of taking heroin while pregnant. There's nothing dignified about a woman in her 40s on drug binges, making meltdown calls to radio phone-ins or falling over on live television. And though Love says of daughter, Frances, now 13: "She's doing very well at school and seems to be avoiding the rock-and-roll ►



says Love, he broke into a houseboat, pretending it was his own, and claimed to be a professor at Trinity College in Dublin, when really, she says, he was a pot dealer and sold Grateful Dead tapes to the students. She's also disturbed by the fact "the girlfriend he had before he knocked up my mother was one of the Manson family, the Manson murderers, who's still in jail. He published in his book he wrote letters from Charles Manson and he thinks that's really cool."

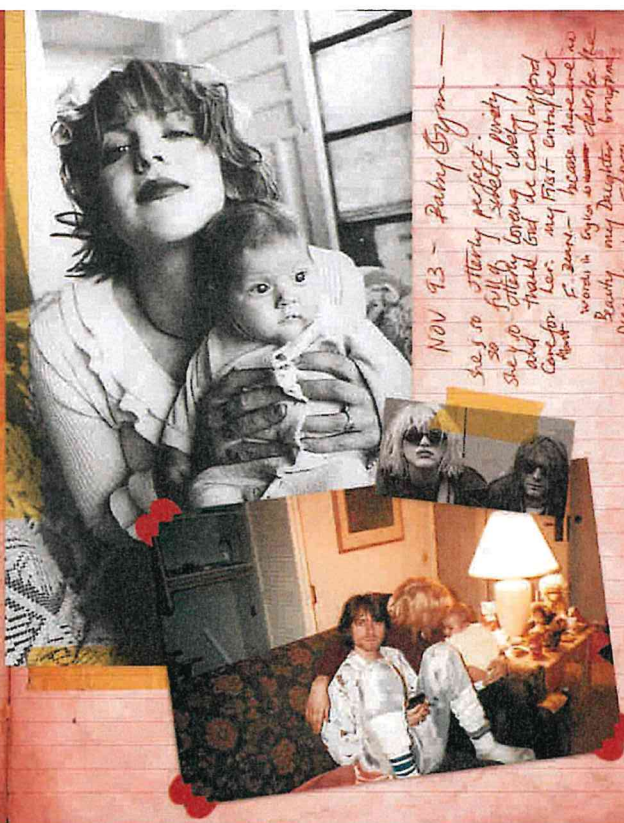
Her anger towards her parents, both of whom she claims not to have spoken to for more than a decade, seems not to have dimmed. "I have the worst two parents in celebritydom. There's actually a list in an American magazine of the worst celebrity parents. Obviously, the first is Marvin Gaye's dad, because he shot his son. But then number two was my mother and number three was my father. I really got a raw deal."

In her teens, she broke away and, supported by a trust fund established by her mother's adoptive parents, travelled around America, the UK and Ireland, also working as a nightclub dancer in Japan and Taiwan ("they loved me because I hadn't hit puberty yet") and as a stripper in Alaska. During her time in England, she befriended Julian Cope who, having taken "a bunch of acid", gave her the keys to his house. The chaos of these early years has never really gone away.

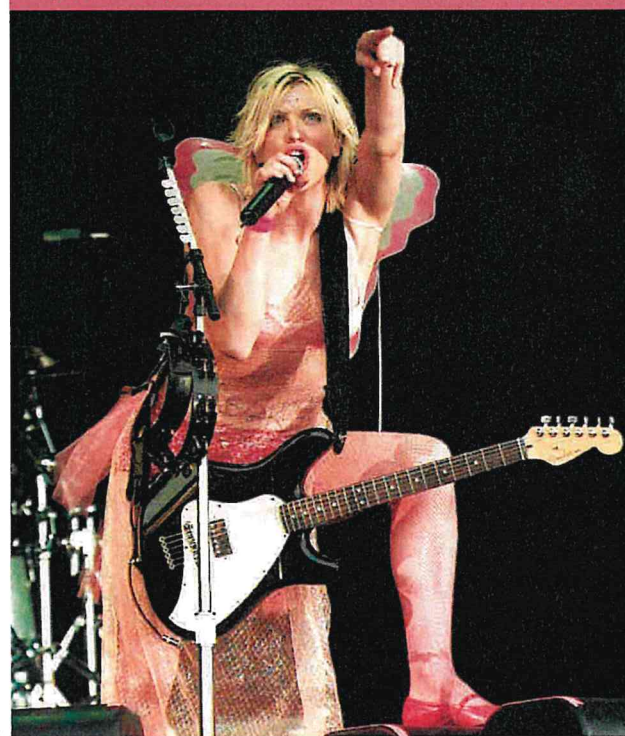
But why, apart from money, would she share such graphic personal information with others? Did she, I wondered, publish these diaries in the hope of changing what people think of her, to explain or justify her later behaviour and maybe even elicit sympathy? Did she hope those that call her a bitch and a whore might change their minds? "I'm not bothered by what people think particularly. But sometimes it's annoying and embarrassing. So I put this out there ... It's important to be understood, or not to be so vastly misunderstood."

The discovery of punk was a turning point. "And I know Kurt saw exactly the same thing at exactly the same time," she says, animatedly. "Which was this thing in Time magazine with pictures of punk rockers in London. And I thought, 'What the f*ck is this? I want to be part of this.'"

But Courtney's roots jar awkwardly with later career moves: a punk singer who also writes with professional hitmaker Linda Perry (Aguilera, Gwen Stefani, Pink); an irrepressible wild child who also acts in Hollywood films and lives the Beverley Hills lifestyle. Is there a problem now that no one really knows which camp she's in? "Right. I always wanted something subcultural – punk rock. At the same time, I love mainstream stuff. I mean, you can't be completely subcultural and then be in films. That takes a real sense of the mainstream and being able to like and respect



Above: A collage from Love's Diaries includes a picture of Frances Bean, left, her daughter with Kurt Cobain; a picture of Love with Frances whom she describes as 'so utterly perfect', and another image with Love, Cobain and Frances; Below: performing with Hole at Glastonbury, 1999; Opposite page, left: Love in *The People vs Larry Flynt*, for which she was nominated for a Golden Globe; Right: a dishevelled Love in Los Angeles Superior Court pleading guilty to being under the influence of a controlled substance in May 2004. She agreed to enter a six-month lockdown rehab programme



TOBY MELVILLE/PA



► lifestyle altogether. She could almost be described as a bit 'square,' you can't help feeling, after the suicide of Frances's father, that Courtney's instability may well be causing further damage.

But she's the one who's still here – not a devil woman but perhaps just in need of help. Unlike Cobain, who also openly discussed his painful childhood, she's received little in the way of empathy or understanding.

What does she put this vilification down to? "Sixteen-year-old boys are always going to blog about the fact, when a person dies, their publishing and their songwriting should go to the rest of the band (referring to the ongoing dispute over Nirvana royalties), not their family. And 15-year-old boys are always going to blog about conspiracy theories. And then they'll turn 20 and go: 'What was I thinking?' What I hate more than anything are the people who think I'm such an easy target, who regress into that 15-year-old blogger mentality instead of looking at my work."

Though she claims to be thick-skinned, one accusation understandably

got to her – that her husband was murdered and she had a hand in it. "They were right there with their guns pointing right at me," she recalls. "And that hurt and it was fu*ked up and evil."

Subsequent relationships with famous partners have deliberately been more low-key. With Ed Norton, whom Love had a three-year relationship and was briefly engaged to, there was a strategy to avoid being photographed together. "Walking down a red carpet and making out with your significant other is just ... cheeseball!" she says. "What are you trying to prove? That this is the way you have sex?"

That Love ended up on the red carpets of Hollywood was no accident. In her diaries, there's her rejection letter from the Mickey Mouse Club, where Britney, Justin and Christina started out, which Love applied to under the fake name, Coco (her audition was the Sylvia Plath poem, Daddy). There are precocious notes to self in which she declares: "I think I'll be a rock star. Get an Oscar too. And be best friends with Elton John." ("And now I am friends with Elton John!" she says excitedly). And then there are the motivational To Do lists ("achieve LA visibility") or her Nancy (Spungen) Studies, in which she analyses the punk icon's traits to adopt ("1. Evil Smile, 2. Punk rock queen pose...").

Was this a young girl's diary fantasising or precocious self-belief? "A bit of both," she says. "At the age of four or five, I was fascinated by the images of Marilyn Monroe and of Bob Dylan – the idea of putting those two images together. I always wanted to be a smart rock star, but I also wanted to be sexy and blonde."

Courtney describes her childhood as 'Dickensian'. What's striking is how, from such an early age, she was drifting, rootless and alone. Her parents – writer and therapist Linda Carroll and writer Hank Harrison – divorced when she was six. During a custody case, her mother suggested her father had given Courtney LSD at the age of four. Love spent troubled years moving through hippie communes with her mother, attending various boarding schools (some of which expelled her), then later reform schools, juvenile halls and foster homes, never staying one place for more than a few months. She recalls at one institution getting dragged off to a quiet room by three men. "You know what a quiet room in a borstal is? It's a padded cell with restraints – because you were afraid of bugs in your room."

In the diary, there's a telling note from her childhood scribbled in red crayon about writing to her estranged mother (who moved to New Zealand leaving Love behind): "When I get around her, I feel so awkward and weak and I always find myself trying to prove to her I can make friends and be popular even though she lives on the other side of the world."

Her relationship with her father was even worse. In their rare meetings,

I'm not bothered by what people think. But sometimes it's annoying and embarrassing. It's important to be understood, or at least, not to be so vastly misunderstood

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Turning on the full Hollywood diva glam, Love arrives at the premiere of Sacha Baron Cohen's hit movie *Borat* in Los Angeles on October 23

► mainstream people and what they think. I've always gotten a little stick from my subcultural sisters and brothers for that."

Next year, a new solo album, *How Dirty Girls Get Clean*, will be released. Though still one or two songs shy of being finished, it sounds encouraging, a focused return after her first solo album, *American Sweetheart*, which Love admits was a disappointment. But after showing such promise with *The People vs Larry Flynt*, Love's future looks more likely to lie in acting. Early next year, she'll complete a four-month run in London's West End (she's tight-lipped about the play, but says it's a modern take on a classic). She also has two films planned, "one small, one big".

"I'm just now starting to get out of actor jail and starting to get offers again," she says, having squandered the post-Larry Flynt opportunities through being on drugs or in the wrong state of mind. "I've just had a 900-pound gorilla of a director ask me to do the title role of a film."

Again, she's tight-lipped, wary of jinxing it, but things seem to be on the up. As with other successes in her life, she attributes this upturn to her Buddhism. "It puts me in rhythm with the universe, turns poison into medicine and my shit into gold."

But in a song from the new album, *Never Go Hungry Again*, there's a curiously ominous line: "The Phoenix she rises, she is sure to descend again." It's as if there's an inevitability to her life, that she's doomed to repeat a pattern of surviving, succeeding, then always screwing up. It hasn't been very long since she was very publicly a mess. So, how precarious is her current togetherness? "Precarious, I don't think is the right word. As long as I chant, I feel good. I know that might sound weird but it works for me."

Mostly though, she's aware she's running out of time to get her act together. There's a substantial gap between how famous she is and her relatively small body of work – tabloid headlines no substitute for actual achievements. Has she learned from the mistakes of her past? And does she feel ready to re-earn her place in popular culture?

"Absolutely. I have a lot to prove. I don't think anyone wants to see me do the same old shit. I've realised I'm this age, you know? So don't fu*k about – this is it. Your tits are not going to hold up for that long. Your ass isn't going to be that great forever."

She takes a breath, sparks up another cigarette. "Where was I?" she says. Pause.

"What was the question?"

Dirty Blonde, The Diaries Of Courtney Love is published by Picador, £20



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