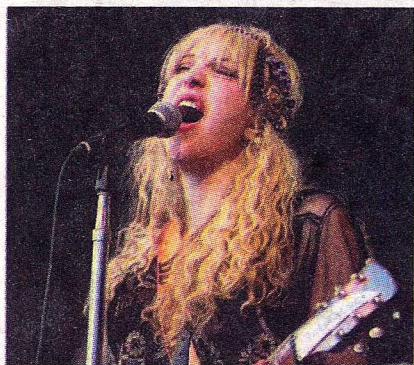


MUSIC



By ANTHONY BOZZA

COURTNEY LOVE'S room at the Mercer Hotel in SoHo was a study in chaos. Racks of clothing, from 1920s vintage to this season's Miu Miu, lined two walls. The floor was littered with boxes of photos. Empty coffee cups, half-finished bottles of juice, opened bags of candy, overflowing ashtrays and stacks of books on Buddhism and psychology were seemingly everywhere. And at the center of it all, at once manic and serene, brash and vulnerable, sat Ms. Love, watching on a battered laptop YouTube videos of her duet with the Irish singer Gavin Friday at a benefit for Red, an African AIDS charity, at Carnegie Hall.

Just 24 hours before that appearance, she said, she was performing with the former Guns N' Roses rockers Slash and Duff McKagan at a hotel anniversary party in Las Vegas. "I don't know anyone else who could do that," she said. "Those are two very different worlds, and I've got one foot in each of them."

Since the release of her solo album, "America's Sweetheart," in 2004, a flop that she refers to as "le désastre" or "that piece of trash I made in the south of France," Ms. Love's life has been even messier than her room. At breakneck speed, in improbably coherent rants, she cataloged much of it: drug abuse and rehab, her "dire" financial situation, losing custody of her teenage daughter, legal troubles, online tantrums. "As a dear friend pointed out to me recently, nothing good ever comes from Twitter," she said.

But now she's concentrating on "taming the Courtney Monster," she explained. Essential to this project is "Nobody's Daughter," her coming album made with a new version of her 1990s band Hole, to be released on Mercury/Island/Def Jam on April 27. It took four years, several producers, various dust-ups and a few million dollars of her own funds, she said, but somehow she managed to finish it. And it's poised to be her best-received work since Hole's 1994 grunge opus "Live Through This" (DGC). In this comeback- and reunion-obsessed moment in pop, Ms. Love, 45, may pull off the most surprising resurrection of all.

"I like the word comeback," she said. "In your career a comeback is like you've just stepped outside for a cigarette."

Ms. Love has turned adversity into success before. "Live Through This" was released just days after her husband, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, committed suicide and two months before Hole's bass player, Kristen Pfaff, died of an overdose. The album and ensuing tour were critical and commercial successes, lauded for their cathartic energy.

But Ms. Love then traded in her smeared-makeup look for a Hollywood makeover, complete with additional plastic surgery, and turned to acting. She earned a Golden Globe nomination for her role in Milos Forman's 1996 film "The People vs. Larry Flynt" and began a four-year relationship with the actor Edward Norton. In 1998 she was the face of a Versace campaign shot by Richard Avedon. Another well-received, platinum album followed, "Celebrity Skin" (1998). Ms. Love had transcended her gritty rock 'n' roll past and become a cultured, free-spirited bohemian in the eyes of the mainstream. Her gift was knowing how — and when — to play each side to her advantage.

But then it all started to slip away, as Ms. Love's abuse of cocaine and prescription pills took a toll. She became a tabloid regular, famous for behavior like flashing her breasts at David Letterman. It was hard to imagine her ever being taken seriously again. "I have lived the worst parts of my life in public," she said earnestly, "and now my band and I have made a relevant record."

"I went all in," she added. "I bet the farm on this record, which is dangerous, but great in a way, because when you do that, you have nowhere else to go. There is no Plan B."

The challenge is to make the quality of the music eclipse Ms. Love's tabloid celebrity, said David Massey, the president of Mercury. The label gave Ms. Love a multi-album deal just four months ago, before the recording was finished. "The decision to sign the band was entirely music driven," he said. "It's now become such a complete, great record that I'm blown away. One thing that impressed me when I got to know Courtney were her lyrics and ideas. Nobody else is doing such raw, truthful music."

Reviews of Hole's live shows in London in February and at the South by Southwest Music and Media Conference in Austin, Tex., last month have been mostly positive, often to the critics' surprise. But Ms. Love has her work cut out for her as a 40-something rock singer in the age of Lady Gaga; college-age record buyers are barely old enough to remember her first act.

"Nobody's Daughter" sometimes taps into grunge nostalgia with its loud-soft alt-rock tropes and minor key melodies; there is a classic rock feel too, courtesy of the



Left, Courtney Love with Kurt Cobain and their daughter in 1992. Right, Ms. Love in 1995, the year after "Live Through This" was released. Below right, she appeared at a Los Angeles court in 2004 on a drug charge.



Courtney Love's Music Therapy



FRED PROUSER/REUTERS



REUTERS

Left, Ms. Love struts her stuff at the Academy Awards in 1997. She appeared in Milos Forman's 1996 film "The People vs. Larry Flynt." Below left, flashing David Letterman on his show.

new band. Ms. Love mentioned "The Wall" by Pink Floyd ("but only the slower, good parts") as a touchstone for songs like "Letter to God" and "Somebody Else's Bed." Lyrically "Nobody's Daughter" recounts the depths of Ms. Love's fall, but avoids blame or self-pity, tackling instead destructive relationships and themes of salvation and transformation.

The first single, the swaggering grunge romp "Skinny Little Bitch," is about Ms. Love at her most frail and chemically dependent. It has been embraced by the influential Los Angeles rock station KROQ and by WRXP in New York and was recently No. 19 on the Billboard alternative rock chart.

"In the two-year history of WRXP we've never had a stronger reaction to a new song than we have had with 'Skinny Little Bitch,'" said Matt Pinfield, the host of a morning show. "When we got the song, we wanted to know what our listeners thought, live on the air. Ninety-five percent of the calls we got, from both males and females, were very positive. Females especially were excited to hear a woman rocking."

Ms. Love began work on the album with the producer and songwriter Linda Perry and Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins, but they didn't last. (Mr. Corgan recently told Spin magazine that "after 20 years of



JIM RUYMEN/REUTERS

friendship, I have decided to break all ties to Courtney.") Next she called on Michael Beinhorn, who produced "Celebrity Skin" and has worked with the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Soundgarden.

Under Mr. Beinhorn the album changed direction and a new band was enlisted: the bassist Shawn Dailey, formerly of the alt-rockers Rock Kills Kid; the drummer Stuart Fisher, formerly of Ozric Tentacles; and the guitarist Micko Larkin, formerly of the indie rock band Larkin Love. But when it was time for the increasingly erratic Ms. Love to record her vocals, the proceedings slowed to a stop for several months.

Feeling distracted in Los Angeles, she moved to New York, but Mr. Beinhorn did not follow her. Production duties were assumed by Mr. Larkin, who also wrote some of the newer songs with Ms. Love. She said she was a different woman then. "A year ago I weighed 100 pounds," she said. "And I shouldn't, ever, because I'm not a small girl." She said she looked "demented" in photographs from that time.

"The record was taking such a toll on me," she added. "I wasn't easy for anyone to deal with because I was method acting the material. These songs were first written in rehab, at a friend's house after rehab, then at the Chateau Marmont — until I was banned from there and had to live at the Sunset Marquis. They come from a

serious record."

Ms. Love is scheduled to appear on "Late Show With David Letterman" on April 27 and play sold-out shows at Terminal 5 in New York that night and the next.

In person Ms. Love is thoroughly engaging, staring with intense blue eyes as she seems to vent every feeling, morphing from elated to irate and back again as quickly as she changes topics in conversation. She will answer any question, but circuitously, dipping into literature, art, film, fashion and music in detail along the way. She is aware that her professed transformation is a work in progress. "I've sent that girl away for the summer," she said of the Bad Courtney. "I have too much to do to deal with her. She's been sent away to a camp to be properly socialized."

But before Ms. Love can fully embrace this next phase of her life and career, she said, she must leave her past behind. In 2006 she sold 25 percent of Nirvana's music publishing, of which Cobain's estate owns 98 percent, for an estimated \$50 million. (She says most of that has gone to taxes, lawyers and scams by a variety of shadowy institutions.) "I'm thinking about selling off all of Kurt's publishing," she said. "All of the rights, everything. It's not a financial decision, it's an emotional one."

"He was the best friend I've ever had, but Kurt and I were only married for three years, and now I need to have my own life," she added. "I'm always 'the widow,' and that drives me nuts. That money has been cursed since the day it started to come in."

She looked down at her shoes. "It's also that it's not really my money," she said. "I don't want Kurt Cobain to buy me shoes anymore. I want to buy my own shoes — lots of them."

As night fell in SoHo, Ms. Love said she wanted to walk around the neighborhood. She stopped in front of a few lingerie stores ("Kiki De Montparnasse is amazing, La Perla is for grandmas") before returning to her hotel and taking a seat in the lobby.

"Oh," she said suddenly. "It's Mr. Lagerfeld." Karl Lagerfeld, the impeccably coiffed designer, breezed into the room with a small army of assistants wheeling huge amounts of luggage behind him. "He photographed me once," she said. "I waited for him for nine hours and ate an entire box of delicious Parisian macaroons. Then he came in and shot me covered in pearls, reclining naked on a chaise."

Ms. Love walked toward Mr. Lagerfeld coyly, with both hands behind her back. "Mr. Lagerfeld, I hope you remember me, I'm Courtney—"

"Of course I remember you," he interrupted, taking her face in his hands. "You look beautiful without makeup. Your skin is so clear. You look wonderful, just like a little girl. I must shoot you again soon. But have you not heard? We have yet to shoot the campaign. There is much work to do, I love go."

Ms. Love sat back down, satisfied: "Mr. Lagerfeld remembers me."

'I have lived the worst parts of my life in public, and now my band and I have made a relevant record.'

confused, lost, real place that I'm happy to no longer be in."

Ms. Love regained her footing through a renewed devotion to Buddhist chant and meditation and with the support of several life coaches and therapists. And, she said, she wants to stay in New York. "I can be in the real world here," she said. "Here I can participate in life."

She didn't record for several months after relocating, but her band mates noticed an immediate change of heart. "When I got to New York to sit in on some of her vocal sessions, it was like meeting a different person," Mr. Dailey said.

"In L.A. the record was one of many things she was doing," he added. "It was just another part of her personal life. She used to have five or six people at the studio every day waiting to have meetings with her about movie deals, about her finances. In New York she made her personal life a nonissue. She became a member of the band, just like the rest of us."

And Mr. Beinhorn was impressed by the finished songs. "She's the person you can never count out," he said of Ms. Love. "She has the ability to come from way behind and do something that is really important. Once I started to hear the mixes of what we had worked, on I realized that this is a

ONLINE: MORE ON...

Previous coverage of Courtney Love and Hole, and a link to music from the band's new album:

nytimes.com/music