

DOWN IN HOLE

Alice In Chains was the one grunge band out of Seattle that had genuine metal roots. But having evolved to develop their own unique sound, they then went on to create that scene's best album, 1992's harrowing 'Dirt'. *Howard Johnson* uncovers how lead singer Layne Staley's heavy drug addiction was central to their powerful art, to the original group's wretched demise, and to his sad and untimely death...

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO SEPARATE Alice In Chains' music in their heyday from the destructive lifestyles of the people who made it, especially their first singer, Layne Staley. Never in 40 years of writing about rock music have I come across a group whose art was such a brutally honest reflection of the lives the band members were leading. Much of the traditional metal music Staley, Jerry Cantrell, Sean Kinney and Mike Starr grew up on was based on fantasy. For some reason, though, Alice In Chains turned inward, pulling out some of the darkest human emotions and marrying them to harsh, sludge-like riffs.

Fuelled in many ways by vocalist Staley's insatiable desire for drugs and a horrific heroin habit that would kill him at the age of just 34, the AIC message was undeniably nihilistic. Yet the music the band made in the decade between 1990 and 2000 somehow connected with millions of disenfranchised souls, turning the Seattle group into a multi-platinum, chart-topping act. None of this seemed to help the members find any personal happiness, though. Staley's addiction to heroin meant he became increasingly reclusive and unable to produce creative work. The last two studio recordings he laid down with the band – songs titled 'Get Born Again' and 'Died' – were made as early as 1998, four years before the singer passed away in 2002.

"He was the focal point, like singers are," said drummer Sean Kinney in a 2011 interview with *Drum* magazine. "So

they'd single him out. But the truth was, it was pretty much everybody. I definitely had my hand firmly on the wheel going off the cliff. And the reason we pulled back... we did that because we love each other and we didn't want to die in public... If we were to have continued I wouldn't have made it. I just wouldn't have."

DESPITE HAVING his own problems Kinney did indeed make it, as did guitarist and main songwriter Jerry Cantrell. Bassist Mike Starr wasn't so fortunate. He died of a prescription drug overdose after a long history of serious narcotic abuse, 18 years after being sacked from Alice in Chains back in 1993. The band had continued with Starr's replacement Mike Inez, but went on hiatus in 1996 when a tour with Kiss was cut short after Staley overdosed on heroin and was hospitalised. Staley appeared onstage with Alice In Chains for the last time on 3 July 1996 in Kansas City, Missouri. It would take 10 years before the band would replace Staley with former Comes With The Fall vocalist William DuVall. "It's completely a reunion," stated Cantrell at the time. "Because the three of us who are left are back together. But it's not about separating and forgetting. It's about remembering and moving on."

Since the first album to feature the line-up of Cantrell, DuVall, Kinney and Inez, 'Black Gives Way To Blue', was released in 2009, Alice In Chains have issued a further

two studio albums, 2013's 'The Devil Put Dinosaurs Here' and 2018's 'Rainier Fog', thereby matching the studio album output with Staley. Cantrell says he quit drugs a year after Staley's death in 2002 and the quality of the music AIC have made since DuVall came on board gives the lie to the notion that people are at their most creative when they're f*cked up. Yet despite that, it still can't be denied that the band's magnum opus is 'Dirt', their second album from 1992. It was the last recording to feature the original line-up of Staley, Cantrell, Kinney and Starr, sold five million copies and is still the best-selling Alice In Chains album. 'Dirt' is a creative masterpiece, in my opinion the finest work from the much-vaunted grunge era, and a record that is surely the most brutally honest depiction of addiction ever laid down. Yet given the band members' musical backgrounds, it's hard to believe they could ever have made such a deeply nihilistic musical statement...

WHILE THEIR Seattle grunge contemporaries Pearl Jam, Nirvana and Soundgarden had a barely disguised contempt for the glam/hair metal scene that had exploded in North America in the mid-'80s, the roots of Alice In Chains can be found right there. In 1984 Layne Staley – who was going by the name of Layne Elmer – was an aspiring drummer turned wannabe vocalist. His stepbrother Ken Elmer attended Shorewood High School in Shoreline, Washington State, around 12 miles from Seattle, where a glam band called Sleze was taking baby steps. Knowing that Sleze were looking for a vocalist Elmer suggested Layne, even though even he wasn't convinced that his stepbrother was the greatest singer. When Layne auditioned, as far as anyone can remember by singing Mötley Crüe's 'Looks That Kill', the members of Sleze disagreed with Ken Elmer. Drummer James Bergstrom told David de Sola, a journalist who published a book, *Alice In Chains The Untold Story*