

Love's Story

The combative singer-actress embarks on a legal skirmish with her record label that may change what it means to be a rock star. Oh, and she also has some choice words about her late husband's bandmates, her newfound ancestry, Russell Crowe, Angelina Jolie...

By [Holly Millea](#) | Mar 25, 2002



Image credit: Courtney Love Photographs by Jean Baptiste Mondino

COURTNEY LOVE IS IN A LIMOUSINE TAKING HER FROM Los Angeles to Desert Hot Springs on a detox mission. "I've been on a bit of a bender after 9/11," she admits. "I've got a lot of s--- in me. I weigh 147 pounds." Which is why she's checking into the We Care colonic spa for five days of fasting. Slumped low in the seat, the 37-year-old actress and lead singer of Hole is wearing baggy faded jeans, a brown pillared sweater, and Birkenstock sandals, her pink toenails twinkling with rhinestones. On her head is a wool knit hat

that looks like something she found on the street. Last night she sat for three hours while her auburn hair extensions were unglued and cut out. "See?" Love says, pulling the cap off. "I look like a Dr. Seuss character on chemo." She does. Her hair is short and tufty and sticking out in all directions. It's a disaster. Love smiles a sad, self-conscious smile and covers up again. Lighting a cigarette, she asks, "Why are we doing this story? I don't have a record or a movie to promote. So I guess this is a think piece." She shakes her head. "God, what was I thinking?"

The singer/actress/provocateur doesn't have an album to push or a film to plug or lemonade to sell, but she does have a potentially precedent-setting personal and political cause to promote. Love is suing Universal Music Group to break her contract. A win could add ammunition to an ongoing fight to change the way the music industry conducts business. As it stands now, major labels issue contracts based on the number of albums (usually five or seven) rather than the number of years, essentially owning an artist for most of his or her career. Love's complaint? Under California's labor laws, no one except a recording artist can be forced to sign a personal services contract that lasts longer than seven years. "What that means," Love says, "is that every seven years every single artisan in California can redo their contracts except for us." Record executives placate their most successful stars by renegotiating their contracts for more money.

Love was doing that dance with Interscope Records after she delivered 1994's platinum CD *Live Through This* and 1998's lesser-selling *Celebrity Skin*. She felt *Skin* suffered from a lack of marketing support "and it p---ed me off," says the singer, who informed the label that she would not record another CD. In January 2000 UMG filed a lawsuit seeking damages for five undelivered albums. Love countersued 13 months later, charging among other things that her contract with UMG label Interscope was invalid because, technically, she had never signed with them. Hole cut a 1992 deal with Geffen Records, known for nurturing mercurial talents like Love's late husband, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana. But through a series of buyouts and megamergers, Geffen was

absorbed into UMG, putting Hole under Interscope's control. "They f--- career artists," Love claims. "Doug Morris [UMG's chairman and CEO] and Jimmy Iovine [Interscope's head] have always done business one way: Throw it out there and see what sticks. Pop hits that come and go--that's what they like. The first billing on Interscope Records was Gerardo. 'Rico Suave!'"

Love feels empowered in her quest to become a free agent by the recent discovery that she has Jewish ancestry, which includes a certain Hollywood legend. Love's mother, therapist Linda Carroll, was adopted by a wealthy San Francisco family but later learned her birth mother is 78-year-old literary sensation Paula Fox, daughter of '30s screenwriter Paul Fox and wife Elsie. (Paul Fox was a first cousin of Douglas Fairbanks Sr.) "Looking at the strength of Jewish actors, Jewish entertainers, and Jewish executives, and knowing that my bloodline is part of that, gives me a kind of strength," she explains. "Think about their positive contributions in this culture: Unionizing? Jews. Leftyism? Jews. So to be part of that--the Norma Rae of it--gives me confidence. Sitting in a room with Doug Morris and the business-affairs people at [UMG], they're not looking at me thinking, Crazy goy. They're thinking, Banzai Jew!"

IT'S ONE WEEK BEFORE LOVE'S LIMO TRIP TO THE SPA. "Sweetie! Darling!" blares from a big television in the master bedroom of her L.A. home. The singer, draped across the arms of a cushy oversize chair, has her eyes on Absolutely Fabulous, with a cigarette in one hand, a glass of white wine in the other, and a cell phone shouldered to her ear. She is oblivious to the stylist stringing pearls through her hair and the makeup artist armed with red lipstick playing catch-as-catch-can with her mouth. A toddler would sooner hold still. Jim Barber, Love's boyfriend and music manager, pads stocking-footed into the room to see if she's ready. It's just after 7 o'clock, and the duo are scheduled to attend the Vanilla Sky premiere, which starts at 7:30. "You're wearing that suit?" Love asks, eyeing his Richard Tyler pinstripes. Barber, 38, is slight and sandy-haired handsome, with dark circles under his eyes. Love twirls her finger: "Give me a butt shot." He turns and lifts his jacket. "Okay, the

ass looks good," she says approvingly. "Now let me see the front." He turns again, opens the jacket, rolls his eyes skyward. "Honey," Love says, waving her hand as if directing traffic, "move your package over to the other side."

Love gets up in search of shoes. "Dean!" she calls out to one of her two assistants, Dean Mathison. "Bring me my diamond earrings--the big honkers!" She moves into the large bathroom and envelops herself in a concoction of Diorissimo, Fracas, and L'Heure Bleue, or, as she calls it, "Le Whore Bleue." A moment later she's sitting on the toilet urinating, her dress hiked up, her long milky legs spread, with Mathison on his knees between them, putting the diamonds in her pierced ears. "Dean's seen it before," Love says, laughing. "When I was a street kid in Portland I used to sleep on his floor." "I had no problem sharing the floor, the couch, the bed with Miss Love," replies Mathison, a gentle, obviously patient man, who first met her in his gay nightclub, Metropolis. She had just returned to Portland, Ore., after three years in juvenile detention centers, and she was dependent on the kindness of strangers. He has been kind to her ever since.

A limousine idles in front of Love's \$6 million Beverly Hills mansion, formerly the residence of movie producer and Muppets heiress Lisa Henson. Catercorner to Love's home is the house where Billy Bob Thornton and Angelina Jolie live. Love was in contention to costar in Winona Ryder's *Girl, Interrupted*. In the end, Jolie won the role--and the Oscar. "Once she walked in the door, all bets were off," says Love. "It definitely had a little gold man attached to the part.... [Winona] is a good friend now, and I think she sort of revised history that if I'd have done it, she'd have gotten her Oscar...because I would have shared." Sashaying toward the limo, Love waves in the dark to her famous neighbors. The lights are out, and nobody's home.

At the premiere, Love can't sit still. More than once, she sneaks behind the theater's heavy velvet drapes for a nicotine fix, watching the Cameron Crowe film through a crack in the curtain, sending plumes of smoke over the audience. (She smokes a lot, sometimes using the end of one cigarette to

light another.) As the end credits roll, the stars are taken to the premiere party upstairs in a loading dock elevator and escorted through a kitchen to avoid the press. It is a big-deal bash, with the usual Hollywood suspects rubbernecking the Cruise-Cruz costars Tom and Penélope. Unguarded, director Crowe graciously greets the well-wishers and wannabe actresses who sidle, squeeze, and slither up to him showing cast me! cleavage.

A close friend of Crowe's, Love is seated at his table, alongside the director's wife, Heart's Nancy Wilson, and his mother, Alice. "My mom had an instant connection with Courtney: 'I see that girl clearly, there's real pain in that girl, real passion,'" says Crowe. "My mom definitely acted on her instincts, and now Courtney is the extra sister/daughter." And like any sibling, she has her issues. "I love him so much. But he's got to say hi to the last f---ing waiter. He's like Cruise that way. He's got to make every single person feel important. I have so many friends like that--Drew [Barrymore]--and they just exhaust me. I mean, I'm a rock star: I was here, I was gracious, I was nice, I ate the potatoes--love you, babe, let's go! Not to be selfish or nasty, but to have to stay and make sure everybody likes you is like running for office. Russell [Crowe] doesn't have to do it. Mick Jagger doesn't have to do it. And goddamn it, I don't have to do it."

Love used to see the volatile, gifted actor as a kind of kindred spirit. "Russell is a really interesting and dark guy," Love says. "Even just holding his hand I get shivers. He goes through hell. But I don't know if he's seen as many dead bodies as I have." They were friends until the tabloids reported a liaison the night of the Golden Globe Awards last year. "We didn't f---," Love says. "We hung out, wrote crazy lyrics and poetry, drank tequila. And we had a nice thing about wanting to be friends. And then that tabloid stuff happened."

Crowe criticized Love in an ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY interview for not making it clear that he wasn't the father of the baby she miscarried last May. Says Love sadly: "That really hurt my feelings. Here I am having a miscarriage with Jim's baby, and Russell's worried about his image." Even so,

"I want to be friends with him." She laughs. "And I demand an apology!" Crowe's response to the tabloid rumors hurt Love in ways that only teenage girls can understand. "It made me feel like ugly Courtney," Love says. "You know, Ben Affleck went on a talk show and said he made out with me at a party, and there's nothing further from the truth. Did I issue a press release saying we didn't f---? It's embarrassing that Russell was embarrassed." She pauses. "Am I a sexual pariah?"

When she doesn't have red lipstick smeared all over her face and she's walking a straight line, Love is, in fact, a highly seductive proposition. "She's a hot mama and so charismatic," says Cameron Diaz, her *Feeling Minnesota* costar. "I love her blatant honesty." Diaz hesitates. "Sometimes I worry about her, because I feel like, in some ways, it's self-destructive." ("I know, I know," Love says. "My shrink keeps telling me I should be honest, not candid.") But it's hard to be just honest when you know being candid gets you so much extra mileage. "Would Courtney be the engaging person she is if her nature was checked?" director Baz Luhrmann asks, knowing the answer. He experienced Love's force of nature for better and for worse when he "genuinely considered" casting her in *Moulin Rouge*. ("She blew me away with her comic abilities and dangerous intelligence," Luhrmann recalls.) Months later, after Nicole Kidman got the part, the director needed Love's permission to do a cover version of Nirvana's iconic "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Says Luhrmann: "Without Courtney that sequence wouldn't be in the film. She set her personal disappointment aside. And that's a big expression of her integrity and character."

Even after that, Love couldn't resist a little name-calling. While playing a concert in Luhrmann's native Australia, she referred to Kidman as an "ice queen." Like so many others she has tweaked, Luhrmann brushed it off with the common refrain "That's just Courtney." After the public dissing, Courtney being Courtney, she sent him a package of notes and photographs that she thought he could use as inspiration for his film. Whether you're in or out of her good graces, Love "is not mean," says Carrie Fisher. "A little self-absorbed,

but what actor isn't? She's not intentionally a bitch. She'll react. She can be demanding. But that's still not mean." Fisher, who first met Love at an Oscar rehearsal, adds: "She is superambitious, which could lead her anywhere--including into trouble."

All of Fisher's observations are illustrated in the other major lawsuit Love is currently waging. In September 2001, she sued Nirvana's surviving members--Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic--to break up the limited-liability corporation they'd formed with her in 1997, which made them equal partners in the lucrative Nirvana business. Love wants complete control of the catalog and makes the claim that "her judgment was significantly impaired" at the time she signed the contract.

In an open letter, Grohl and Novoselic accused Love of acting for her own financial gain. Since their first release, in 1989, Nirvana have generated an estimated \$500 million in sales worldwide. Like Hole, Nirvana were on Geffen, which means the Nirvana catalog is now with UMG--the very company Love is suing to break her personal recording contract. Critics feel that Love is using the catalog as leverage for an even better record deal for herself, and that her stance of wanting to free artists from a kind of indentured servitude through her suit against UMG is just convenience.

Love denies this, but she does fess up to being capable of manipulation. "Of course I'm manipulative! Who's not?" she hollers, adding facetiously, "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm being candid, not honest."

"Kurt's death was so difficult for so long and Courtney got bad advice," says Barber, a former Geffen executive. "She feels she has a responsibility to her daughter and the rest of his surviving heirs. In reality, Nirvana was closer to being Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers or Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band. If Springsteen died tomorrow, should Max Weinberg have an equal say as to how his catalog is promoted and marketed?"

When Love learned Grohl and Novoselic were countersuing her, she said, "F--- this! I own Nirvana. Bottom line, 75 percent of the f---ing thing is mine, and you can't do s--- with it without me." Love proved her power when she blocked the sale of a Nirvana boxed set last Christmas, which included a previously unreleased song. "When Kurt died he left behind a collection of music that is mind-blowing," she says. "These are really insane, beautiful songs. The point is, I have the Holy Grail of rock & roll." Love sits back with a so there! smile.

It's the day after the Sky premiere. Love is sitting in her private screening room, her knees pulled up under her slip dress, watching the 1948 classic *The Red Shoes*, one of her favorite films. "It's a metaphor for fame and addiction," Love says. "She puts on the red shoes and she can't stop dancing. She dances until she dies."

The sound of a deep, phlegmy cough can be heard outside the door. "I hear the cough of my daughter," Love says, calling out. "What is that bronchial coughing? Come in, Francesca!" The door flies open and Frances Bean runs over to her mother and sits in her lap, wrapping her arms around her neck. The 9-year-old is clearly her father's daughter, with Cobain's intense blue eyes and dimpled chin.

"Oh, when is the coughing going to stop? When?" Love says in a cooing, concerned voice. "What's happening? Are we on the antibiotics? What's going on? When was the last time you saw the doctor?"

"Last week."

"What did he say?" Love asks. "Nothing in the chest X ray?"

"He said it was fine. He said there was nothing wrong with them."

"Well," Love says, rocking Frances back and forth. "I only smoke in here and in my bedroom, so that's kind of good. I had some incense burning the other day. No more incense. Are you okay at school? Are your teachers

concerned? Do you have your Kleenex and stuff for when you cough stuff up?
How many times has it happened today?"

"Twelve."

"You have to spit it up and not swallow your phlegm," her mother says.
"You've got to stop that. You know what's nice?" Love stands up and puts her hands on her hips. "Handkerchiefs! Sexy old handkerchiefs. Like Winona [Ryder] and I got at the lace show. I think I have some that are really pretty and have lace on them. Frances, you've got to blow the nose."

"Where's Jim, Mommy?"

"He's in New York."

"Why?"

"He's doing business."

Frances has grown attached to Barber since he met Love more than three years ago while Hole were recording their last album. At the time, Barber was married. (He and ex-wife Lesley have two children.) He declines to comment on his divorce, but Love doesn't. "He was sleeping in the basement!" Love claims. "She positioned herself as this Oprah-audience-member martyr." The divorce was not without high drama. Love filed a stalking and harassment suit against the former Mrs. Barber in December 2000, claiming Lesley had driven to Love's house and tried to run her over. (Lesley Barber's lawyer says "she denied any liability in the case," and that a confidential settlement is in the works.) "It was crazy!" Love says. "I was like, 'All right, look, if I poached your husband when you were having a good marriage, that would be one thing.' But the fact is I gave her a six-month warning. I called her and said, 'I really have the hots for your husband, and you're treating him like shit.' I've never poached anybody's f---ing guy!" She reconsiders: "Maybe a one-nighter here and there." Love takes a drag off her cigarette and exhales wearily. "How you go from a woman with a degree in library sciences to me, I can't explain."

NEXT TO THE BEDS OF THE KIDS AT THE SKIPWORTH Juvenile Detention Center in Eugene, Ore., were clipboards stating the names and phone numbers of parents to contact in case of an emergency. Courtney Love's read, "Whereabouts of parents unknown." She knew where they were, but she didn't want anyone else to know. The 13-year-old convicted shoplifter was afraid that if it were discovered she had a healthy trust fund from her mother's adoptive parents, she would have to leave.

Love's mother got pregnant by Love's father, Hank Harrison, a Grateful Dead follower with whom Courtney has no contact. While her birth certificate reads Love Michelle Harrison, Love says her mother always called her Courtney, after the heroine in *Chocolates for Breakfast*, a 1956 pulp romance novel about a teenager whose mother is a has-been actress living at the Chateau Marmont in Los Angeles. Love pulls the book from a shelf and reads from the jacket in a melodramatic tone: "Courtney had a need for love that drove her on a frantic and hectic pursuit of an unattainable ideal!"

Less than a year after Love was born, her parents divorced, and Carroll embraced the '60s lifestyle, living in New Zealand with her daughter. "She didn't really want me around," Love says. "And I didn't want to be around her." Eventually, Love found a more structured life by stealing her way into Skipworth. According to a 1994 *Us* magazine story, a social worker filed a report with Oregon Children's Services in 1980 stating "Courtney...repeatedly asks for authorities to find her a 'home.' It is apparent that Courtney has been in search of the family life she has been deprived of for so many years."

Once out on her own, Love led an itinerant existence stripping, acting, and punk-rocking her way from Portland to Dublin to Hong Kong to Minneapolis to San Francisco to Los Angeles. By the early '80s she was living in Malibu with her "first real boyfriend," Jeff Mann, and dabbling in drugs. After Mann broke up with her, Love moved in with his mother, Bernadene Morgan, a Hollywood costume designer (*Mommie Dearest*). "I found her effortless to love," says Morgan, who encouraged Love's interest in acting and began dropping her off

at cattle calls. (It was then that she changed her name to Courtney Love and soon was cast in Sid & Nancy.) "It's such massive imprinting when you've been cast off at a vulnerable time in your life. The more you think deeply about that injustice--which Courtney has the mind to do--the deeper the cut. When you're young and being damaged there's nothing you can do except be in it, live through it right now. Courtney became deeply disturbed by 'How am I going to pull up this plane?'"

That kind of survival is Love's great inheritance. In Paula Fox's memoir, *Borrowed Finery*, the singer's grandmother details her own difficult childhood, distant parents, and her ambivalence toward them. Love met her famous relation at tea once, but, afterward, in a March 2001 *New York Times Magazine* article, Fox said she found Courtney's language "dreadful." "That really p---ed me off," Love says. "Well, I don't understand yours! She looked like Gwyneth Paltrow's auntie.... She had no idea who I was or what I did and didn't want to know."

Love is also essentially estranged from her mother. A few weeks later, hearing of an attempt to reach Carroll, Love leaves the following answering machine message: "Hey, it's me," she says, her voice both sad and anxious, "let's not scare my scary mother, because she's scary, okay?... I have to deal with legal insanity today. UMG, they are following me around using some guy in a black SUV, and it's terrifying, and I feel like Jeffrey f---ing Wigand.... Listen to me being paranoid, dude. [Laughs] I've been taking pictures of the car for court. I think they're trying to bug me. You have to remember a lot of the music business ends up in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, where the Sopranos really come from, so there's an aspect that's frightening, about as frightening as my mom...." (UMG says it has "possibly had people running from her but not following her.")

LOVE TAPS ON THE LIMOUSINE'S GLASS DIVIDER, WHICH IS marked with a big "no smoking" sticker, and asks the driver for a match. The limo is strewn with a duffel bag, books, a carton of cigarettes, and her guitar. Along

with writing songs and waging war on the music front, Love is fighting to keep her movie career on track. Since her Golden Globe-nominated performance in *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, Love appeared in 1999's *Man on the Moon*. She has a role in Sony's upcoming thriller *Trapped* with Kevin Bacon, and has also been cast in a movie as the real-life Victoria Woodhull--the first woman to run for President. And she's still trying to get a Janis Joplin project going: "I'm no spring chicken. So if I don't play Janis now, I'll be almost 10 years older than the woman when she died."

But so far the more important roles have eluded her. Love remains undeterred. She nudged Cameron Crowe to contact director Brad Silberling--whom he'd never met--to read her for a role in *Goodbye, Hello*. "Courtney did some shrewd lobbying. I went to her house and our first meeting lasted five hours. It's a movie about love that emerges after a death," says Silberling, who was dating actress Rebecca Schaeffer when she was murdered.

"Discussing [the movie] led to a more personal discussion. And before we knew it both of us were cracked wide open and crying." Silberling went with an unknown, but Love's now a friend--something he didn't expect. "Courtney's rep preceded her: a complete pile driver, human carnivore," Silberling says. "People have a need and put an effort into making her responsible for Kurt's death. They're angry and they have to put it somewhere. It's a lot to carry. And Frances has her own pressure being the daughter of this cultural icon."

Courtney says her daughter aspires to be an equine veterinarian (she named her horse Charisma). But she could well take after her parents. "She's got a five-octave voice," Love says, proudly. "And she's been in two school plays--*Cinderella* and *Rumpelstiltskin*. She's got range.... You know Kurt was enamored of Hollywood. He was going to do a part in *The New Age* with Judy Davis. He was entranced by the whole Hollywood thing. He courted [director] Gus Van Sant.... Nobody had any idea because they all had this picture of St. Kurt the Unambitious. But it's like, Oh, God, please! He's more ambitious than Ashley Judd on latte!"

A road sign up ahead: In-N-Out Burger, one half mile. "I'm starving," Love says, pushing a button to lower the glass between her and the driver. "Excuse me, sir," she says. "I want to stop at the In-N-Out Burger." Love figures it will be her last supper before five days of fasting and colonics. "What difference does it make?" she reasons. "Tomorrow morning it'll be in and out of me."

Turning into the fast-food joint's parking lot, the driver informs her that the limousine is too big for the drive-through. "Are you going inside?" he asks. "No," Love replies. "You're going inside. We'll take two cheeseburgers, two fries, and two large Cokes."

Asked what their lives would be like if Cobain were alive, Love replies, "I don't think we'd still be together." She stares out the window into the empty parking lot. "But I'd have found him a good wife. I'm good at that. I get along with my ex-boyfriends. Edward [Norton] loves/hates me. But I did dump him, so it's gotta be tough. He still has mine and Kurt's marriage bed. I should get that back. Jeff Mann dumped me, and after that I said, 'I'm never getting dumped again.' Well, if you consider a suicide getting dumped, which I guess it is, getting dumped on an epic level."

Love split Cobain's ashes with his mother, but he has yet to be put to rest. "I can't get Kurt buried anywhere," Love says. "No graveyard in Seattle wants him. Although many in Hollywood do. They like that kind of tourism."

After five hours on the road, not five minutes away from We Care, Love changes her mind and tells the driver to turn around. "It's too late to go to the We Care spa tonight," she says. Dialing information, she calls the Ritz in Rancho Mirage. "It's Courtney Love," she says. "I'm in the neighborhood and I'd like to book a luxury suite for tonight. Do you have a masseuse available? No? Then open the yellow pages and get a certified masseuse to come in and let's hope it's not a crazy old hooker or something."

The limo pulls up to the hotel. The door opens. And out steps "a Dr. Seuss character on chemo." But she doesn't care. She smiles back at the stares,

lights a cigarette, and strolls through the lobby to the front desk, where the clerk, as instructed, is scanning the yellow pages.

As in all things Courtney Love, nothing winds up what, when, or where you expected it to--not least of which is her lineage. "Douglas Fairbanks is my great-uncle. And if you think that I'm going to f---ing let the fact that I'm the great-niece of one of the first movie stars go down unnoticed, you are out of your f---ing tree, thank you very much!" declares Love. (Technically speaking, he's her first cousin thrice removed, but the two are nonetheless related.) "Finally I got a little pedigree. Because if you're a rock star, of course you walked out from the trailer. But I didn't. I walked out from being institutionalized by the state of Oregon, and a mother being extremely wealthy and not really wanting me around. And I didn't want to be around her." (Carroll's comment to EW: "I'm sure that's what she felt...and that's for her to tell and not me.") Despite the disconnect between Love and her maternal relatives, they do connect her with the heritage that she believes will level the legal playing field: "I want to put a Star of David on my head. Do you know why? That makes them know that I can win. I'm one of them. I'm a member of the tribe."

Should Love win her lawsuit, more than her bloodline will tie her to Hollywood history. More than 50 years ago, Olivia de Havilland sued Warner Bros. to free herself from a long-oppressive contract and won, upending the old studio system and inspiring a legal statute--known as the de Havilland law--which, yes, limits entertainment contracts to no more than seven years. Parallels aside, it's hard to imagine de Havilland ever calling anyone a "wanking, wig-wearing, coke-snorting piece of s---." But Courtney is Courtney. "I don't want it to be known as the de Havilland law anymore. I want it to be the Love law!"

(Additional reporting by Joshua Rich)

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