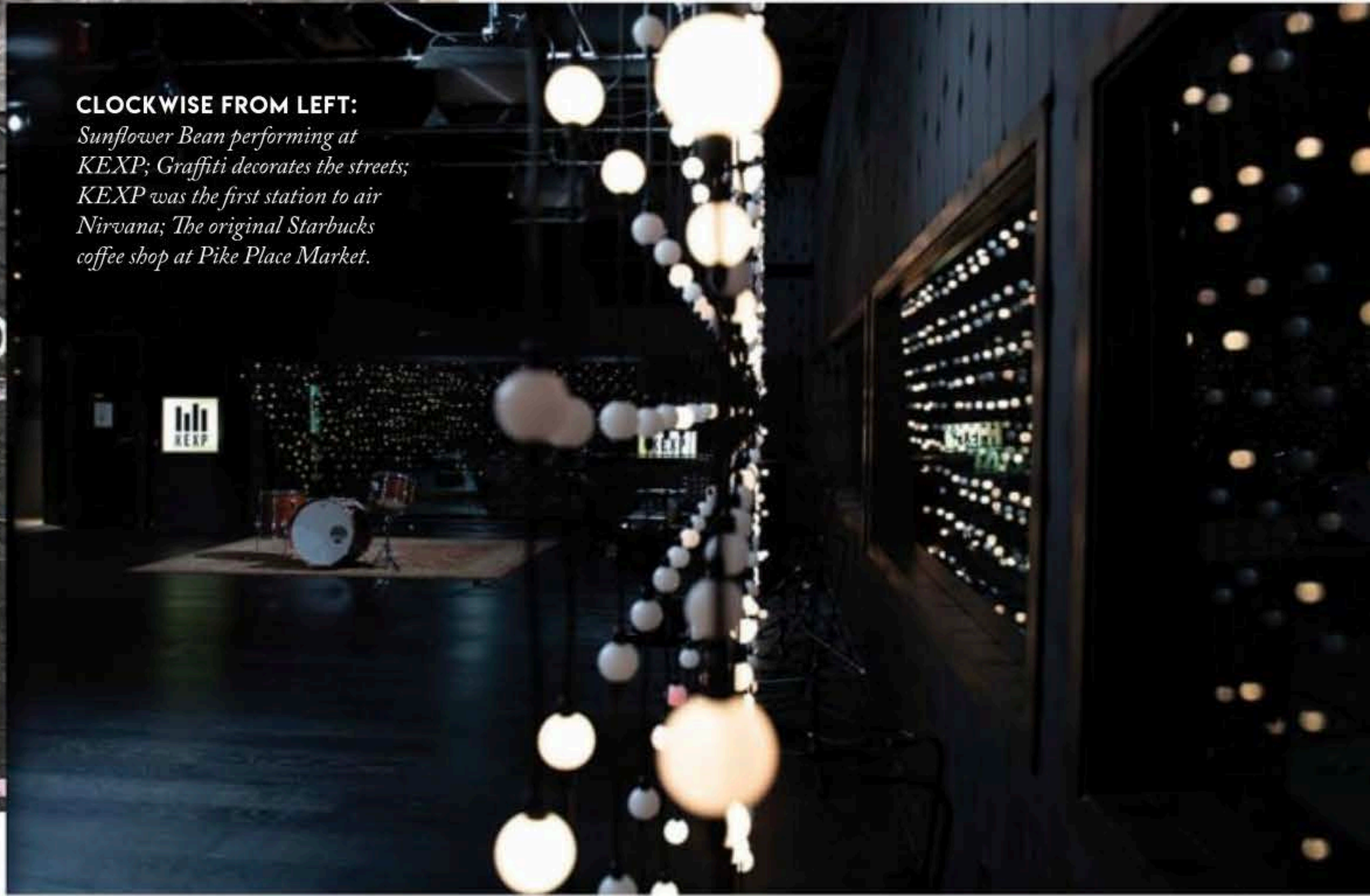




**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:**  
*Sunflower Bean performing at KEXP; Graffiti decorates the streets; KEXP was the first station to air Nirvana; The original Starbucks coffee shop at Pike Place Market.*



# RAW expression

FROM COFFEE BARS TO GRUNGE AND GUITARS, THERE'S SOMETHING BREWING IN SEATTLE. IVY CARRUTH PLUGS INTO THE SCENE.



50  
 Greatest  
 Travel  
 Experiences  
 39

Countercultural Seattleites in America's Pacific Northwest have never been for the mainstream. And that's exactly how they like it. From the anti-establishment noise behind the coffee revolution to the birth of grunge – a new style of music born from disenchantment in the 1980s – both have been intrinsic to Seattle's cool-kids vibe, no matter how old the said kids happen to be.

But what do these two seemingly unrelated aspects of most societies – coffee and music – really have in common? In this case, both represent the ethos of a generation seeking authenticity and raw expression and are products of an era that valued the alternative and the underground. It couldn't have happened anywhere but Seattle. At the time, the two offered a distinct contrast to the polished and commercialised trends of the time. But nowadays, these cultural enclaves reside well beyond the fringe and inside the milieu of the modern.

Gen-X favourites Soundgarden, Nirvana and Pearl Jam got their start in Seattle when the storied indie radio station KEXP debuted the artists on air. It's a public station beholden to no advertisers, so it can well afford to be radical and flip the proverbial bird at mainstream conformity. A US\$3 million donation from Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen in 2001, the first of several, helped in this regard, ensuring the beloved Seattle stalwart stayed true to its roots and had the independence to do so. Making a sound for itself, Seattle's music scene is still synonymous with the angsty lyrics and political stances it espouses via riffing commentary belted out through mumbling lips.

PHOTOGRAPHY: NATAWORRY PHOTOGRAPHY (KEXP); IVY CARRUTH (CAFE VITA, T-SHIRT WALL, STARBUCKS EMPLOYEE); GRAFFITI: ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/TRINITY MIRROR/MIRRORPIX (KURT COBAIN); SIMON CRUMPTON (STARBUCKS); DENNIS K. JOHNSON (PUBLIC MARKET SIGN); TETRA IMAGES/LLC (COFFEE BEANS)



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** *There are plenty of records to sift through; In the KEXP Gathering Space; Much like music, coffee encapsulates culture; Kurt Cobain is an icon of the city; Seattle oozes a cool-kid vibe; A neon coffee sign at sunset; Your local coffee haunt is a part of your identity; And every local has their favourite.*

Even today, aspirants in expensive culottes and ironic tees come to the welcoming Uptown Arts District headquarters to drop off their warbling demo tapes in the hopes of snagging the attention of someone who can get them on air. Locals and visitors hang out here, where the prerequisite vinyl record store holds court beside what else – a slickly urban coffee shop. A lucky 70 people who've arrived early enough to get a ticket are granted access to observe Live Sessions where bands play mini-concerts that are recorded for streaming; it's free, of course. (Did I mention that KEXP is non-profit? How very Seattle of it.)

Across town, the scene is, well, scenic. When the very first Starbucks was born here in 1971, the java ethos turbocharged into less of a dock worker's pick-me-up and more of an ethical and inexpensive 'organic' drink that suited the tastes of contrarians. Artisans upped their game with new pedigreed beans, foam art and barrel-infused blends and all of the hip and happening flocked to it. Entrepreneurs could enter the market with relative ease and, in the days before social media, word of mouth was everything. Coffee was suddenly as ubiquitous as Doc Martens and transcended socioeconomic status, exactly like music does. You can bet that every local has their favourite cafe, and their selection is no less a form of virtue signalling than their political party affiliation is. There's something for everyone, from the plant-forward offerings at ROOT in Ballard, lively lattes with a side of social justice at The Station in Beacon Hill and the unpretentious (but misleadingly straightforward) simple espresso at Espresso Vivace in Capitol Hill. In Seattle, your coffee shop is who you are.

The non-conformist dissidents who kicked off Seattle's caffeine revolution were the same ones welcoming the mavericks in music who would bring grunge to the world.

But, hey, if you're not into the bean juice and you prefer your music a bit more manufactured, as Kurt Cobain sang, *"Oh well, whatever, Nevermind"*. ☐

