

The suicide of Linkin Park's Chester Bennington (1976-2017)

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4 August 2017

On July 20, Chester Bennington, singer, songwriter and frontman for alternative rock group Linkin Park, committed suicide at his home in Palos Verdes Estates, California.

Bennington, 41 years old, was confirmed dead by hanging on July 21 by the Los Angeles County coroner. According to reports, there was no evidence of substance abuse, although half a bottle of alcohol was present. His tragic death occurred on what would have been the 53rd birthday of singer-songwriter--and his close friend--Chris Cornell, who died two months previously also from suicide by hanging.

Bennington was one of Linkin Park's two vocalists, along with Mike Shinoda. He had also been lead singer for Dead by Sunrise and had fronted Stone Temple Pilots.

Bennington was due to begin the third part of the One More Light Tour--in support of the Linkin Park album of the same name--a week later in Mansfield, Massachusetts. He had completed the second, European leg of the tour in Birmingham (UK) July 6. A video for the second single, "Talking to Myself," from the band's seventh album was released barely hours after his death.

Bennington grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, born to nurse Susan Elaine Johnson and police detective Lee Russell Bennington. After his parents divorced when he was 11, Bennington's father took custody of him--at which time he began drinking and doing drugs. Bennington was bullied at school. He also alleged, in 2008, that he suffered sexual abuse from an older friend between the age of seven and 13. Around this time, he began writing poetry and songs and became a fan of Stone Temple Pilots, the band fronted by Scott Weiland.

Bennington grew up at the end of the Cold War and reached adulthood a few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The cultural and political conditions in the US were difficult in many ways. Nirvana's Kurt Cobain committed suicide in April 1994.

Twelve months later, the Oklahoma City bombing, carried out by right-wing extremists, killed 168 people.

The music scene at the time was dominated by the early pioneers of rap and grunge.

The nu metal genre arrived in the mid-1990s as the grunge scene receded. The majority of the bands employed relatively new, or uncommon, techniques, including a mixture of harsh and rapped vocals, the use of turntables and DJs, as well as more groove/funk-oriented song structures often fairly syncopated and reliant on simplistic riffs.

Linkin Park was formed in 1999 and released their debut, *Hybrid Theory*, in 2000 to critical acclaim and commercial success.

Nu metal drew most of its often angst-ridden lyrical influence from the declining grunge scene, and the wider world that reflected. The majority of bands hailed from California (Bakersfield, Sacramento and Agoura Hills, for instance, as well as Los Angeles) and typically from urban working class or lower middle class backgrounds.

The scene developed varying levels of political consciousness in the post-9/11 period and especially with the onset of the Iraq War, which spawned a number of protest tracks from previously apolitical bands.

Linkin Park played a rather prominent part in bringing the nu metal genre into the limelight. *Hybrid Theory* is still the best-selling debut album of the 21st century and received the Diamond certification from the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in 2012, for selling over 10 million copies. The album's second single, "Crawling," won the band a Grammy in 2002.

Bennington was best known for his range, and his ability to combine anguish and pain in his singing along with screamed vocals. While *Hybrid Theory* and the follow-up, *Meteora*, could comfortably be labelled nu metal, the band dispensed with various hallmarks of the genre for their third record, *Minutes to Midnight*, released

in 2007. The album title draws its inspiration from the Doomsday clock, maintained by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Science and Security Board. The closer the clock is to midnight, the closer the world is to nuclear and ecological catastrophe.

The album drew out more of the band's politically conscious lyrics including those in the track, "Hands Held High," performed by Shinoda:

risk something/take back what's yours
say something they might attack you for
cause I'm sick of being treated like I have before
like it's stupid standing for what I'm standing for
like this war's really just a different brand of war
like it doesn't cater to rich and abandon poor.

Later in the song, the lyrics make reference to the phrase of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, "When the rich wage war, it's the poor who die."

The following song, "No More Sorrow," has these lines, delivered by Bennington:

are you lost/in your lies
Do you tell yourself I don't realize
Your crusades a disguise
Replaced freedom with fear/you trade money for lives
I'm aware of what you've done

The bridge of the song has Bennington repeating the words "thieves and hypocrites" three times; he draws out the last "hypocrites" with a scream.

On their 2010 follow-up album, *A Thousand Suns*, Linkin Park used excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time for Breaking Silence," and Berkeley Free Speech Movement activist Mario Savio's "Operation of the Machine" speech from 1964.

The title of the album is taken from comments by theoretical physicist Robert Oppenheimer, who said that witnessing the first artificial nuclear explosion in 1945 reminded him of a verse from the Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita*: "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the mighty one ..."

The band's fifth album, *Living Things* (2012), saw a development of electronic elements along with a "poppier" sound. Their sixth album, *Hunting Party* (2014), took a twofold step, reintroducing some of the grittier edge of the nu metal era, while holding onto the band's more distinctive electronic and softer elements.

In their songs, Linkin Park have, to varying degrees, taken an anti-war stance. Also, their "green" credentials were displayed prominently with the Projekt Revolution

tours, which the band founded and headlined whereby a donation of \$1 was made to the American Forests charity for every ticket sold and other ecological initiatives undertaken. Unsurprisingly perhaps, Bennington came out in support of Hillary Clinton in 2016, asserting that Donald Trump was "a greater threat to the USA than terrorists."

Linkin Park's last album, *One More Light*, fared badly with critics and fans alike. The marked move towards electronic pop caused a backlash, which saw Bennington deeply resentful in interviews about accusations of "selling out."

The album was released two days after Chris Cornell's death. The suicide of such a close friend evidently had a serious impact on Bennington. He found it difficult to complete his performance of the song, "One More Light," dedicated to Cornell, when the album was released. The emotion is plain to see in the video.

In his last interview before committing suicide, Bennington discussed at some length his life-long struggle with depression. The theme of such internal turmoil was one of the most persistent in Linkin Park's 18-year existence and something that the song "Heavy" from their latest album continues to convey. The chorus goes:

I'm holding on
Why is everything so heavy?
Holding on
To so much more than I can carry
I keep dragging around what's bringing me down
If I just let go, I'd be set free.

Chester Bennington gained considerable fame and fortune during his lifetime, supposedly the goal of every American. Linkin Park has sold over 75 million albums and singles worldwide. However, getting caught up in the US entertainment industry, especially successfully so, can often be a crushing, excruciating experience. For a psychologically vulnerable personality, the pressures are only that much more intense, sometimes unbearable.

There are individual, private elements to every tragedy, but the untimely deaths of Cornell and Bennington must surely point to something especially bitter, disastrous and poisoned about the quality of American public life at the moment.



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