

Pearl Jam: Fjord Fiestas

Andrew Mueller, Melody Maker, 20 February 1992

Like Nirvana and Jane's Addiction before them, PEARL JAM look set to become this year's big US rock event. With Top 20 single 'Alive', they've already come from straight outta nowhere to capture critical approval and public imagination alike. This time next year, the Seattle-based band will be one of the biggest acts on the planet. ANDREW MUELLER joined the band on the road in Scandinavia, saw two astonishing concerts and talked to singer Eddie Vedder about American derangement.

I'VE NEVER SEEN anything like this. Saturday night in Oslo's Club Alaska, and your correspondent stands uneasily amid scenes suggesting rush hour at the New York Stock Exchange as choreographed by Caligula. The place is rammed, a mighty scrum of noise and chaos. Whichever way you turn, weave, duck or run for cover, fists are being exchanged as enthusiastically as various bodily fluids, wild-eyed faces smeared with blood and/or lipstick lurch fleetingly before you, glasses full of four-quid-a-pint lager are being lobbed about with random drunken abandon and, in front of the stage, a heaving, sweating moshpit swirls and chums under a continual hail of increasingly-acrobatic stagedivers. Digging myself into a nervous bridgehead behind a table at the back of the dancefloor, I've got a split toenail, a burnt hand, a rising swell above the right ear, and *I'm* trying to keep out of trouble.

And I'm thinking, Christ, it's gonna be hell in here when the band start playing...

"I was uh, a glorified gas station attendant. I mean, I used to tell my friends I was a security man. Which I guess I was, in as much as I guarded these gas pumps, ha ha..."

In the back of Pearl Jam's spacious tour bus, parked the next night outside the Pumpehuset venue in Copenhagen, Pearl Jam's singer, lyricist and reluctant stargazer Eddie Vedder is getting, in his customary, meandering manner, around to explaining how he ended up in front of a band that's nearing half a million sales in the States and is on the verge of stealing the zeitgeist that Nirvana ran off with last year and that Jane's Addiction hi-jacked the calendar year before that. Pearl Jam have the heart and horns to matter so much to so many. Pearl Jam are going to be enormous.

"Uh," shrugs Eddie, "I don't know if I even want that to happen. I'm just apprehensive about not being able to write a serious song or be taken seriously. That's why I fully vow to help people out with whatever comes my way, to help them get above that line. Cos I went through the ice myself once or twice, you know."

For four years, Eddie pumped gas in San Diego, from midnight till eight in the morning. He'd leave work, go surfing, go home and make a noise with a guitar, or write stories and songs ("I could never call them poems, because they always seemed to have this fast drumbeat behind them..."). Late afternoon, he'd go hang out in rock clubs, offering to help out for free or for a tee-shirt, watch the soundcheck, see the show, go back to work. Sleeping was something he did when he could fit it in.

When I ask him how old he is, he fixes me with the weary eyes sunk into his perfect young face and croaks, "I'm pretty old. I'm 48. Or at least I feel that way. And I mean that.

"I was," he says, "kind of a mad scientist character. People thought I'd either do really big things someday or just... die."

Rescue from the petrol pumps and a life of maverick hermitry came in the form of a demo tape passed on to Eddie, so the story goes, by Red Hot Chili Peppers' drummer, Jack Irons. On the tape was some music recorded by guitarist Stone Gossard and bassplayer Jeff Ament (former members of Seattle scene grandfathers, Green River, and nearly-men, Mother Love Bone), guitarist Mike McCready (who'd joined the pair on the Temple Of The Dog album, a tribute to Love Bone vocalist Andy Wood, who died from a heroin OD), and drummer Dave Krusen. They needed a singer, an eye in their storm.

Eddie sang some stuff over three of the instrumentals and mailed the tape back. Stone, Jeff, Mike and Dave knew a great thing when they heard it. Within the week, Eddie was in Seattle recording with them. Ten songs in six days. A copious bleed.

"Got a bomb in my temple that is gonna explode... Got a 16-gauge buried under my clothes..."

And the Norwegians know all the words. It takes something less than seconds for Pearl Jam, in a live context, to astonish. Down the front, the crash barriers set up to save the band from the audience and poor, bloody Steve Gullick from both were like shanties in a dam burst. I haven't seen Steve for two songs now. I'm beginning to wish I hadn't lent him that tenner.

Up there, though, as the stagedivers dodge the desultory efforts of the Oslo bouncers — men who move with the torpor that a lifetime of futile struggle engenders — Pearl Jam are utterly lost, drowned in their own tumult. Dave thrashes his kit with the same hands he couldn't close for blisters before the show; Jeff looks, given the environs, spookily like Hagar The Horrible, head and bass swaying frantically in front of the row of model basketball heroes that decorate his amp; Stone and Mike providing, if they but knew it (oh, and how they'd deny it), the next steps in the current resurrection of the credible guitar hero (draw a line connecting Slash, Turner, Navarro and Kobain).

"Once upon a time, I could control myself... Once upon a time, I could lose myself..."

And, at the centre of it all, Eddie, a tornado with a mikestand.

Pearl Jam are A Band. Pearl Jam are the sum of their parts, five wilful, individual, hugely personable and likeable characters, as fine company as you could hope for on a whistle-stop tour of the tundra. Pearl Jam are definitely and determinedly not Eddie and four other blokes, but seem to be worried about appearing such. Pearl Jam, all of them, are going to be hugely hacked off when they read this highly Eddie-centric feature. Fair enough, I guess. The errant journalist can only offer, by way of excuse, the suggestion that, as well as being such a natural focus, Eddie is conceivably the most fascinating young (I'm assuming, I'm assuming) lyricist to have emerged in some time and therefore merits some particular attention.

"They come at me from all different directions but, usually, they're based on some kind of real thing. I'm not really into fiction. I mean, I like Kurt Vonnegut, but I don't think even he considers himself science fiction. I think he probably gets as upset when he's called that as we do when we're called metal."

Eddie is introducing me to the characters that populate his songs, a tottering parade of losers, outsiders, loners, people left behind or ground under by the glory-or-death American-success ethic. Killers ('Once'), the institutionalised ('Why Go Home'), bullied/battered children ('Jeremy'), the heroically lovelorn ('Release')... almost all of us are in there somewhere, in the same way that the extremes depicted by Eddie's real peers (Mark Eitzel, Guy Kyser, Paul Westerberg — he's never heard much of any of them but faithfully promises to do so) can function as a cracked mirror for even the most ordinary. Whoever *they* are.

"I'm drawn to any character of extremes. Because that's where I'm coming from. I've never been able to find a happy medium."

Is what you write identification or fantasy?

"I definitely identify with these people, definitely," he nods.

"Without a doubt, and that's the only reason I feel like I can write about it, or sing it. Otherwise, I'd be an actor or something..."

Is there an element of autobiography?

"Yeah..." he pauses, uneasily. He's already said he thinks he might have given too much away. "There's probably, like, autobiographical filters these things go through. I mean, I think I'd get pretty tired just hearing someone go into intense detail about, you know, 'This happened to me, and then...' Unless, of course, they had totally amazing lives. I mean, that's what Bukowski does, but I'm, uh, with him there."

There's some awfully deranged stuff in there, though. All that creeping about with a gun under your coat and stuff ('Once').

"If there is," he says, slowly, "any one song that's autobiographical, then that's it..."

He's wary, but he continues.

"Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't want to do it. But there's a sense of — and, again, I frighten myself by relating so much — a sense of f*** it, if I'm going down, and it's not my f***ing fault, and I did everything I f***ing could, and I

worked with these hands, and I didn't do drugs, if I'm out of here, then I'm taking a few people with me. There's no logic there, but that *misplaced passion*...

"I mean, my upbringing was like a hurricane, and music was the tree I held onto. That's how important it was, and is. It's everything. If someone reads this, they'll probably think that sounds silly, but it's everything. It really is."

"I... Oh, I... I'm still alive..."

The mikestand got tossed somewhere over the drumkit during the last song and now Eddie's perched right up the front of the stage, one foot on the foldback, arms aloft above the merry carnage in the pit, looking like nothing so much as a metal Moses giving the Red Sea its marching orders. Eddie's not even amplified right now, but it's ear-splitting loud in Oslo. Current hit single 'Alive' (Pearl Jam's requisite 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'/'Sweet Child O Mine'/'Jane Says'-variety accidental anthem) has been taken up by this mob of hellbent hedonists and turned into a glorious, spontaneous and celebratory outpouring of euphoria. Eddie's expression is exultant. He's never caught a wave like this before.

"I just kind of came to this realisation today that Pete Townshend was probably more of a father to me than anybody. And yet I never sent him a Father's Day card. I feel kind of guilty about that..."

Eddie falls in love with people as well as music and tells me he has to believe in the artist as a person before he can believe in the art. Farrell, Cobain, Fugazi's Ian McKaye, they walk it like they talk it, he tells me, and it's something he admires and strives for.

"Hopefully," he says, "I'm living what I'm singing."

Eddie wanders off on one of his frequent tangents.

"It's like when you look at something and say I could do this, but it's much easier not to... like, I could run around that lake as fast as I could, just to say that I'd done it and had that experience, or I could sit here on the bus and look at it and think about it.

"But you have to do it, it makes life worth... hell, man, this sounds so f***ing stupid."

You're doing fine, really.

"Naw, you can't print this. Unless you're there, or unless you see it, or unless you hang out with me for a day, or unless we run that lake together."

Any time. Possibly the definitive Eddie Vedder story — and, therefore, the band being extensions and reflections of each other, as fine an allegory for the Pearl Jam ethos as you could want — is the one about how, the night before this tour started, Eddie took a writer in Seattle up to the top of the Space Needle, the mirrored architectural phallus that dominates the city's skyline. At the top of the Needle, there's these huge lightbulbs. Said lightbulbs ("From the ground they look like stars, or Saturn's rings," remembers Eddie) rather took our hero's fancy, and he was just starting to suss out his chances of sneaking through the suicide nets to procure one when the writer announced that she had no wish to watch Eddie convert himself to pavement pizza from a height of 30 storeys and would he please stop. Please.

Eddie, ever the gentleman, bowed to the lady's wishes. Next night, he went back with amend ("It was much windier, too," he laughs), wriggled through the wire, edged out along the bars, and knocked off not one but two of the glowing prizes. One's still on his mantelpiece. The other he sent to the journalist.

Seize the moment and share it.

"Well, hey, we might not be back in Norway for a while, so I guess we'll just keep playing..."

Pearl Jam return for the first of umpteen encores. A game move, attempting to top about the most breathtaking finale to a live set I've witnessed, but they're that kind of band. See, as 'Porch' had rumbled and bubbled to a beautiful, messy end, Eddie had coiled up his microphone lead and thrown the mike, grappling-hook-like, up through a hole in the ventilation rig 12 or so feet above the stage. Using the cord as a leg-up (he'll repeat the stunt in Copenhagen, but instead Tarzan back and forth over the throng), he climbs up into one of the man-sized horizontal holes and adjusts himself to face the audience. He keeps singing.

"The audiences aren't this good in Seattle," he bellows, to an ecstatic reaction, and engineers himself headfirst out of his perch to cling, Spiderman-style, to the right angle between the wall and the ceiling. What follows seems to happen in slo-mo. Eddie spreads his arms wide, launches himself with his feet, and drops into the pit. He doesn't miss a beat.

But Pearl Jam even manage to top this stunt, launching with an exchange of devilish grins into a merrily shambolic cover of The Who's 'Teenage Wasteland'. Eddie, such a big voice for such a little bloke, sings it like — hey, I'm happy with this if you are — the fires of youth stoked by experience beyond its years. Or something. The carnage in front of the stage has, by now, reached a point well beyond metaphorical approximation.

I'm joined on my precarious perch on a partition by a couple of the sodden natives. Greetings are exchanged in the international language of the drunk (them, not me — what do you think we *get paid?*) and deafened ("Howarrghibwiboof ugh?" "Bowwowwoogh wnurrgh unh!"), but it seems my new friends have interrupted someone's jealously-guarded view. A hand seizes each of their shirts and hauls them unceremoniously back, bringing them crashing down across two tables, spilling drinks and people everywhere. They brush themselves off and keep dancing. Is there no Norwegian for "Excuse me"?

The encores keep coming, getting less coherent with each song and involving ever more members of the local support act. Jeff, for reasons best known to himself, is doing a go-go routine on top of his amp. Plastic basketballers go sky-diving. Pearl Jam exit. The hysteria is palpable. It's one of the best half-dozen gigs I've ever seen.

As we warp back to the bus in Copenhagen, Eddie is pondering the previous night's riotous majesty. The idea that he can come from a San Diego truckstop to a Scandinavian nightclub and find 900 people who'll sing his words back at him is one he can't get his head around. And from here on, of course, it's going to get sillier.

"I've thought about that a little, because of the mail I've been getting," he offers. "At first, I answered every piece, and I thought that would make me feel good... and then it got weird.

"I mean, because this has happened so quickly, I'm *still* that same f***in' surfer gas-station guy who plays music. I'm *still* him. So I write back a normal letter and find myself becoming a part of their lives, a part that they need, and they keep needing more and more.

"I, uh, don't mind being friendly, but when it's like, 'Can I have your hat?'... No! It's my one and only hat! I love this hat. This actually came from a real baseball player, see, he wore it all season."

And you went up to him and said, "Can I have your hat?", right?

"No!" he laughs, swatting me about the head with it. "I did *not*. He gave it to me. I've been taking pictures of it in every city and sending them to him... here's your hat in London, here it is in Stockholm..."

Eddie has to go and soundcheck, but not before he talks about the delight he takes in discovering new thrills in new places. As he climbs the stairs up the side of the Pumpehuset, I can't help wondering if he and the band he sings with are just too honest for their own good.

It's below zero in Oslo, but the rooms backstage are full of albino goth goddesses in plastic mini-skirts and sweaty young chaps in singlets. To my undying relief, the bedraggled genius Gullick is alive, if evidently a little unwell, bearing as he does the shellshock glaze of a combat veteran.

"Christ, my back hurts," he says.

I spin him around.

There are footprints on his shirt.

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