

Identity crisis disappears when Seattle's Pearl Jam takes the stage

By Greg Kot
Rock music critic

In this post-Nirvana age, the big question about any band from Seattle is, Where does the hype end and the substance begin?

After Nirvana proved that flannel shirts, grungy pop songs and a singer with a chip on his shoulder the size of a small tree could sell records almost as fast as Mariah Carey, the music industry followed the smell of instant cash to Seattle.

Pearl Jam, which headlined Saturday at Cabaret Metro, is now making the most of its geographic circumstances, riding Seattle madness into the upper reaches of the pop charts. Although the group is relatively new, two members were in Green River, generally regarded as the mother of the vaunted Seattle Sound in the mid-'80s, and later in the short-lived Mother Love Bone.

Like those predecessors, Pearl Jam is a group of '70s metal heads repackaged as a

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'90s "alternative" band.

So if there was nothing particularly revolutionary about Pearl Jam's Metro performance, the same could be said for virtually all the Seattle bands on major labels, many of whom still haven't evolved much beyond their influences.

Nirvana broke from the pack first because its songwriter, Kurt Cobain, has a knack for shooting pop melodies through his MC5-meets-Alice Cooper rave-ups.

Pearl Jam's songs aren't quite of Cobain's caliber. Its MTV-fired hit, "Alive," is typical: a shapeless mess of verses, an anthemic chorus that comes out of nowhere and a "Free Bird" guitar finale.

The band's most compelling instrumentalist is Jeff Ament, whose bass lines blended melodic invention with Taffy-pull rhythms. Pearl Jam doesn't so



Photo for the Tribune by Steve Shay

Pearl Jam, a group of '70s metal heads repackaged as a '90s "alternative" band, played the Cabaret Metro Saturday.

much write songs as build arrangements: slow to fast, loud to soft. N

It somehow works in a live setting because the band just lets it rip. Ament and guitarist

Mike McCready accented the crescendos with leaps and flying "V" splits, and singer Eddie Vedder embodied the music's thunderous physicality, including covers of Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World" and the Beatles' "I've Got a Feeling."

A long-haired waif in baggy shorts, Vedder staggered and crawled, cork-screwed himself into the stage head-first, dove into the audience, scaled the balcony and somehow lived to sing the encore (joined by local guests Smashing Pumpkins).

In a baritone that veered from lacerating growl to honeyed vibrato, he made a line as innocuous as "Jeremy spoke in class today" sound apocalyptic. As a studio band, Pearl Jam is still looking for an identity, but on the stage it has personality to burn.

Opening was 11, a California trio that blended uptempo melodies, Gothic chord progressions and stray-cat vocal harmonies with delightful ease.