

A night of body contact with Pearl Jam

By Jim Sullivan
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Pearl Jam is a band that's poised to go through the roof. The Seattle-based quintet's Epic debut album, "Ten," has sold

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860,000 copies, largely on the back of a killer single, "Alive" as the group has made a connection with both mainstream hard rock fans and alternative-oriented types. There's a buzz about the band and they're currently packing the clubs of America. In July, they join the high-profile, mega-band "Lollapalooza 2" tour.

Pearl Jam's fans, too, are poised to go through the roof - at least they at the packed Axis Wednesday night. Ha ha - that's a (lame) body-surfing/slam dance joke. Some of the fans who crested upon the upstretched hands of the others were whackin' and grabbin' at the cables that were strung across Axis' ceiling doubtlessly making management a bit nervous. It was a wild night, 65

PEARL JAM

At: Axis, Wednesday night

minutes of communal pushing and shoving, sweating and grunting. It was a night where one of the Jammers warned stage-crashers that they'd "get hurt" if they bumped the musicians and caused the guitars to go out of tune and a second, perhaps more pacifistic Jammer quickly added, "Don't hurt each other. We should make that clear." Yes, this was not a night for the timid, the claustrophobic or the agoraphobic. This was a night for body contact, for unavoidable semi-intimate relations with people you didn't even know.

Now, if there are only two things you know about Pearl Jam, they're probably these: (1) That they've got this wonderful, swaying, liberating hard-rocking quasi-ballad called "Alive," a celebration of the state of being alive, against, it would seem, all odds. (2) That they are despised by Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, who seems to take any and every opportunity to dis his fellow Seattle-ites as corporate rock phonies who've been dressed up in alternative clothes and shoved down the throat of a gullible youth market, that they're not much more than the Monkees of their day, as it were.

Whoa. Ouch. Cobain is no idiot and he's certainly got some clout as the leader of the top up-from-the-underground band of the past year -



Pearl Jam is currently packing the clubs of America.

CHRIS CUFFARO PHOTO

remember in 1976 when Johnny Rotten slagged Pink Floyd and they suddenly became totally uncool? - but I don't see what he sees or hear what he hears. For one thing, Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder is a tremendous singer, capable of digging down deep for some passionate vocalizing that is not usually found in the field. It's that pain/joy thing - he can convey a mixture of both with specific words or with an extended, quivering moan that hovers over a line of guitar fire. For another, Pearl Jam's players - guitarists Mike McCready and Stone Gossard, bassist Jeff Ament and drummer Dave Abbruzzese - have strong chops. There's muscle and moodiness; there's power, finesse and intensity.

Still, I can't say Pearl Jam gets all the way there. It's one of those whole-is-less-than-the-parts situations. They hit the proper peaks in places - "Alive," certainly, the pumped-up, fiery close to their regular set, "State," and their flailing encore of "Porch" - but there is a monotonous quality about them, too. Most everything is played at a mid-tempo pace and there are few twists or surprises in their songs. There's an implied edge, an obvious tension, but rarely does Pearl Jam push that particular envelope. It all seems frenzied, but you step back a bit and

realize it's all that frenzied. It's the sound of a good young band with a lot going for it - and it's certainly not

the sound of the Alternative Rock Devil Incarnate - but it's not the sound of a truly monster group.