

Pearl Jam plays so well it hurts

By Don Adair
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When he left the stage for what appeared to be the last time Thursday night, Eddie Vedder turned back to the crowd and held up his hand.

"It's a cruel world," he said. "Don't let it beat you down."

Then, after the house lights had gone up and as the weary crowd streamed to the doors, Pearl Jam returned to play one last song, "Indifference," a piece about what is perhaps the cruelest hurt of all.

There's something remarkable about the way Pearl Jam probes deliciously, like a tongue on a sore tooth, around the world's edges of hurt. And though it's likely that most of this band's exploding audience doesn't get it, it's wonderful release for those who do.

Pearl Jam's show at The Met on Thursday was surrounded by all the hype, exhilaration and disappointment that goes with a secret show by a mega-band in a small hall, but at showtime, the band had the goods.

The show opened with a set of mostly new material — the new songs had a harder edge than the 11 on their debut record, "Ten," especially when Vedder added a third guitar (emblazoned with a "Skateboarding is not a crime" sticker). About midway through, the responsive crowd was

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rewarded with a flurry of hits — "Once," "Even Flow," "Deep," "Alive" and "Jeremy."

If there was any doubt about Pearl Jam's ability to pull their dark material together live, they dispelled it Thursday. They have only one full-length release as Pearl Jam, but the deep roots of Mother Love Bone are obvious. Their music is dense and thick as the pain they sing about.

Vedder is a powerful front man, largely silent and deeply enigmatic, and the band is every bit his equal — Mike McCready and Stone Gossard played filligreed twin guitar parts or blasted furious near-industrial walls of sound.

Rumors that Neil Young would appear with Pearl Jam preceded their shows here and in Missoula the night before; the grandfather of grunge didn't show, but his spirit was here, especially in an encore rendition of "Why Do I Keep (Messin') Up."

Pearl Jam takes a good look at the corners we'd rather not see and, like him, comes away with some stunningly powerful music. Convincing, wrenching and real — great rock 'n' roll.