

Pearl Jam poet Eddie Vedder mixes rage, rhyme and reason

By **CINDY LAMB**

Special Writer

Eddie Vedder's beauty and rage are fast friends. The singer and emotional center of Pearl Jam can swing from soft-spoken poet to a primal-screaming rocker, finding time in between for a brawl in a New Orleans bar.

These qualities have helped Vedder appeal and empathize his way into many a young heart. He takes responsible action for dormant emotions that have weakened all of us for years and that we are now too lethargic or too embarrassed to express. Parents should either fear or thank him.

Vedder is also something of a reluctant rock god. After gracing every cover from Rolling Stone to Time, the pen behind Pearl Jam's songs has been tucked into a pocket — he ducks interviews with practiced skill.

Still, it never hurts to try. The plan was to call Pearl Jam's Seattle offices and perhaps speak to the band's manager in advance of its sold-out performance Thursday night at 8 at Louisville Gardens. A low, cautious voice answered.

"Oh, he's not here. This is Eddie."

Amused by the idea of granting an unscheduled interview even as he dodged a Rolling Stone writer, Vedder spoke for a while about freedom, the nature of success, his ongoing collision with the realities of fame and life in small towns.

"Listen, if you're looking for truth, you don't have to be in any size city," he said. "Young people in the country may not harbor the same emotions as those in the urban areas but, really, it's all kind of the same. I've traveled a lot, and the more I see in other countries . . . it all boils down to we're sharing a common thread."

Vedder's effect is a prophetic blend of comfort and disturbance, and his likable demeanor resembles the range of his lyrics — from subtle to pulverizing. He's like a millionaire guru in flak jacket and Army boots, whose message is that things are screwed up but there's a way out.

"In small, less experienced towns, compared to New York, you won't be encouraged to be different or a little



Pearl Jam's Jeff Ament, left, and Eddie Vedder, during a less philosophical moment.

strange," said Vedder, 29. "And if you don't act normal, you may be persecuted for your clothes or hair or music."

Vedder has experienced a fair amount of persecution. After Seattle's signature grass-roots rock-'n'-roll sound was tagged "grunge" and became a national phenomenon, Pearl Jam became a band with two multiplatinum albums — 1991's "Ten" and last year's "Vs."

Vedder was freaked out by success and its demands and has been praised and chided by his peers for speaking out on the discomfort of Pearl Jam's rise to fame. He dislikes being a spokesman for a generation. Yet he insisted that, no matter how the world perceives you, a person should always strive to be unique.

"In doing so, you're expressing yourself as an individual, not necessarily a group. It may produce rage or happiness, but it will keep you alive inside.

"Things will always change, so don't resist. . . . The bigger the rewards, the bigger the problems. But change is something that we have all tried to reject at one time or the other," he said, adding, "it doesn't mean compromise, though."

So how have things changed for Pearl Jam since making the leap from rock band to icon?

"Sure, things have 'changed' for Pearl Jam, but we didn't start out being an unsuccessful band — we always stuck to our music and beliefs," Vedder said. "Our audience has changed, grown. Not too long ago, we were written about in underground magazines, and now we're considered to be sort of" — there's a pause here — "palatable."

But Vedder has more on his agenda than a career in music.

"Everyday we wake up, we're creating our memory," Vedder said. "We have to create the best ones we can, even if for one day. Find your goals and take them one step at a time. Your happiness and control form responsibility. It takes work and you *must* do things for yourself. Don't expect anyone else to do it for you. Don't feel sorry for yourself. I've learned that about myself. I once thought I was under the lion's paw, but, when I decided to take on responsibility, I became much more free."

Freedom is an abiding concern for Vedder, whether it's the freedom to swing wild from a stage or scrawl in a tour-weary journal. There is definitely a mission in his life, and it's not just to snag an encore.

"Either we have one go-around at life or maybe there will be other times," he said. "The main thing in this journey, I believe, is to create a better trip."