

# Pearl Jam's Contract With America

■ **Pop music:** In its first full concert in almost a year, the band gets political in a Constitution Hall concert to benefit an abortion-rights group.

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WASHINGTON—The deeper we get into the '90s, the more Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder is looking like someone who can stand proudly alongside the best of the '60s rock stars. We're not dealing with recycled sounds but renewed idealism and conscience.

For years, most young performers with punk or alternative-rock roots were too cynical or disillusioned to align themselves strongly with social or political issues—aside from occasional activity involving everything from Amnesty International to the homeless. There was even disdain in some quarters for how '60s musicians and fans—their parents' generation—failed to live up to their lofty ideals.

But a new spirit is emerging in contemporary rock—and that spirit filled historic Constitution Hall for five hours Saturday as Pearl Jam headlined a concert to benefit Voters for Choice, the Washington-based political-action committee that supports abortion-rights issues.

In its first full-length concert in nearly a year, the Seattle band played with intensity and joy. Bassist Jeff Ament hopped about frequently with the bounding vitality of a frisky kangaroo.

As the band moved from the tenacious "Corduroy" to the delicate "Immortality," there was little question that Pearl Jam now stands as *the* essential American band in '90s



DOUG PENSINGER / For The Times

Political man: Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder burns with intensity at Constitution Hall.

rock.

One reason is that Vedder has accepted the mantle of leadership—as he also demonstrated in front of another microphone earlier in the day.

At a 2 p.m. press conference at the 930 Club, where the group had played in its early days, the normally media-shy singer stared into a battery of TV cameras and reporters as he expressed his support for Voters for Choice, which is headed by Gloria Steinem.

"It is a weird position as an artist . . . to blatantly enter the political ring," he said, seated next to Steinem. "We don't come from that space . . . [but] I know what it is not to be heard, so if I can raise my hand and speak out for some of these people who don't have a voice at the moment, then I almost feel a responsibility."

About the recent violence at abortion clinics, he added, "I think it is . . . sickening. There's nothing that distinguishes these [people] from any other terrorists. . . . I was thinking [in 1993] after David Gunn, which was the first death to come about this way, that everything was going to stop . . . that people were going to realize that pro-lifers killing people was going to be the ultimate contradiction and it would just stop. . . . As it is, now they're like martyrs."

Vedder said fans as young as 12 and 13 have written him about their concern over such issues as violence in school and abortion rights, and urged them to learn about the political process.

"Forget MTV," he said into the cameras. "The action is on C-SPAN."

Many of the fans in the 3,500-seat Constitution Hall that night had heard Vedder's remarks on the radio on the way to the concert, and they were pleased.

"I care about pro-choice matters and it's

Please see PEARL JAM, F7

# PEARL JAM: Singing a New Political Tune for the '90s

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good to have someone speaking out on the issue," said Janis Montgomery, 23, who drove from New Jersey. "I think a lot of people in this country would rather see Eddie Vedder on TV than Newt Gingrich."

Rachel McMullin, 15, agreed.

"People my age need a voice . . . someone they can connect with," she said before the concert. "We need to know we're not alone in believing in these issues. Until recently, there hasn't really been anyone in music that you could connect with on that level. But people like Kurt Cobain and Pearl Jam have changed all that."

Tom Campbell, who organized Saturday's concert for Voters for Choice, also sees an awakening of consciousness among young alternative-rock musicians.

"The [congressional] election was like a wake-up call," said Campbell, whose Hermosa Beach company has produced more than 400 benefit concerts over the past two decades, featuring such artists as Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt and Bruce Springsteen. "A lot of bands see this as a time when we are going to have more tax breaks for the rich and when the streets are going to get meaner."

Saturday's show opened with a brief set by Lisa Germano, a singer-songwriter whose reflections on relationships and sexual identity have a convincing, intimate edge. She was followed on stage by L7, the Los Angeles group that has been active on the abortion-rights front as founders of Rock for

Choice.

The group's spunky set—in which Mudhoney drummer Dan Peters sat in for Dee Plakas, who is suffering from wrist problems—ended with bassist Jennifer Finch playing the final song topless, certainly a first for this stately old hall.

Neil Young, just two days after his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, delivered an hour of music that connected most with the young crowd when he sang, "My, My, Hey, Hey (Out of the Blue)," which contains the line cited in Kurt Cobain's suicide note: "It's better to burn out than to fade away."

From the strong crowd reaction, it appears the song has been adopted as an anthem of sorts by the those who so admired Cobain—not as a macabre salute, but as a cleansing eulogy. Because of the death, the song's most haunting words are not the ones included in the suicide note, but the stark reminder: "Once you've gone you can't come back."

By the time Pearl Jam took the stage it was nearly midnight and the audience gave the group a thunderous ovation. Not only were these fans seeing the band return to action, but they had also overcome tremendous odds to get the \$25 tickets. The band will do more shows in the United States in June and August, following a February tour of Japan and Australia.

Because Pearl Jam refuses to use Ticketmaster, the Los Angeles-based ticket distribution system,

concert organizer Campbell set up an elaborate mail lottery system for the Saturday and Sunday benefits. This led to about 167,000 pieces of mail with the winners pulled by random.

Saturday's show also marked the official debut of Jack Irons, who has replaced fired drummer Dave Abbruzzese. Irons seems ideal for the rawer, more spontaneous feel that makes the new "Vitalogy" album such a strong musical advance for the band. Yet there was scattered booing when his name was mentioned at the beginning of the show.

A marvelously instinctive performer, Vedder paused at one point during the band's set to address the personnel change.

"I heard a few boos out there . . . and I know you were thinking of Dave and that's cool," he said. "But [believe] it or not, Jack Irons saved the life of this band."

Vedder, wearing a red sweat shirt, spoke only once about the abortion-rights issue, and that was in the form of a brief message urging young fans to believe in themselves, whether starting a rock band or expressing their political views.

Mostly, he and Pearl Jam—also featuring Stone Gossard and Mike McCready on guitars—spoke through their music.

Opening with "Release," from the band's 1991 debut album, Pearl Jam turned to five songs from "Vitalogy," a collection of frequently remarkable passion and commentary.

With the intensity building

through "Spin the Black Circle," "Last Exit" and "Tremor Christ," the musicians seemed to unleash all the pent-up energy and desire of recent months in a pairing of "Corduroy" and "Not for You" that ranks alongside the great concert moments of any decade.

Vedder wrote the lyrics as angry, extremely personal outbursts against elements that were overwhelming him in his sudden rise to rock stardom. But they serve as liberating and universal battle cries.

Though the band then moved on to some of its older tunes, including "Daughter" and "rear-viewmirror," it was another song from "Vitalogy" that best summarized the mood of the benefit concert.

"Immortality," which Vedder sang with an almost prayer-like tenderness, is an absorbing look at the heart of the alienation and fear expressed by so many young people today. But it, too, is ultimately an expression of comfort and hope.

In the '60s, hundreds in the audience would have held up cigarette lighters in silent salute, back before the ritual became a concert cliché. But these were no flames on Saturday. This is the '90s. Few young Pearl Jam fans even carry lighters and Constitution Hall is a smoke-free building.

Today's rock and its audience must find its own heroes and symbols. Cobain was the first candidate, but he found the burden too great. The weight is now on Vedder's shoulders and he seemed ready Saturday to carry it.