

Pearl Jam: Music and then some

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WASHINGTON — Even though it was well past midnight, and Pearl Jam had just completed an exhausting, exhilarating 13-song set, the band wasn't quite ready to call it a night. "As long as you all are here, we might as well stick around a few minutes," singer Eddie Vedder told the crowd at D.A.R. Constitution Hall Saturday night. "We don't get together like this very often."

Indeed, not. Apart from the fact that Pearl Jam is way too popular to make a habit of playing 3,000-seat halls, the shows at Constitution Hall — the band played Saturday and Sunday nights — weren't just ordinary concerts. Instead, Pearl Jam had enlisted Neil Young, L7 and Lisa Germano to donate their services to benefit Voters for Choice, a political committee working to protect women's reproductive rights by assisting candidates nationwide who support abortion rights.

As might be expected, the evening had a decidedly political bent. Besides opening remarks by host Gloria Steinem (who founded Voters for Choice), the concerts were dedicated

to Leeann Nichols, Dr. John Britton, Shanon Lowney, Dr. David Gunn and James Barrett — family planning clinic workers who were killed by anti-abortion activists. Nor was the political content limited to the pre-show remarks, as the performers made their own feelings on the issue abundantly clear. Your body is yours, L7 bassist Jennifer Finch told the crowd at one point. "Nobody can . . . tell you what to do with it."

Politics was just one part of the event, however, as most of the evening's energies were devoted to making music. The 5½-hour concert began with Lisa Germano, who is perhaps

better known as John Mellencamp's violinist than as a solo artist. Germano's songs aren't exactly pop-savvy, being given to coloristic swirls of sound and winding, word-packed vocal cadences, but her wan, wobbly voice conveyed such emotional honesty that it was hard not to empathize with protagonist songs such as "Everyone's Victim" or the wry "Cancer of Everything."

There was nothing wan about L7. "We're the true daughters of the revolution," announced guitarist Donita Sparks as the band hit the stage, and judging from the mighty roar that followed, she wasn't exaggerating. With a sound that draws freely from both punk and metal, L7's material was almost the polar opposite of Germano's, but that didn't seem to bother the crowd, which was on its feet and waving its arms by "Stuck Here Again." Although its set had its weaknesses — guitarist Suzi Gardner's vocals never quite came across with the kind of power Sparks and Finch managed — its rebel spirit and relentless energy was more than enough to make "Pretend We're Dead" and its ilk seem like the stuff of which hits are made.

Next up was Neil Young and Crazy Horse, who were every bit as deafening as L7 (possibly louder, in fact), but far less frenzied. In fact, there

was something almost pacific about the great, rolling swirls of feedback Young and his band generated in "Cortez the Killer," something strangely contemplative about the flowing, feedback-tinged guitar solo he unleashed in "Change Your Mind." It was as if he had somehow managed to turn the implicit aggression of overdriven amps inside out, and brought out the soothing core of that ear-searing sound.

Young did more than just crank up the amplifiers, though, as his set ranged from the acoustic beauty of "I Am a Child" to the spooky majesty of "My Heart," to the surly crunch of "Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)." Yet as far afield as his performance ambled — two of the eight songs he performed were new and unreleased efforts — he never lost the thread, lending a remarkable cogency to the performance.

Good as Young was, though, he was no match for Pearl Jam on Saturday. But then, it would be hard to imagine how anyone could have been. It wasn't just that the band — which was making its first public appearance with new drummer Jack Irons — played as if it had something to prove; there was a level of communication between these five that went beyond anything normally found in rock, lending the music an almost organic sense of unity and strength.

From the slow-building intro of "Release" to the funky, juggernaut pulse of "Blood," Pearl Jam played with more power, grace and passion than any band this reviewer has seen in years. It wasn't just that the band conveyed the full emotional force of these songs, from the driving momentum of "Rear View Mirror" to the vinyl devotion of "Spin the Black Circle"; it did so with an almost uncanny musicality, offering a perfect live fade at the end of "Corduroy," bringing an unexpectedly soulfulness to "Not for You," and exerting breathtaking control over dynamics in "Deep."

Could this be the best rock band in the world now? It was certainly hard to think otherwise Saturday.

Liz Smith

REVIEW