Bands sing defense of abortion choice

Pearl Jam leads benefit chorus

By Matt Neufeld
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The rock bands Pearl Jam and L7 yesterday said they are performing pro-choice benefit concerts here this weekend to combat the "terrorism" of abortion-clinic shootings.

"This is not our usual job," said Eddie Vedder, Pearl Jam's lead singer, referring to news conferences. His band, with L7, violinist Lisa Germano and feminist Gloria Steinem, held a midafternoon news conference at the 9:30 Club in the 900 block of F Street NW.

"Usually we just feel like playing," Mr. Vedder said. "In this case, things are getting a little insane out there, and we thought that maybe it would be productive to have a press conference to bring your attention to it [abortion violence] and maybe get people in their 20s to watch C-SPAN.

"Forget MTV; the action's on C-SPAN."

That comment evoked some laughter, but Mr. Vedder and the others were quite serious throughout the 50-minute conference, veering from abortion only once to another topic: Pearl Jam's fight with TicketMaster, which the Seattle band says has a national stranglehold on concert ticket prices.

The musicians are in Washington with rock legend Neil Young, who did not attend the conference, to play shows at DAR Constitution Hall last night and tonight. The shows benefit the private group Voters for Choice, which is committed to educating people about abortion and registering voters. Organizers said they expect to raise about $100,000.

Because of its battle with TicketMaster, Pearl Jam held a mail lottery for tickets to the two shows, which have a combined capacity of about 6,000 seats. Julie Burton, executive director of Voters for Choice, yesterday said the group received about 175,000 postcard entries for tickets.

Throughout yesterday's news conference, the musicians and Ms. Steinem stressed the urgency of ending attacks at abortion clinics, educating youth about abortion, combating members of the "radical right" who are against abortion, getting people to register and vote, and lobbying lawmakers for new laws against abortion-clinic violence.

"This is as serious as any terrorism anywhere in the world," Ms. Steinem said in opening remarks. "We need to de-escalate the rhetoric."

The speakers said the issue is not a "Republican-Democrat" matter, but a health and education matter that affects everyone.

"I probably wouldn't be so public with this if I didn't feel it at almost every angle of this issue," Mr. Vedder said. "I know what it's like to be 15" and facing a pregnancy.

WHFS-FM (99.1) disc jockey Wes Johnson asked L7 guitarist Donita Sparks how loud the bands will have to play to get their message heard by the right ears on Capitol Hill.

"Eleven," she said, referring to amplifier controls that usually go up to 10.

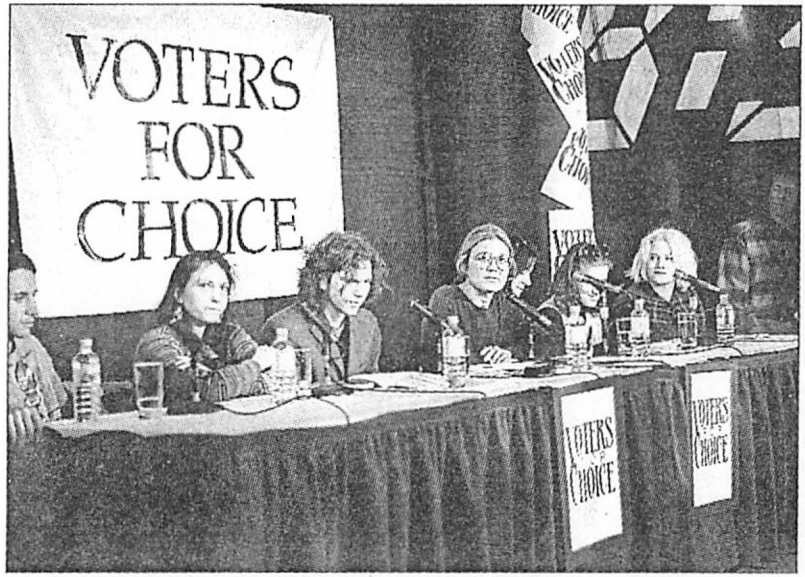

Photo by Matt Neufeld/The Washington Times

At the 9:30 Club yesterday, (from left) Pearl Jam guitarist Stone Gossard, violinist Lisa Germano, Pearl Jam front man Eddie Vedder, Gloria Steinem, and L7 members Donita Sparks, Dee Plakas and Jennifer Finch explain the reasons for the two Voters for Choice shows.