

King Eddie finally comes alive

ROCK

BY MICHAEL DWYER

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THE chant was not "Pearl Jam" but "Eddie ... Eddie ... Eddie ..." Even this far from Seattle, on their first live date in Australia, the rare and electrifying adulation that awaited America's most popular rock band was strictly personal. For a generation whose comfort and inspiration is its anti-heroes, Kurt Cobain is dead; long live Eddie Vedder.

The 9,000 who had made it were the lucky ones: all 125,000 tickets for Pearl Jam's first Australian tour were snapped up within three hours. Sleazing around the blast-proof shell of the Perth Entertainment Centre, scalpers were picking off desperadoes at \$150 to \$200 a head.

The blinding irony was this band's unprecedented stand against box-office extortion, a typically altruistic hard line which led them to cancel last year's United States tour rather than ask their fans to pay the booking fee required by the monopolising agency. Most Australian punters paid just \$35, two-thirds the going rate for an international act of this stature.

The most obvious explanation was Pearl Jam's devotion to passion as opposed to spectacle. A row of lit candles was the sole concession to theatre on a stage which was tight and bare, amplifiers pulled in close to

focus energy against a stark white backdrop. It assumed a deep green hue as the band sauntered on stage, the exhilarating buzz of expectation erupting into a deafeningly shrill greeting which persisted throughout a (mercifully) moody and restrained opening selection, *Oceans*.

The sound desk had received a set-list in Vedder's own scrawl just minutes before the lights went down. It was a condensation of Pearl Jam's three multi-million-selling albums which would stretch to almost two hours' playing time and keep virtually the entire arena on its feet for the duration, a rare testament to the consistent quality of their material as much as the unflagging intensity of the band's delivery.

On stage, Vedder remains the troubled introvert whose angry and dejected lyrics strike a black chord in so many of his generation. While guitarists Stone Gossard and Mike McCready and bassist Jeff Ament cut loose in sympathy with the velocity of the arrangements, Vedder was more prone to hanging his head, gently shaking his mop while his knuckles turned white on the microphone stand: feeling it, believing in it.



Eddie Vedder ... still angry.

From Pearl Jam's 1991 debut album, *Jeremy* was among the more wildly received highlights of the show. The story of a domestically abused school kid bullied to the point of shocking retaliation is typical of Vedder's quasi-autobiographical subject matter. *Better Man*, described as "a hate song", is an unflattering dedication to his stepfather. *Alive*, Pearl Jam's signature tune and Vedder's most cathartic account of his own abused childhood, was surprisingly omitted.

Through it all, the singer's apparent restraint was at odds with his audience's frenzied, almost terrifying, enthusiasm. The raised arms which crammed the floor on Monday night were constantly awash with crowd surfers; the first unconscious fan was dragged clear by an irritated boyfriend during the second song, *Go*.

"We finally meet," came Vedder's late, laconic greeting before cutting the crap, lurching into the tense intro to *Corduroy* to give his disciples something more substantial than his loathed cult of personality to scream about. By the second sweat-drenched encore he had loosened up sufficiently to speak out in support of Sydney's Gay Mardi Gras and then to make equally flippant remarks about his own oft-hypothesised suicide and the absence of waves on Perth's city beaches.

A truly joyous encore of Pete Townshend's *Let My Love Open the Door* was a late antidote to the curiously elating vitriol of most of the show, even if it was probably as familiar to this crowd as an Elvis Presley B-side. For most of them, Vedder is the one true king. His protestations will be doubly useless after this gig, which 9,000 will carry with them to the grave and at least as many again will never forget missing.