

Great rock band connects with a generation

CLIVE James once observed of a Marlene Dietrich performance, "So ecstatic was her reception that it was obvious the performance she was about to deliver had already been taken as read, so there was no real reason why she shouldn't have turned around and gone home." The same could have been said about Pearl Jam, given the hysterical reception that greeted their imminent arrival on stage at the Sydney Entertainment Centre.

At 9 pm, the lights went down and the scream went up. For three minutes, drums throbbed and the audience, positively demented with excitement, forgot that the show hadn't started and held thousands of cigarette lighters aloft — a gesture usually reserved for big ballads and encores. It was an appropriate symbol for a two-hour concert which was heavy on attitude and light on logic.

Without doubt, Pearl Jam are one of the great contemporary rock bands.

Their honest, no-frills, post-punk approach combined with powerful lyrics and the raw beauty of Eddie Vedder's vocals has seen them reach out into suburbia and connect with a generation. In live performance they rely on some very time-honoured rock strategies. They dress down so that they are indistinguishable from their audience. Bass player Jeff Ament looked particularly fetching in basketball shorts. Their lighting is about as basic as you can get. Eddie Vedder speaks to the audience sparingly either to announce a song, to ask "Am I doing OK?" or, with disingenuous humility, to say during the third encore, "Thanks for being nice to a bunch of strangers from America."

They keep their stagecraft to a minimum, doing little more than balancing raw, head-down punk with singalong hits like *Alive* and the muted intensity of slower, more reflective numbers like *Daughter* which they delivered as a huge, passionate anthem.

ROCK

BY BRUCE ELDER

Pearl Jam, Sydney Entertainment Centre, March 10

Rock credibility is elusive and difficult to describe. There is no doubt that, at this point in their career, Pearl Jam are positively suffused with attitude and credibility. Apart from popular strategies like keeping ticket pricing down and rarely speaking to the media, they can do whatever they like on stage without it seeming crass or stupid.

The last 40 minutes of their performance was about as strange as any concert can get. After only 70 minutes (and, given the intensity of both the performance and the audience response, it was probably about the right length), the band left the stage. The audience, rather than demanding an encore, waited patiently in the dark. The band reappeared, played a couple of songs, and disappeared again. Then Eddie Vedder came on stage holding a banner which announced that it was Jeff's birthday. Flea from the Red Hot Chili Peppers appeared. A cake was brought out. Jeff blew out the candles, then someone pushed it into his face and a cake fight broke out. Flea, slipping and sliding on bits of cake and mimicking Neil Young's strained falsetto, sang a truly woeful version of *The Needle and the Damage Done*. Then Vedder and Flea duetted on an exuberant version of Pete Townshend's *Let My Love Open the Door* which ended with them both falling over on the slippery stage. They left the stage. The audience again, as though they were exhausted, did not demand an encore. A few minutes later, Vedder reappeared and delivered a hauntingly beautiful version of *Indifference*, after which he waved briefly, walked off the stage, and that was it.

Don't ask how they got away with 40 minutes of disorganised sloppiness. They did and that is one of the mysteries of rock'n'roll.



Disingenuous humility . . . Eddie Vedder's vocals have a raw beauty.

Photograph by JAMES ALCOCK