



Photo for the Tribune by Joe Mahoney

Pearl Jam performs in Denver; photographers were denied access to the group's concert Tuesday at Soldier Field.

# Just play, baby

## Pearl Jam skips theatrics in nearly 3-hour show at Soldier Field

By Greg Kot

TRIBUNE ROCK CRITIC

It seemed like an omen of stranger things to come. Early Tuesday evening at Soldier Field, kids were body-surfing to Otis Rush, which drew amused expressions from the Chicago blues great and his band.

But by night's end, normalcy prevailed. If this was to be Pearl Jam's last North American concert of the year, the Seattle band didn't go out in a blaze. Instead, the mood was almost campfire mellow.

"I want to thank the Grateful Dead for letting us use their stage," singer Eddie Vedder said, referring to Soldier Field's weekend guests. "We think it's only right that we play as long as they do"—and Pearl Jam nearly did. The 2½-hour concert was short on theatrics but long on musical intimacy.

On a spartan stage devoid of gimmicks, Pearl Jam blasted through most of its three albums, a handful of new songs and covers of Sly Stone's "Everyday People" and Pete Townshend's "Let My Love Open the Door."

Considering all the fuss made about crowd control as 13,000 concertgoers mingled and moshed on the stadium floor while another 30,000 looked on from reserved seats, the smoothness of the event and the general easygoing demeanor of the audience was a small triumph all its own.

The only splinters were from Vedder's guitar, which he trashed

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during an encore of "Blood," and the only hint of bile was dredged up during the singer's rambling introduction to "Not for You."

"I hate to think that's the wave of the future when corporate giants ... some of them just can't be toppled," Vedder said, referring to the band's feud with Ticketmaster over service fees, which took a decisive turn last week when the Department of Justice closed its investigation of the ticket agency without filing a lawsuit.

"It's up to you guys now," he said to the audience. "We tried our bit," and then laughingly led a halfhearted chant of "Ticketmaster sucks."

In trying to bypass Ticketmaster by playing only venues not associated with the ticket agency, the band has canceled almost as many concerts as it has actually played in North America the last year. And it has none scheduled for the remainder of 1995—an absurd circumstance for arguably the world's most popular rock band.

The wave of cancellations and Vedder's recent bout with the stomach flu were seen as signs that the band was cracking under the stress, but Pearl Jam at Soldier Field looked and sounded like a band very much in it for the long haul. The music was tautly performed, with Vedder, guitarist Stone Gossard and bassist Jeff Ament frequently closing a circle in

front of drummer Jack Irons.

In the special-effects department, the band got a little help from nature as lightning flashed in the northern sky during Mike McCready's slow-burn guitar solo on "Immortality." Otherwise the band placed its trust not on high-tech staging but in the music and the crowd's attentiveness.

That trust was amply rewarded: When Vedder sang the lilting melody of "Elderly Woman Behind the Counter in a Small Town" in a husky tenor, the place was rapt.

Vedder's resolute plea during "Daughter" of "She holds the hand that held her down ... She will rise above!" was greeted by a sea of flickering lighters—Rock Cliche 101, perhaps, but a moving sight all the same.

The opening set by Otis Rush was likely a first lesson in hard-core Chicago blues for many in the audience. Rush was in stellar form, his voice a lionlike roar, his guitar piercing.

Longtime Southern California punk band Bad Religion was up next, introduced by roadies dressed as nuns. With singer Greg Graffin spitting out high-minded lyrics and spinning like a tipsy schoolboy, the band pounded through one anthem melody after another: "21st Century Digital Boy," "Stranger Than Fiction," "What It Is," "Leave Mine to Me."

The strength of the opening acts was testament to Pearl Jam's determination to let music prevail on this night. And it did.