

Energetic Pearl Jam, Ramones thrill Cruces crowd

By JOHN VILLANI
For the Journal

From the moment the Ramones strode onto the Pan American Center's stage to the sounds of "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," to the end of Pearl Jam's marathon, seven-song encore set, Thursday night's concert by America's punk rock and hard rock kings was nothing short of brilliant.

"Do y'all have to go to school tomorrow? We're gonna play for a while longer, because we may not get back here too soon," were lead singer Eddie Vedder's words of warning to the center's soldout crowd about halfway through the band's two-hour, 20-minute journey through the Pearl Jam songbook. Nobody, however, was in a hurry to head to the library.

Vedder, in top form and obviously enjoying himself, was at times dynamic, at times enigmatic, but at all times engaging and highly energetic, even though he complained about the onstage heat and, at one point, kicked over a malfunctioning air blower. Projecting superstar magnetism in a wonderfully earthy, self-effacing manner, Vedder didn't posture, pose, or beg for attention... he was perfectly happy leading his tight, well-rehearsed band through their soaring, pounding repertoire.

The concert opened with a classic, 40-minute set by the Ramones, the seminal, New-York based veteran punk band whose performances are "one-two-three-faw" nonstop assaults of four-chord power riffs. Listening to them play is like watching an express train blast its way through a subway station while you're standing on the platform, waiting for the local. If you blink, you've missed it. It took the Ramones all of five seconds to walk onstage, grab their instruments, and start blasting away.

Joey Ramone, known for performing in his black leather motorcycle jacket, dirt bike boots and leather gloves, actually took off his jacket halfway through the band's

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set, telling the crowd "Yes, it's true, it's good to be here in Las Cruces, New Mexico."

Johnny Ramone's speed-strumming guitar technique was streamlined and flawless, powering the band through numbers such as "Teenage Lobotomy," "Spider Man," "Hey, Ho, Let's Go," "I Wanna Be Sedated" and the band's anthemic "I Don't Wanna Grow Up." When it all was over, Joey comically threw his mike stand to the floor and stalked offstage, and the Ramones had the center's crowd in their hands.

It took Pearl Jam's stage crew 30 minutes to set up the band's funky elaborate set, complete with a Victorianesque floor lamp, candelabra, a stuffed animal and a woven tapestry. Onstage, more than a dozen sterno-burning torches and a 20-foot chandelier festooned with flickering electric candlelights set a homey atmosphere appropriate to the antiquarian spirit of "Vitalogy," the band's latest CD.

Vedder, who started the show slugging from a bottle of red wine but switched to bottled water after 20 minutes, wore knee-length cutoff jeans, a long-sleeve brown shirt and beat-up sneakers — fitting in well with bassist Jeff Ament's Michigan Wolverine basketball shorts and guitarist Stone Gossard's typically reserved gray T-shirt and black shorts. But while Pearl Jam may not be much of a fashion show, it's their music that's trend-setting, and listening to them in concert is an education in what the rest of the music world is trying to play catch-up with.

Animated lead guitarist Mike McCready executed solos with not just precision, but mastery. Compared at times to Jimi Hendrix, McCready at one point broke into a few bars of a Hendrix tune, almost as if to show the center's crowd how easy it all is.

The Pan American Center audience showed its appreciation by set-

ting up an intense, nearly nonstop demonstration of crowd surfing, passing hundreds of bodies from the auditorium's general admission area over the outstretched hands of the audience stageward, eventually tossing them into a phalanx of red-shirted security guards standing behind a crowd control barrier, on the floor directly in front of the band. To their credit, the security troops handled each body carefully, cradling them to safety and allowing them to exit back into the throb-

bing crowd's flanks.

Throughout Pearl Jam's set, the crowd kept tossing clothing onstage. Interestingly, the band didn't just kick the debris aside. Vedder, Ament and McCready (but not Gossard) would carefully look the stuff over, passing some objects to their roadsies (presumably, for safe keeping).

Pearl Jam launched into material from "Vitalogy," making everything they touched sound 10 times better live than it does on disc. "Tremor

Christ," in McCready's capable hands, brought echoes of the Beatles into the show, while "Corduroy" brought out Vedder's best, sending the crowd into a body-tossing frenzy.

A couple of new songs ("tryouts," as Vedder referred to them) found their way into Pearl Jam's set, but the wildest crowd reactions came during rock radio standards such as "Jeremy" and "Not For You" (when the crowd broke through parts of the security perimeter). During

their encore, Pearl Jam, flew through a number of older and newer songs such as "Better Man," "Satan's Bed" and "Last Exit."

On the last song of Pearl Jam's main set, McCready stooped over one of the flaming torches and lit his guitar on fire. It was an act seemed to capture the band's obviously ecstatic attitude about again being onstage together, proving that behind all the Pearl Jam hype there's the musical muscle to back up their heavyweight reputation.