

A Rare Live Sighting

Pearl Jam Tour Starts in Seattle on the Sensitive Side of the Tracks

POP MUSIC REVIEW

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SEATTLE—There were so many questions surrounding Pearl Jam as it began its first North American tour in nearly a year Monday at the Key Arena here that the rock quintet's appearance seemed as much a press conference as a concert.

No, Eddie Vedder and the rest of the band, which has emerged over the last two years as the most commanding force in '90s American rock, didn't actually take questions from the audience.

Trey didn't comment on such matters as whether the band's aversion to conventional promotional activities—including music videos and extensive touring—has begun to hurt record sales.

Neither did they speak directly about a change of musical tone that some observers believe is alienating the band's young, hard-core audience.

But Pearl Jam, in its manner and song selection, did reaffirm its faith in a new direction, and it combined the old and the new in ways that had the estimated 13,500 fans enthralled for more than two hours.

Questions about videos and the like have been hanging over the heads of the Seattle outfit for some time now, but they have been intensified in recent weeks by the tepid sales of the group's new album, "No Code."

Where each of the band's previous two albums sold more than 870,000 copies in its first week, "No Code" sold only 367,000 in its first week. That was enough to make it No. 1 on the pop charts but not enough to prevent the second-guessing.

Fans, some of whom had
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ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

Pearl Jam's frontman Eddie Vedder performs Monday at the Key Arena in Seattle.

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driven from as far away as Los Angeles to see the start of a tour that includes no other Western U.S. dates, didn't have strong opinions when questioned about the band's lack of videos or touring.

But there was disagreement over the musical tone. Many of the younger fans called the new direction too mellow. Shawn Kelly, 18, who drove three hours from Vancouver, Canada, to attend the concert, liked Pearl Jam better when the music was "faster, louder, harder." But others embraced the new album, calling it more "purposeful, personal . . . more spiritually minded."

Pearl Jam's transition to music with more sensitivity and depth can be traced to its 1994 "Vitalogy" album, but the most important step in the musical evolution may have been last year's song "The Long Road."

That's the haunting, spiritually tinged reflection on longing and loss that the group recorded with Neil Young for a single, and which Vedder recorded with Pakistani singer and world music sensation Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan for the film "Dead Man Walking." It's a progression that continues in the best moments of the gripping, intimate "No Code."

Significantly, the Pearl Jam concert audience, previously limited almost exclusively to an under-25 crowd, on Monday included older listeners. That is a breakthrough for '90s rock, which has tended, from Nirvana on, to be strongly dismissed by adults as too angry and inaccessible.

In Monday's performance, Pearl Jam treated its fans to a generous serving of its early signature tunes, including the angst-driven "Daughter," "Alive" and "Jeremy."

Yet the band seemed most alive itself when it turned to the new material, including the concert-



ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los Angeles Times

Fans eagerly await Pearl Jam performance in Seattle's Key Arena, the start of the rock quintet's first North American tour in nearly a year.

opening "The Long Road."

Even when the musicians—Stone Gossard and Mike McCready on guitar, Jeff Ament on bass, Jack Irons on drums and sometimes Vedder on guitar—tore into the thunderball assault of a song from the new album, Vedder sang not so much of the demons that haunted him in his early works as of the comforts of a relationship.

In "Hail, Hail," he shouts, "Hail hail, the lucky ones/I refer to those in love."

But the key new songs aren't simply idyllic exercises. They assert a tension that, much like Young's best works, acknowledge life's complexities and strains.

Even though the band did a warmup show Saturday at a local club, its playing on Monday after the long layoff was frequently rusty and tentative in the early going, and the song order often seemed clumsy. Even the band apparently sensed the latter problem, sometimes huddling between numbers to change the order of the set list.

There's a difference between making music in the privacy of a studio and the public surroundings of a concert stage, and it will take

time for the band to get its instincts and interaction back.

But the group's foundation is solid. That's the issue most forcefully addressed in Monday's opener on a tour that continues with approximately two dozen shows, mostly on the East Coast and in Europe. A band source said Tuesday that the group hopes to be more active tour-wise in 1997, with a possibility of Southern California shows in spring or summer. Monday's date was a benefit, with tickets distributed through the FT&T computerized phone system.

"I've got a drink in one hand and a bra in the other," Vedder said playfully near the end of the evening, picking up the lingerie that had been tossed on stage. "Thanks for everything."

It was a great summary of all that rock 'n' roll fame and success once meant—a time before the Beatles and Bob Dylan introduced such matters as artistic ambition and social urgency to the music.

Though most bands are willing to settle for the stardom, the best ones—from the Clash to U2—have tried to live up to the higher calling. Pearl Jam stands proudly among them.