

They're still alive

Pearl Jam shows its muscle in tight Toledo show

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TOLEDO — You wouldn't have known they'd been gone.

With a sweet rumble that burst into a gritty roar, Pearl Jam took over a small basketball arena on the University of Toledo campus Sunday night, quickly proving the kings of '90s rock can still do it onstage.

Rock's spotlight was shining hard on Savage Hall, the Midwest stop on an 11-city jaunt that opened last Monday in hometown Seattle. Two years since laying low to wage war against Ticketmaster's alleged concert-biz monopoly, 14 months since aborting a self-supported tour, Pearl Jam is hoping to reclaim its live reputation.

The band revealed little rust Sunday night in front of a sellout crowd of more than 9,000: Grounded from underneath by the tight-locked rhythm section of bassist Jeff Ament and drummer Jack Irons, the group was tight and crisp, elevating well-worn radio hits like "Even Flow" and "Alive" to cathartic heights.

On a stark stage decorated only by a dozen candles, newcomer Irons added beef — and refreshing punchy tempos — to "Corduroy" and "Better Man," while guitarists Mike McCready and Stone Gossard stuck sizzling twin-guitar attacks onto "Spin the Black Circle" and "Desist."

But as with all things Pearl Jam, every ear in this house zeroed in on vocalist Eddie Vedder, dressed in black sweatpants, T-shirt and boots. Vedder took his high-endurance throat through sticky vibrato on "Hail, Hail" and "Corduroy," growling fury on "Animal" and cracking upper-range shred on "Spin the Black Circle" and "Lukin."

The band only occasionally wobbled, wandering on the improvised breakdowns that closed "Not For You" and "Corduroy."

But otherwise the arrangements stayed familiar, letting the five-piece ensemble do what it does best: Crank out tightly structured, melodic hard rock.

Pearl Jam is an arena rock band, whether or not it intends to be, which is why it felt natural when the crowd lifted lighters to "Better Man" and sang big with "Jeremy."

The band drew heavily from its latest album, "No Code," kicking off the night with the subdued "Sometimes" before storming into the crunching "Hail, Hail."

Notoriously grumpy Vedder toyed playfully with the crowd, winking as he bowed off the mike during an "Even Flow" chorus, even smiling wide as the crowd took over the final section of "Jeremy." He poked fun at the youthful audience — whose T-shirts advertised everyone from Alice in Chains to Alan Jackson — telling fans late in the 75-minute show, "I can go all night — you guys have got school."

The Ticketmaster debacle has made it easy to get aggravated with Pearl Jam, which wound up ensnared in its own web of righteousness. What started as a noble crusade — keeping ticket prices low to help young fans — eroded into a rickety campaign that overshadowed two stellar releases and, more notably, rooked fans who were drooling to see the group live.

But loud rock has a way of brushing aside sins, and Sunday night Pearl Jam logged a fine redemption effort. Here's to life on the road.

**Pearl Jam
in Toledo**

★★★
out of 4 stars