

PEARL JAM: THE STAGE IS THEIR OYSTER

By Richard Harrington
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Having spent far too much time over the last 18 months jousting with a windmill called Ticketmaster, Pearl Jam has finally returned to what it does best -- playing live in front of frenetically loyal audiences. Tuesday's jam-packed concert at the Merriweather Post Pavilion (an 18,000-ticket, six-minute sellout) found the band not only raring to rock, but sounding tighter and harder-driving than it has in the past.

While on strike, the members of Pearl Jam must have done some serious woodshedding because their sound -- a mix of molten metal with a mental edge of punk belligerence and operatic anthems -- came across fuller, tougher, crisper than ever before, particularly in the sometimes shimmering, sometimes shattering shards of Mike McCready's lead guitar. This cohesion reflected the full assimilation of the band's new drummer, Jack Irons, bringing depth-charge power and supple undercurrents to the basic Pearl Jam sound.

Even Eddie Vedder, the band's notoriously morose vocalist, seemed relieved to be on the road again. Vedder's bellowing (and occasionally tremulous) tenor was as commanding and compelling as ever, and he certainly continued tapping the angst of adolescence as well as a 30-year-old can. But the overflowing reservoirs of Vedder's pain may finally be receding: His familiar, sometimes reckless on-stage restlessness was absent, as was his penchant for cocooning. Instead, he looked relaxed, confident and comfortable despite fans' hysterical adoration. Vedder even told . . . a joke! Eddie Lite?

There was some offstage tension. Traffic was veerrrrry slow coming in and the security outside was almost presidential. But the mood on stage was loose, the uncrowded set spare and lit by a mix of candles and spots. And there was no shortage of power, particularly on material from the band's new album, "No Code." Live, songs like "Hail, Hail," "Red Mosquito" and "Habit" came across more hard-driving and committed than their already aggressive studio versions. The one exception was "Who You Are," a mantric, mystical tune whose supple rhythms and reflective mood couldn't quite cut through the night's hypercharged energies.

While serving up a few rarities from outside projects, Pearl Jam rewarded fans' patience with powerful, sometimes slightly recast, readings of the best material from its own canon. Among the highlights: a sonically furious "Animal," "Spin the Black Circle" (the band's punk paean to vinyl), "Corduroy" with a tough, roiling pulse, and a liquid "Even Flow."

Vedder's keening vocals captured the frustration and compassion at the heart of "Daughter," while "Jeremy" downplayed its original rock-opera grandeur for brittle compassion (and proved no less intense for it). And the propulsive "Rear View Mirror" suggested, much as the new album does, that

many things will seem clearer once you can move past them, a retrospective consciousness more fully explored on the "No Code" album.

Judging from the crowd's standing ovation from the first note to last, "Not for You" and "Alive" cemented their reputations as generational anthems. The first seemed rooted in anger, frustration and isolation, the second in a triumphant sense of survival through assorted adversities of adolescence. Vedder, pushed by the band, addressed them with equal fervor. And the finale, "Yellow Ledbetter," mixed the soul simplicity of "Drift Away" with some sparkling Hendrixian commentary by McCready.

Because of his powerful vocals and presence, Vedder remains the natural center of Pearl Jam, but now that he's abandoned some of his stage eccentricities, the band's image is more cohesive. Bassist Jeff Ament remains consistent and reliable, as does (mostly) rhythm guitarist Stone Gossard. Gossard got his own showcase on "Mankind," a pleasant power-pop track he wrote for the new album. You'll know why the band wisely leaves most of the singing to Vedder, and you'll find new respect for the band's moral confidence.

The last year and a half were troublesome for Pearl Jam's members, and not playing must have pained them as much as it did fans not to hear them. Their hiatus was a result of the band's refusal to work with Ticketmaster, to protest what it called a monopoly on concert halls and ticket charges; the band went so far as to request a federal investigation, an idea that was eventually turned down by Janet Reno. On Tuesday, reconnection led to joyful exuberance on both sides of the stage. The Post Pavilion date was the fourth in a string of 11 American concerts, which will be followed by an extended overseas tour. At show's end, Eddie Vedder said, "See you next year."