

VEDDER'S INTENSITY LEADS PEARL JAM IN A CHARISMATIC CONCERT

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Oct 2, 1996

He exudes a spiritual sensibility to go along with a lethal dose of rock 'n' roll anarchy. Eddie Vedder seems plagued by demons yet touched by angels.

The lead singer of Pearl Jam brought a charismatic, almost mystical presence Tuesday night to a sellout crowd at Marine Midland Arena estimated at 20,000 by a security official. This was a concert that surpassed the usual rock show limitations thanks to Vedder, who soared with passion, emotion and gut-wrenching music.

The crowd's evening started on a sour note with long delays getting through security checks, some nearly two hours, but Pearl Jam's performance proved worth the wait.

On Tuesday, no song better defined Vedder and Pearl Jam than "Jeremy." A grunge anthem for the young and disaffected, it came about halfway through the two-hour set.

Vedder took off his black shirt and was wearing a brown T-shirt and gray pants. He stood stiff and solemn at center stage, sweat rolling down his forehead and curly shoulder-length brown hair as the song began.

Then Vedder gripped the microphone with both hands, thrusting himself toward the hot, crashing bodies that packed the mosh pit in front of the stage. Vedder seemed to growl a mantra that lifted him and the fans to a higher consciousness as he kept repeating the last line of the song, "Jeremy spoke in class today."

"I'm scared just like you are," Vedder said to the crowd. "I have problems just like you."

The rest of Pearl Jam, including remarkable lead guitarist Stone Gossard; Jeff Ament, bass; Mike McCready, guitar, and Jack Irons on drums, seemed just as intense as Vedder.

They all shared roles on "Jeremy," as the song became a bond that linked the band with those in the pit and up in the cheap seats. The song is filled with piercing guitars, a haunting vocal and, most of all, Vedder's intangible spirit.

"Everybody all right out there?" Vedder asked from the stage after the song was finished. It was one of his many conversations with the crowd throughout the evening. "I want you all to settle down so you can listen to this one."

Vedder then played an acoustic guitar on a soft, folky ballad, "Off He Goes." He sounded something like Bruce Springsteen on

that song, but there were other familiar sounds throughout the evening.

On "Lukin," a torrid rocker that lasted about 45 seconds, Vedder and Pearl Jam did their best Led Zeppelin imitation. "Hail Hail" was reminiscent of Neil Young.

The fans, like Pearl Jam's musical influences, were a major part of this concert. During a wild and rocking "Porch" that lasted nearly 10 minutes, Vedder pointed to a guy in the mosh pit and waved to him to come on stage.

The kid was soon standing next to Vedder. Next thing you know, Vedder took off his shirt and exchanged his for the one the young man was wearing. Vedder talked to him for a couple of seconds, then pointed toward the mosh pit. The guy took a flying leap back to his comrades.

The band is on its first tour in two years but seemed refreshed and energized by the layoff.

Vedder is a perfectionist; he started one song, "Rats," but abruptly halted the band after about 15 seconds.

"Hey," Vedder told the crowd, "we haven't been on tour for a while -- we need some time, you know. But if we're going to do something, we might as well do it right." After those words, Pearl Jam stormed its way through the number.

The concert began in somber, almost reverential style. The stage was lined with candles and the smell of incense. The lights remained dark as the band entered and Vedder slowly and gently began singing "Oceans," with a serene demeanor.

The mood changed with the next half-dozen all-out rockers, including "Last Exit," "Spin the Black Circle," "Animal" and "Corduroy."

Vedder seemed joyful and invigorated by bantering with his fans. "I'm going to have my tea now," he said, taking a drink from a cup. "I know I have some catching up to do to keep up with some of what you guys have been drinking."

Pearl Jam gave the old songs new life. "We're going to do this one and we haven't done it in a while," Vedder said before ripping into a grunge-laced version of "Still of Love and Trust."

Pearl Jam seems to have hit a comforting niche on the band's tour, which began a couple of weeks ago.

In the middle of it all, as always, is Vedder. He is sometimes burdened by ideals, judging by his battles with Ticketmaster and his refusal to play the music industry game by making videos for MTV.

But Vedder seems to thrive on playing the role of anti-rock star, battling for his integrity and individuality.

Judging by Vedder's performance Tuesday, it's worth the fight.