

Pearl Jam steals show from rock mentors

By J. Freedom du Lac

Bee Pop Music Critic

MOUNTAIN VIEW — To: Eddie Vedder, lead singer, Pearl Jam.

Re: Your performance Saturday at the Bridge School concert to benefit children with severe speech and physical impairments.

Yo, Eddie — didn't anybody ever teach you to respect your elders?

In a night filled with mostly strong performances by veteran rock stars who are around the golden age of 50, the 29-year-old Vedder easily stole the almost all-acoustic benefit show, upstaging two of his biggest musical heroes (Pete Townshend, 51, and Neil Young, 50) as well as two other highly regarded artists (Patti Smith and David Bowie, both 49).

Leading Pearl Jam through a winning 10-song set of unplugged material at the sold-out Shoreline Amphitheatre for the first of two shows, Vedder's powerful, revealing vocal performance highlighted the tender, vulnerable side of his soul that drives many of Pearl Jam's best songs, but which is often overshadowed by his oft-raging vocals and the meaty Black Sabbath riffs and punk fury that dominates his band's first three albums.

In the warm and humbling "Sometimes," off the band's new "No Code" album, Vedder — whose enunciation was a marked improvement over three of his last Northern California performances — shyly confessed that he's still

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searching for meaning and direction. In the new, wandering, Tom Petty-like "Off He Goes," he lovingly provided the spiritual anchor for a distracted, restless friend.

In a loose, cleansing reading of "Better Man," off 1994's "Vitalogy," Vedder sang tenderly about his mother, who was stuck in a destined-to-fail relationship. And in a liberating "Daughter," he sang of breaking free from restrictions, then added a borrowed verse for good measure: "Hey, ho / Away we go / We're on the road to heaven."

With the group performing unplugged, rarely did Vedder's four band mates get to demonstrate that Pearl Jam is more than just, well, Vedder and his four band mates. Augmented by a keyboardist on a Rhodes electric piano, the relaxed band was restrained and focused, with only guitarist Mike McCready spotlighting his playing with a brief, blues-infused acoustic solo near the end of the set.

In contrast, David Bowie's trio showed off throughout its seven-song set. Bowie said early on that "we haven't done an acoustic gig ever," and that's counting Saturday's show: Both his bassist and lead guitarist were plugged in, playing electric instruments.

Still, Bowie, who himself played an acoustic guitar, impressed with some surprising read-

ings of his material, including an almost bossa nova-style "Man Who Sold the World" (turned into an alternative-rock mini-hit by Nirvana) and an entirely rearranged metallic blues-rock version of "Let's Dance," which, Bowie said, "started off as a joke."

Although he didn't follow the all-acoustic rules, Bowie clearly enjoyed the setting — as did punk-poet Patti Smith, who repeatedly cracked a smile, even as she performed her dark, mystical material, including the Kurt Cobain tribute "About a Boy." Smith closed her set by singing her uplifting 1988 song "People Have the Power" to a group of Bridge School children who watched the six-hour concert from the rear of the Shoreline stage.

Pete Townshend, in the Bay Area with the Who for two performances of "Quadrophenia," made an unscheduled appearance after a largely unnotable opening set by Tom Waits-like Canadian singer-songwriter Hayden and before a decent, covers-dominated performance by the Canadian lit-rock quartet Cowboy Junkies.

Townshend electrified the crowd of 20,000 with performances of the Who's "The Kids Are Alright" and his own solo hit, "Let My Love Open the Door."

Conversely, Neil Young said little on stage during an hourlong, show-closing set that included six . . . long . . . songs with his longtime backing band, Crazy Horse.