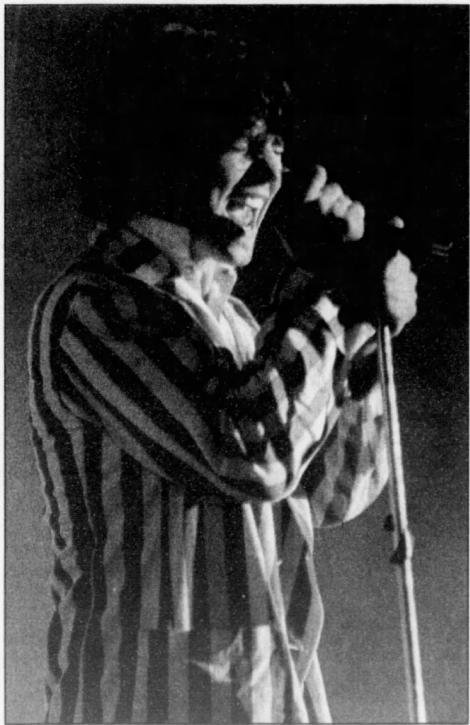


A High-‘Yield’ Return



Associated Press

Back onstage, Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder is ready to tour again.

■ Pop music review:

With a new album on the horizon and a dazzling warmup for the Stones, Pearl Jam answers questions about its future.

By ROBERT HILBURN
TIMES POP MUSIC CRITIC

OAKLAND—For most stops on their “Bridges to Babylon” tour, the Rolling Stones are having typical opening acts, from Blues Traveler in Chicago to the Wallflowers in Los Angeles.

For four nights at 50,000-seat Oakland Stadium, however, the Stones have what amounts to a co-star: Pearl Jam.

It's that group's presence that allowed the Stones to play more than two nights in a single city for the first time on the tour. Pearl Jam sold 85,000 tickets on its own in the Bay Area in 1996.

The Seattle quintet's effect was obvious at the first of the four shows, on Friday (the stint concludes on Tuesday and Wednesday). Where the Stones' audience at Dodger Stadium last week was mostly in its 40s and older, there were far more teens and twentysomethings here.

Jason Haynes, a 24-year-old college student from nearby Fairfield,

Please see PEARL JAM, F10

PEARL JAM

Continued from F1

summarized the cross-generational pull of the evening. His father was such a big fan of the classic English band that he named two of his children after a Stones member and song (Keith Richard Haynes and Angie Haynes).

"But my wife and I really came to see Pearl Jam," Jason said, sitting in his seat before the show. "I know it sounds like a cliché, but they speak to my generation. Their songs represent to us what I guess the Stones did to my dad."

Pearl Jam, however, hasn't done much representing on any level in 1997. Until these shows, there was no new record, video, performance or even interview this year.

That absence raised questions about the status of the biggest-selling American rock group of the '90s and its future musical direction. Various members, especially lead singer Eddie Vedder, have complained about the pressures of sudden stardom and vowed to walk away before it ever suffocated them.

The question of musical direction grew out of the fact that the band's last album, "No Code" (1996), fell far short of the multimillion sales level of earlier collections. That kind of commercial downturn has led some groups to retreat. Rather than follow their artistic impulses, they try to duplicate the elements that

made the early records such hits.

Pearl Jam gave reassuring answers to both questions in a dazzling, high-energy hourlong set highlighted by three songs from "Yield," a new album due in February. After six older songs, including "Even Flow" and "Jeremy," the band previewed "Given to Fly." It's a warmly philosophical tune that, like the more reflective songs from "No Code," derives from "The Long Road"—the wonderfully embracing song that Vedder recorded with the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.

"Given," which is likely to be released next month as the first single from the album, asserts a far more vigorous pulse than "Road," without sacrificing the grace.

Three songs later, the band showcased the sweet, disarming "Wish List," a new song in which Vedder cites a series of personal goals or ideals while guitarists Stone Gossard and Mike McCready provide especially eloquent punctuation.

"Do the Evolution," the third new number, is a sarcastic commentary on society's progress. Pushed by the rhythm section of bassist Jeff Ament and drummer Jack Irons, it has the spirit of a frisky colt.

Together, the songs reflect the same bold growth that has enabled Pearl Jam to evolve in its last two albums into the most valuable band in U.S. rock since Nirvana. The show's spirit was echoed backstage.

"This has been the best year of my life," Vedder said after the

afternoon sound check. It was a surprising comment from a man who has never been known to err on the side of optimism. "I feel like I've really gotten a lot of things together. I'm even looking forward to touring."

"We talked about touring this year, but we didn't want to lock ourselves in the studio with a timetable. We wanted to give ourselves time in and out of the studio to let everyone come up with songs and lyrics and to have some time for themselves, and it worked great. During one stretch, we came up with something like 32 songs."

"To me, the new album is a natural progression from 'No Code.' I love that album, but I found myself waiting in a couple of places for some more up-tempo numbers. This time, a lot of the songs start off quiet, but then they lift up."

Pearl Jam will start a tour on Feb. 20 in Honolulu, then proceed to Australia before returning to the U.S. next summer with two four- to five-week legs. An L.A. stop, still to be determined, will be included.

About the yearlong break, Ament said backstage after the sound check: "It's just the way we choose to work. Some bands are in your face all the time. . . . In videos, magazines, McDonald's ads, whatever, but then they'll only put out an album every three years or so. We put out a record every year or year and a half. So it's a question of what do you want to end up with every three years or so—30 songs or 10 songs and all the other stuff?"