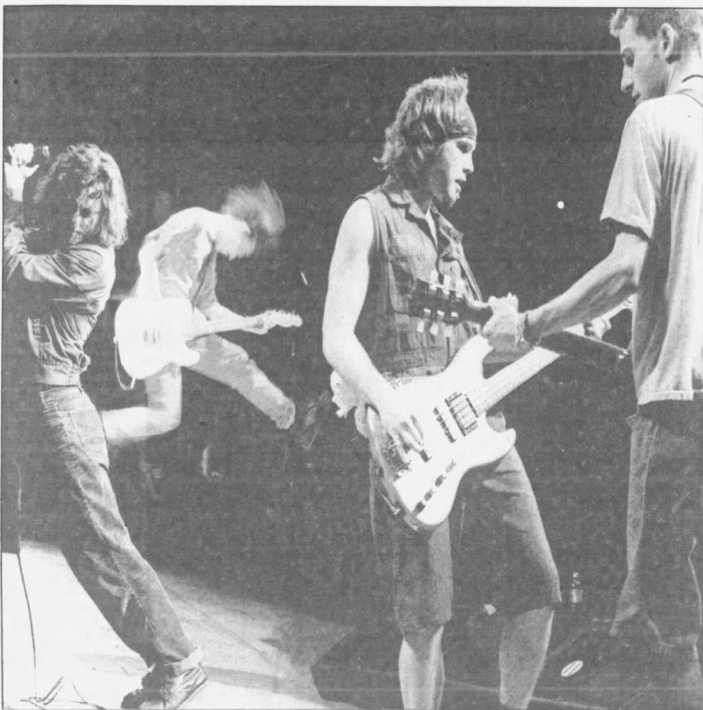




A COUPLE OF GEMS

Pearl Jam
is superstar
opener
for legendary
Stones



Pearl Jam: singer Eddie Vedder, guitarist Mike McCready, bassist Jeff Ament and guitarist Stone Gossard (not pictured: drummer Jack Irons).

By James Sullivan

CHRONICLE POP MUSIC WRITER

Only one band on the planet would expect Seattle superstars Pearl Jam to be its opening act, and that's the Rolling Stones.

"Are they really a functioning, relating group of guys?" wondered Pearl Jam bassist Jeff Ament, speaking by phone from Seattle. "If so, maybe they can give us some insight. Or are (we) going to go, like, 'God, I don't want to be in that situation in 30 years?'"

Preparing to release its fifth album, which is due in February, Pearl Jam will have some very public rehearsal time this week when the band performs with the Stones at the Oakland Coliseum. Ament said he expects his group to sprinkle its set with songs from the new, as-yet-unreleased record.

"This week we're messing around with some artwork (for the cover), so we'll probably have a title soon," he said. Asked to help kick off the "Bridges to Babylon" tour in Chicago last month, Pearl Jam declined, citing various personal obligations. When the Stones came back with an open invitation, the band agreed to play the Bay Area.

"We've definitely played more shows in the Bay Area than anywhere else, including Seattle," Ament said. "I think it's partly the Bridge School connection" — Neil Young's annual fund-raiser, at which Pearl Jam has appeared three times.

Young also bailed out the band at its most unfortunate gig, an aborted 1995 concert at the Polo Field in Golden Gate Park, where a troubled summer tour hit its low point in the form of front man Eddie Vedder's infamous stomach virus.

"We have a lot of friends down there," Ament said, noting

that drummer Jack Irons is from the area and that the band recorded its second album at the Site in Nicasio.

All that aside, why wouldn't Pearl Jam simply play the Stones' Seattle dates? "They're playing the Kingdome," Ament said. "There's nothing musical about that venue. I saw the Stones play there a couple of years ago, and sonically it wasn't pleasing at all."

Well known for a brooding, introspective image personified by Vedder's soul-searching vocal style, Pearl Jam's five members are prone to overanalyzing themselves, Ament said. For the Stones shows, it was guitarist Mike McCready's lifelong enthusiasm for the older band that buoyed the rest of the group. "Just seeing the look in his eyes it was like, wow, yeah, that's why we're doing this — to have fun, and to have new experiences."

Still, frustration and disenchantment are a major part of the Pearl Jam legacy. Reports abound that Vedder's insularity and perfectionism have made other band members uncomfortable, and at times they've seemed happier working on their side projects.

Guitarist Stone Gossard has spent the past few months touring with his other band, Brad, while he continues to

oversee his Seattle-based record label, Loosegroove. And Ament plays periodically in a group called Three Fish.

As if the group were embarrassed by its early multiplatinum success, Pearl Jam subverted the classic hard-rock hooks of the band's first two albums in favor of a consciously arty approach on its third and fourth outings, 1994's "Vitalogy" and 1996's "No Code."

In describing the new album, the earnest Ament chooses his words carefully. "It seems like the best group of songs. Whether it's the best performances, or the best pop songs or the most commercial songs, I don't know yet."

With the record industry still complaining that its biggest acts aren't performing up to expectations, it will be interesting to see how well Pearl Jam's fifth catches on.

"If people already have some of our records, I would rather see some of them buying the new Ben Harper album, or the new Stereolab, or Radiohead," Ament said. "It doesn't bum me out. The difference between selling 5 million records and 2 million — it's still numbers that I can't really put into reality."

Still, he's enthusiastic about the new record. For the first time, Ament said, each member contributed tracks: "What's different is that people came to the table with complete songs, even lyrically. So from that end, I think everybody feels they contributed."

Vedder, he implied, is a tough sell when it comes to pitching new songs.

"He pays a lot of attention (to the words) — sometimes more than the rest of us can appreciate. Because he reads and writes

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so much, he has pretty high standards.

"The *sound* of the words has to hit me first. If somebody's writing amazing poetry and can't sing it, it doesn't really grab me."

A High-Water Mark

But Vedder's trademark soaring baritone, Ament said, is just now reaching a high-water mark. "Rhythmically, and phrasing- and tone-wise, Eddie's doing stuff he's never done before. So I'm excited about that."

Apart from the music, Pearl Jam made lasting news when the band locked horns with concert behemoth Ticketmaster, launching a di-

sastrous 1994 tour in atypical venues, including the Golden Gate Park fiasco. Captured in a widely published photo, Ament and Gosard testified before Congress about Ticketmaster's alleged monopoly.

Ament hinted that the band might continue its Ticketmaster boycott in 1998.

"We want to put together a solid summer tour, and we have a list of venues that aren't affiliated with them. There's a lot more localized ticketing now.

"We want to make people aware of where their money is going."

But the battle has made the band members weary. "There are more important things to life than battling a f—ing ticket company. We need to expend our energy on the music."

To that end, he said, the Stones

shows will be good for the band. "There are definitely moments live where it's as good as any experience that you can have.

"There have been shows where maybe the whole first half of the show my eyes have been closed. And then you'll look out in the crowd and there'll be somebody totally lost in their head, in exactly the same place that you're in.

"That, to me, is the essence of music."

Learning From the Masters

And the Stones, he said, can teach the young 'uns a thing or two. "Watching Keith and Charlie together — to me, that's the heart of the Stones," Ament said. "It's not Mick running around the stage.

"It's Keith and Charlie, and their connection. That's the heart." ■