

# Food fighters have the cake and heave it

PEARL JAM

Entertainment Centre, March 9

By JON CASIMIR

THE chosen audience member was taking too long to get over the barricade, having too much trouble breaking free of the moshpit's jungle of limbs. Up on stage, Eddie Vedder stood impatiently, cake in hand, waiting to slam it into the face of the willing volunteer. (Remember when people got up on stage just to hug singers?)

What had started as a *Happy Birthday* singalong for bass player Jeff Ament was turning into a food fight. After Vedder had played the slapstick card, cramming the cake into Ament's face, it was introduced to the dials of the other band members.

Given how well the gâteau was holding up to the manhandling, Vedder went looking for a fan to flan. As the moment dragged and it became clear the nominee couldn't make it through the mosh, the singer lined up a guy rising from the pack five or six metres away, took aim and Splat! A direct hit.

Which was pretty much the way the whole night went. Everything connected. Everything worked. Pearl Jam turned in a no-drama, no-fuss, straight-ahead rock concert that was almost a relief after the recent onslaught of the overwhelming U2, the underwhelming Oasis and the utterly whelmless Ozzy Osbourne.

The band's show is crunching, direct and free of excess. On record, they often lean uncom-

fortably towards the stilted and bombastic, but in the live arena it's a different story. Vedder's tremendous voice, which seems too big for the average lounge room, fills the auditorium. The swelling arrangements of the band rise to meet it.

Pearl Jam surged through a set that drew from all five of their albums, respectful of both their catalogue and the demands of the fans, whose commitment was total — the cheers erupted the second the lights went down and barely let up as the 90-minute performance wound on.

Pearl Jam can and do play meat-and-potatoes rock, reveling in the simple, exciting rush of noise and beat, but, unlike many of their contemporaries, they are not constrained by its limitations. Even at their most

masculine, Vedder's singing still carries a hint of vulnerability, the slightest tremor at its edge.

Add the fact that they have worked out how to use minor chords, unusual textures and non-standard song shapes, and you end up with a band capable of physical power and emotional resonance.

If there is a lasting value in the Seattle sound, as represented by Nirvana and Pearl Jam, it has been that it essentially reclaimed the popular middle ground of loud rock music without the macho bull, the posturing and preening that it had devolved into by the mid-1980s.

Monday's performance was a perfect showcase of the ideal, and proved, in a satisfying night for all, that you can have your cake and throw it.