

Classic act

Pearl Jam plugs
into pre-punk, still
connects with fans

By Greg Kot

TRIBUNE ROCK CRITIC

Now at least that Pink Floyd T-shirt makes more sense.

Saturday night at Alpine Valley Music Theatre in Wisconsin, Pearl Jam guitarist Mike McCready was sporting a T-shirt advertising the Floyd, a band with tenuous, to say the least, connections to the Seattle grunge scene that spawned Pearl Jam.

Monday at the United Center, however, singer Eddie Vedder brought a rousing version of Pearl Jam's "Daughter" to a close with a long quote from Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall Part 2."

"Hey, teacher, leave us kids alone!"

What was even more surprising is that the audience picked up on the reference to the 20-year-old anthem, singing every word. Which demonstrates that Pearl Jam is, in many ways, a classic-rock band itself, with a deep connection to the aesthetic and the communal vision of the great bands that predated punk.

Yet, there's a crucial difference. The members of Pearl Jam don't look or act much like old-school rock stars.

In the cavernous expanse of the United Center, in the revealing glare of white light, the band looked younger, scruffier and less jaded than their years. More than anything, Vedder, McCready, Stone Gossard, Jeff Ament and Matt Cameron looked like five



Tribune photo by Charles Cherney

Pearl Jam lead singer Eddie Vedder expands on the Pink Floyd reference displayed at Alpine Valley in Wisconsin over the weekend during the band's concert Monday night in the United Center.

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people who could have been plucked from their audience, fans as much as performers.

This appeal was not lost on the audience. As "Alive"—a song of deception, bewilderment and outrage—rang out, 20,000 voices eagerly took it over from Vedder and wouldn't give it back.

The singer smiled and strolled around the lip of the stage, waving like "da mayor" making his rounds of the city streets.

Pearl Jam gave what amounted to a greatest hits show and then some. They shuffled the deck a bit from their set Saturday at Alpine Valley and slipped in new entries such as "Long Road," with its hypnotic tom-tom groove, and the rising tide "Present Tense," while appending a snippet of the English Beat's "Save It for Later"

to "Better Man."

"Don't let me down," Vedder repeated on the latter, and on this night there was no chance of slippage. In contrast to some previous Chicago appearances by the band, where the air was thick with tension and high expectations, this show had the air of a celebration: a band looking its fans square in the eye, and delivering the goods.

As at Alpine, Frank Black and the Catholics played a 50-minute opening set heavy on new, unreleased material.

Black—in his incarnation as singer Black Francis of the Pixies—paved the way for bands like Pearl Jam in the late '80s. But he's between record deals at the moment, though some of his new pop-crunch tunes rode the "Wave of Mutation" surfed by his old band.