

Pearl Jam comes back strong at Riverport

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They pronounced the momentarily hot "grunge" music dead a couple of years ago, unceremoniously buried it, and it's been resting in peace every since, while other music forms, including rap, country and the return of pop are allowed to thrive.

But one of the few surviving forefathers of the fallen sound, Seattle band Pearl Jam, had no trouble selling out Riverport Amphitheatre Thursday night or unearthing a few grungy gems for an enthusiastic crowd overjoyed to see its musical heroes in action once again.

It has been way too long since Pearl Jam embarked on a proper tour. Lead singer Eddie Vedder, looking a little like a pudgy Bob Dylan these days but still sounding like a dream, guessed the last time the band played St. Louis was anywhere from six to eight years ago.

The last "tour," the 1995 excursion in which the band took on Ticketmaster, only hit a handful of cities, so many fans were left out.

Now, the band is back on the touring circuit and giving fans a two-hour show encompassing the best of its five albums, from 1991's classic "Ten," perhaps the quintessential grunge album, and the current, somewhat under-appreciated "Yield," which is a far step up from 1996's uninteresting "No Code."

The band opened the concert in low-key fashion, performing a laid-back number under muted lighting when something more spirited was more expected. But this would give way to the more frenzied sounds of "Brain of J" (as in JFK) and "Hail, Hail" that officially kick-started the concert into high gear. And once it was on, Vedder and his bellowing baritone, with guitarist Stone Gossard, bassist Jeff Ament and the rest of the gang, were reluctant to let up.



Pearl Jam rocks in a concert last year.

The hyper band seemed re-energized by its too-long absence from touring, which allowed contemporary rock anthems from "Ten" like "Alive" and "Jeremy" to sound just as vibrant as "Yield" cuts like "Do the Evolution" and "Wishlist."

The band took its time getting to the tunes that made Pearl Jam *Pearl Jam*, with a whole 50 minutes passing before necessary cuts like the back-to-back "Even Flow" and "Daughter" entered into the set. But rabid renditions of "Spin the Black Circle" and "Corduroy," the moody "Tremor Christ," and the Bruce Springsteen-like "Nothingman," all from "Vitalogy," made the wait worth it.

Vedder, always an advocate for his fans, said that before the concert he walked through Riverport's pavilion, looked at how close the seats were and how fans would be packed

in, and thanked them for coming. He also joked that since the last time they were in town, many of their fans had either graduated from college or become addicts — or both. And he blasted folks who buy Pearl Jam bootlegs.

Murder City Devils, another Seattle band, opened the show with the pronouncement that they wanted to be thought of as more than a rock 'n' roll band. They wanted to be a history lesson — not exactly the thing to say at a rock concert. So what was learned? Nothing discernible.

However, the band did deliver an impressive array of punkish rock tunes like "18 Wheels," "Dancing Shoes" and "Broken Glass," and the set was notable for more than the moment when the lead singer stuck the microphone in his mouth and screamed into it. But his Bobcat Goldthwait-like presence wore thin.