

Pearl Jam sells out concerts but not its integrity

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CONCERT REVIEW

INGLEWOOD — Eddie Vedder, the singer in rock band Pearl Jam and anti-speakerman for a generation, is a man of few words.

In fact, it was half a dozen words at Pearl Jam's propulsive two-hour performance at the Great Western Forum on Monday night before Vedder directly addressed the sold-out crowd of about 18,000. The singer preferred to let the music do the talking.

It was just as well. On those few occasions when Vedder spoke, he did so in a flat drawl that made it sound as if he were a vinyl record on a turntable set at slow speed. Besides, it wasn't as if he had much to say beyond the "it's great to be here/capitalism sucks" variety of rock-star chatter.

Make no mistake, Vedder is a rock star, though he works hard to conceal that fact. And Pearl Jam's music, well-intentioned as it may be as it explores abusive relations (usually in bitter generational terms), is not above taking advantage of Vedder's stature as the man too good to waste the spotlight.

When he wasn't singing, Vedder was careful to deflect attention from himself by watching other band members play or leaving his head so as to obscure his face with his hair (no small feat, given how clipped his locks are these days).

His act can go to absurd lengths. During a growly, pounding "Even Flow," Vedder backed away from the microphone as one of many guitar solos soared through the arena. Vedder grabbed a quick swig from a bottle, hunched over as he crept backward toward the microphone with the stealth of a cat burglar, then suddenly spun and straightened up to belt out the song's final chorus.

This was a move worthy of a schmaltz-mester like Tom Jones, yet Vedder's detached air made it seem not like a pose at all — if you didn't watch too closely.

That may seem a little harsh, but Pearl Jam's stance as a torchbearer for all that is good in rock 'n' roll invites such scrutiny. Its reluctance to create promotional videos once it had established success with its 1991 multi-platinum debut, "Ten," gave Pearl Jam alternative credibility. The band's mid-

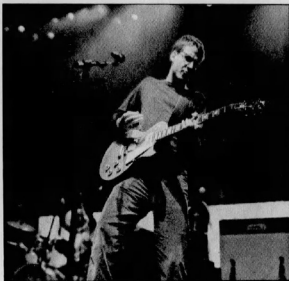
'90s battle with Ticketmaster over who controls the prices fans pay for concert tickets suggested a benevolence rare in the me-first world of rock.

Pearl Jam tried to mount a concert tour outside the system and succeeded mostly in draining its resources away from creative endeavors. A floundering Vedder was unable to complete a San Francisco show, and other stops on the tour had to be postponed. This time around, Pearl Jam is touring mainstream facilities (after a second sold-out show Tuesday at Inglewood's Forum, it performed Thursday night at Sacramento's Arco Arena) and is even using Ticketmaster in some cities to dispense tickets.

With the Alternative Nation collapsing on itself in a fit of self-induced show-biz torpor, it seems a fair time to ask: Has Pearl Jam sold out? In the living-room comfort of indoor arenas, is Pearl Jam just another yuppie rock act, like Dave Matthews? From where I sat Monday night, an "L.A. Cellular" banner framed the top of the stage like a giant warning sign, signifying all that is trendy and distracted in pop culture.

But the answer would have to be a qualified no. Amidst Nirvana wannabes and angry youth waifs (attention, Natalie Imbruglia; your limo is waiting), Pearl Jam still wants to matter. It's not just longevity beyond grunge that makes the band stand out. Pearl Jam's moody songs challenge Middle America's choices with a bracing sanctimony worthy of the most ferocious fundamentalist.

"I would rather starve than



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Pearl Jam guitarist Stone Gossard performs during the band's concert Tuesday at the Great Western Forum in Inglewood.

eat your bread," Vedder sang on the song "Orcutry." Almost under his breath, he muttered, "All that's sacred comes from youth," during "Not for You." For the coda to "Daughter," he sang from the defiant if battered viewpoint of an incest victim, Vedder worked his way into the possessed incantation of a fever dream.

Though they weren't met with the same enthusiasm as Pearl Jam hits of years past, songs from this year's "Yield" album fit in nicely. The raspy, punkish "Do the Evolution" was particularly impressive.

Throughout, Pearl Jam provided drama by alternating soft and loud passages. Guitarists Mike McCready and Stone Gossard and bassist Jeff Ament

swayed, feet together, like wind-blown wheat in the fields as they launched into one neo-pie-pie jam after another. It can be a narrow approach. Pearl Jam reminds me of a painter who only uses various shades of brown. Sometimes it's deep, sometimes it's dirty, sometimes it's even beige. It can be fascinating to see. But it's always brown.

Nevertheless, the audience anticipated every explosive crescendo and met one after the other with boisterous ovations. Singing heartily to the exten-

tial ultimatum "Alive" made it seem as if the crowd were participating in the largest group-therapy session in history.

Yet it was clear that Vedder doesn't trust his fans to get it. After singing the pointed "Not for You," Vedder made sure to say that it wasn't aimed at them. Though the stage was properly understated for a band with such a precious lack of pretention, wild strobe lights punctuated the sonic blasts of "Go" and "Spin the Black Circle." As Vedder sang the line "she dreams in red" on "Better Man," sure enough, red lasers lit up the stage. Vedder knows how well-placed profanity in lyrics can stir a crowd to applause, and he wasn't shy about using that device.

But is it fair to blame the messenger? It was odd to hear Vedder sing the nightmarish "Daughter" as a fan in front of me wildly shook his body, oblivious to the song's angst. During "Jeremy," a song that describes a mistreated student's bloody vengeance, fans sang and

danced lustily. One wonders: How many have suffered a similar fate, how many were appreciating the song's emotional wallop, and how many were simply celebrating the chance to see their favorite rock band?

On "Wishlist," Vedder sings, "I wish I was a souvenir."

Hey, Eddie — guess what? Despite your best intentions, that's precisely what you are for many people, like it or not.