

Pearl Jam sounds right at home in rockin' Arco Arena

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Just when you think you've got Pearl Jam figured out, the Seattle quintet that helped to define a generation goes off and redefines itself.

This became obvious Thursday night at jam-packed Arco Arena, where the idealistic and ideologic Pearl Jam, making its only scheduled Northern California concert appearance of the year, tried out a surprising new role:

Arena rock heroes.

White lights flashed, and green and orange and purple ones, too — and a mirror ball dropped over the stage from the rafters during one song for moving effect.

There was smoke, and there was

MUSIC REVIEW

fire, the latter coming from lighters sparked up by fans during the slow ballads and from the five candles that burned in the background during the entire two-hour, 23-song show.

Guitarists Mike McCready and Stone Gossard sometimes abandoned their posts on opposite ends of the stage to face each other for dueling riffs in that classic rock style, and there was inspired soloing, too, especially by McCready, whose searing psychedelic blues licks frequently amazed. McCready even played his guitar behind his head at one point — a shocking move for a member of a group that once kicked out a drummer report-

edly because he displayed rock-star tendencies.

Eddie Vedder, the enigmatic singer and soul of the band, bowed like a Broadway actor during the first encore and spent considerable time throughout the night in a spotlight. This marked a major change from previous performances, which Vedder, he of the warm, scratchy baritone, often preferred to give in near darkness, as if the attention and adulation embarrassed him.

And then there was the music.

Sometimes, the band played slashing punk rock at breakneck speeds, as with "Spin the Black Circle," "Hail Hail" and "Habit."

But usually, it was something



Bee photograph/Randy Pench

Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder showed a new willingness to take the spotlight during Thursday's concert at Arco Arena.

Pearl: Band is focusing more intensely on its music

Continued from page 1

more arena-ready – dynamic, crescendoing songs featuring wholly hummable melodies; soaring choruses; varied but fluid rhythms from the versatile tandem of bassist Jeff Ament and new drummer Matt Cameron; and graceful arpeggios that gave way to propulsive power chords and scorching licks.

“Corduroy,” “Jeremy,” “Daughter,” “Better Man,” “Evenflow” and “Given to Fly” were just a few of the better-known songs that suggested Pearl Jam on Thursday was precisely where it should’ve been all along:

On stage, in an arena.

The group refused to tour regularly in recent years while it battled Ticketmaster over the company’s high ticketing fees. Ironically, PJ made its first Sacramento appearance in three years at a venue Ticketmaster just recently began servicing.

Suggesting that there might actually be something to the title of the band’s newest – and poorest-selling – album, “Yield,” Pearl Jam also didn’t order promoters to cover the billboard advertisements around Arco, as it did at its 1995 show at Cal Expo Amphitheatre.

With the focus squarely on the music, Pearl Jam put on a superlative performance marked by intensity and passion, as with most of the band’s best live moments, but also a certain looseness and happiness rarely before displayed by the band formerly known as overly earnest.

Vedder, who botched several lyrics throughout the night, is often referred to as the spokesman for a generation; that’s surely overstating things, but he and his band did seem to have something important to say at Arco:

For those about to rock, we join you.

It’s about time.