

Pearl Jam five play intensely, psychically

Seattle's grungers achieve priceless artistic maturity

By **MARTY BERRY**
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CAMDEN, N.J. — Pearl Jam needs to be seen — and more importantly, heard — to be appreciated. Cranking up the band's CDs on a home or car stereo is but a stopgap pleasure to tide fans over till they come to town again.

Unfortunately, the band's live shows have been few and far between, thanks to their famous battle with Ticketmaster and their plain reluctance to play the rock star game. Their last appearance in the region was in 1992.

Their area fans grew a little restless in those six years, but all was forgiven Friday night when Seattle's premiere grunge band came to Camden's E-Centre for a two-night, sold-out stay.

The excitement in the air was much more intense than for any of the other highly anticipated shows of summer.

The crowd of 25,000 sat politely through fellow Seattle grunge-meisters Mudhoney and punk icon Iggy Pop — who did get the crowd up and dancing with a feral cover of "Johnny B. Goode" at the end of his set.

But Pearl Jam showed what set them apart from the start — songs with rhythm and melody and lyrics and tight playing that makes the five musicians seem almost psychic, knowing just where the others are going at any given time.

The band took the stage at 10, five silhouettes against a vivid backdrop of solid green, with five large, elevated candles burning behind them.

They opened softly, as is their habit, with "Release," the crowd whipping out their lighters usually saved for encores. The slowly burning song built and built — another Pearl Jam trait — until the band exploded into "Animal," also from their second CD, '93s "Vs."

They shot forward in time for the ecstatic release of "Hail, Hail," from 1996's "No Code," then into the present for the gorgeous "Given to Fly," the standout cut from this year's "Yield." Its gentle, eloquent opening and inspirational message were a quietly beautiful contrast to the blunt guitar fury that dominated most of the night.

Singer Eddie Vedder, standing still and clutching the microphone as he let loose with his trademark passionate vocals, sounded a little ragged at times, and a little more restrained than usual. He report-

edly was suffering from some throat trouble earlier this week. But restraint sounds good on Vedder, and has tempered his over-the-top intensity in recent years.

Musically the band is as tight as ever, with replacement drummer Matt Cameron not only fitting in perfectly, but pounding with a little more strength, if less subtlety, than regular drummer Jack Irons, who is sitting out the tour with health problems.

Guitarists Mike McCready and Stone Gossard, augmented from time to time by Vedder, and bassist Jeff Ament have become a remarkable unit, and seemed more relaxed together than ever before.

If a band can survive the inevitable strains of superstardom these days, as Pearl Jam has done, sometimes they can realize the rewarding payoff of an artistic maturity that only comes through struggle.

Pearl Jam will play a second show tonight at 8, but it is sold out.