

Pearl Jam cooling the angst

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By all rights, Pearl Jam ought to be the Band That Time Forgot.

Choice and circumstance has, in recent years, sidelined the once-dominant Seattle rock group, which headlines a sold-out concert Tuesday at Lakewood Amphitheatre. Its efforts to grow beyond the formative "grunge" sound it helped to incubate in the early 1990s, and its past refusal to make rock videos or play music venues whose ticketing is controlled by Ticketmaster, has cost the group. While album sales shrank — down to 1.3 million for its flawed, ambitiously introspective "No Code" (1996) — a new generation of copycat acts launched careers by emulating the musical postures that Pearl Jam has struggled to subvert.

Yet, if this is a band destined for nostalgia's dustbin, as some critics have asserted, you wouldn't know it tonight.

As more than 12,000 fans roar their approval at Michigan State University's Breslin Arena, the five musicians respond in kind.

Bellowing at the limit of his lungs as guitars snarl and slash behind him, Eddie Vedder slumps against the microphone

PREVIEW

Pearl Jam

7:30 p.m. Tuesday. Sold out. Lakewood Amphitheatre, 2002 Lakewood Way S.W. 404-249-6400.

stand, hair obscuring his face, body limp, like he's about to collapse around the wine bottle near his feet. The only part of the vocalist that appears to work is his mouth, and it consumes everything around him. "The whole world," he sings — or, rather, yodels, howls, groans — "will be different / The whoooole world . . ."

Whether Vedder, 32, intends a promise, a threat or some sort of mockery, it's hard to know. He's a sincere enigma. But for Pearl Jam the lyrics are already fact. The world, for this band, is different. Embarked on its first major American tour since 1994, when it began a quixotic battle against concert ticket-sales monolith Ticketmaster, the group has emerged with the strongest work of its

Eddie Vedder

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Band: Pearl Jam evokes a kind of modesty in an immodest age

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career. Much as Pearl Jam's live performance, its new album, "Yield" (Epic), flaunts the musicians' knack for agile, muscular thrash—Vedder's every wail a protest against the nature of existence. But more persuasively, it gives us the gorgeous reverie "Given to Fly" detail complex emotions in ballads that emphasize the ruddy textures in Vedder's voice, with folk-rock foundations that draw on the gentler side of such '70s icons as Neil Young and Led Zeppelin.

The title of "Yield," (Grade: A), might imply that Pearl Jam is giving in. The group is now playing Ticketmaster venues. A video clip for the song "Do the Evolution" is being offered to MTV, with a live rehearsal documentary "Single Video Theory" also available for sale. The band's members, traditionally wary of the media, have been talking.

What happened, says bassist Jeff Ament, is the band was eager to return to performance. "You go back and forth depending on what day it is," he says, alluding to the group's bruised, but intact, integrity. "OK, I'm gonna do this and this and this, I'm gonna make my relationships better and my family life better and my business better. Some days you wake up and you don't give a [expletive], you don't want to have to worry about responsibility."

No band this decade has fretted so much, reaching a commercial peak with its first album "10" in 1991, and then beating a steady retreat from stardom. Major pop personas such as Bruce Springsteen and Prince have made significant mid-career shifts, for example, by staging a solo acoustic tour or releasing new work in three or four-CD chunks that only hard-core fans can fully appreciate. It's a rock 'n' roll version of downsizing that can give a creatively crowded performer some breathing room

(or perhaps encourage foolish self-indulgence). Pearl Jam made of this a drama equal to the tensions that propel its songs.

As one fan, Jim Delacorte, 24, of Westland, Mich., puts it: "Whatever's popular, Eddie does the opposite and sees who's going to the opposite."

It worked. While the band launched its own voyage of discovery—touring and recording behind kindred spirit Young, for instance, or, as Vedder did, collaborating with the late Pakistani vocal star Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan—the moody, dynamic swings of its guitars and cries of rage and dysfunction were adopted by such groups as Stone Temple Pilots, Live and Silverchair.

Meanwhile, the "heavy" factor that once occupied radio station playlists influenced by Pearl Jam and its Seattle neighbors Nirvana, was eroded by the soft pop-rock of such phenomena as Hootie & the Blowfish and Jewel. It didn't help that the band often seemed to be shooting itself in the foot rather than slaying its corporate nemesis.

"The group, despite a steady number of high visibility bouts of conscience, has managed to slip to the margins of the American public's musical radar," observes Christopher Hawthorne, arts editor of the East Bay Express in Berkeley, Calif., writing recently in the Webzine Salon. "While following other bands on their voyages of Beatle's self-discovery—like the Beastie Boys, say, who've never lost their sense of humor—has been effortlessly entertaining, with Pearl Jam it's always felt like a bit of a slog."

True enough: Vedder's brooding, his air of refusal, seems utterly perverse in this era of all-out celebrity saturation. "I think the whole band got a little full of itself," says Megan Frampton, senior director of sales and marketing for CMJ publications, which include the trade magazine CMJ Monthly. An early fan of the group, Frampton began attending

Pearl Jam shows when the band was still known by its original name, Mookie Blaylock. "I just haven't been interested. I don't know why. The punk ethic doesn't really suit a stadium-filler band."

Yet, it's a significant part of Pearl Jam's—and Vedder's—image.

"Eddie's probably one of the major icons of pop music who's kept his anonymity throughout," says Jay Fung, a 19-year-old Michigan fan.

When everything in pop music can be construed as a franchise, when every classic tune is just another jingle for a car commercial, Pearl Jam might be that little mom 'n' pop store on the dirt road under the new interstate. It's a band asserting a kind of modesty in an immodest age.

"It's about artists seizing control," says Ted Mankin, an Atlanta-based promoter with Cellular Door, which has produced Pearl Jam concerts in the region. "It's about taking back control and taking care of the people that got you there and having a career. They [careers] can go by in a blur if you don't make it special somehow. Just as quickly as the momentum can build it can deflate."

Though 18,000 tickets have been sold for the band's Lakewood show, its new album has been steadily slipping down the charts. Sitting at No. 166 after 27 weeks, "Yield" has sold a million-plus copies. So has "My Own Prison" by Creed, a slavishly derivative act whose sound is nearly identical to grunge knock-offs Bush, a band indebted to Pearl Jam and Nirvana for its sound. After 45 weeks in release, the Creed disc is at No. 23, demonstrating that there's still mileage left in post-adolescent wallowing.

Pearl Jam is trying to relate to adulthood. "You don't have to represent yourself as the [tortured], angst-ridden artist all the time," contends Ament, 35, call-

ing from his home in Missoula, Mont., during a break in the tour. "You don't have to die at 26 and shoot drugs and be drunk all the time along the way to create something good. I'm not gonna hold it back and turn myself into a monster. I've seen a lot of people do that."

The transition from neurotic, world-beating rock supergroup to a mature band in full control of its fortunes was necessary, if not terrifically sexy. "When you don't have any perspective, when you're selling 10 million records and you don't know what that is, and then you look around you and your friends aren't selling as many records, you kind of wonder why." Ament continues, looking back on the band's evolution. "Those bands are at least as good as we are. That provided some insecurity. You get a little paranoid."

That's not Vedder's stance tonight. Not the furive Garbo some have labeled him, he's talkative, downright chummy at times. He makes speeches about campus censorship and summer romances, revisits the band's biggest hits, "Jeremy" and "Alive"—which, defiant as they are, have become fraternity-row anthems—and impressively moves between stirring, hymnlike confessionals (the quiet "Wishlist") and more vigorously driven material (explosive riff-fests such as "Do the Evolution" and "Brain of J."). It's a substantive performance, in which themes of resistance and redemption seem designed to fill a void.

At the end of the show, for an encore, Vedder does something funny. *Ha ha* funny. He pledges his love to a guy in the audience and plucks him onstage—wow, just like Springsteen did for the then-unknown Courtney Cox in the "Dancing in the Dark" video

—only to send him back for dressing inappropriately: wearing an offending Michigan jersey on rival turf, no less. Then, Vedder invites a college-age woman to join him. She's gaga, you know, but she gets it together because the singer has a task for her. He hands her a book of lyrics to hold while he performs a song the band has barely rehearsed. It's called "Molish of Love," by the late, great Memphis songwriter Arthur Alexander, a soulful ditty from 1962, a good 20 years before some of these fans were born.

As he tentatively proceeds toward the chorus, which everyone is encouraged to clap and sing along with, Vedder is neither the roiling conscience of an uncertain generation nor a sullen anti-star grumbling as he dodges

fame's arrow. He's just a guy who'd be as clumsy as you'd be standing in front of a bunch of people, a little wine in your belly, trying to sing something sweet from a forgotten jukebox to a pretty girl, you'd only just met.

Eddie Vedder has to laugh. And, for a couple of minutes, the world laughs with him.

■ To hear Pearl Jam's "Yield," call 511, enter 8600, then access code 852.