

Angst for the Memories

Seattle's Pearl Jam weds soaring music to a compelling message

MUSIC REVIEW

PEARL JAM. Still one of the best. Thursday and Friday at Madison Square Garden. Seen Thursday.

By Letta Tayler

STAFF WRITER

I'M SURE YOU don't give a — how you got your ticket. Well, we don't care either," Pearl Jam's frontman, Eddie Vedder, declared Thursday night at Madison Square Garden in a tone so belligerent you couldn't help but suspect he meant the opposite.

Times have not been easy for Pearl Jam, the superband that played a seminal role in the angst-filled grunge movement.

Four years ago, the band bravely boycotted TicketMaster to protest its hefty surcharges on ticket sales. But the noble stance almost killed the group's ability to tour. In an inevitable capitulation to market reality, Pearl Jam's current tour stops at several venues serviced by TicketMaster, which has slapped fees as high as \$11.75 onto the band's \$23 tickets.

Meanwhile, despite strong reviews, "Yield," Pearl Jam's latest album, has sold only 1 million copies — one-tenth the number for "Ten" — and is wallowing at No. 140 on the pop charts.

Musically, however, the band has lost no ground. In a two-hour set in which its new material sounded as strong as the old, Pearl Jam showed it remains one of the most vital groups of the decade, and one of the few that can project both grandeur and intimacy on an arena-sized scale.

Even an occasional flub didn't stop the band's momentum. When guitarist Stone Gossard botched a solo during "All Those Yesterdays," forcing the band to abandon the song, Vedder imme-

diately rallied the crowd with "Alive," building the story of how he'd never met his real father to a harrowing climax.

Vedder is one of the most affecting voices in rock. Tortured yet tender, it carries a vulnerable quaver that is as soothing as it is wrenching. His lyrics about abused children, confused adults and other battered souls are never less than convincing.

His baritone moved in and around an intricate instrumental thicket that ranged from heaving rock to buzzing punk and often started spare before building to soaring crescendos. Lead guitarist Mike McCready, who sported a punky blond hairdo and dashed around the stage like a young Pete Townshend, delivered riffs as flashy as his moves, bathing the crowd in electric tidal waves on "RVM" and "Even Flow."

Former Soundgarden drummer Matt Cameron, a longtime Pearl Jam associate who has joined the band's current tour, was as deft at delicacy as he was at force, adding subtle touches to the somber ballad "Long Road" and to Vedder's soaring, Icarian tale "Learning to Fly."

Though angst remains its mainstay, Pearl Jam has lightened up a little. During the caustic "Do the Evolution," Vedder shimmied and grinned ghoulishly between verses that decried atrocities committed in the name of progress.

Before its encores, Pearl Jam resumed the mix of humor and homily by having four uniformed men bring onstage a pile of file boxes, which Vedder joked he'd been given by independent counsel Kenneth Starr in exchange for concert passes. Then Vedder turned serious, declaring that "We have no business knowing" about a president's private life and adding, "We should move

onto bigger issues, the first one being music."

It is there, within the realm of chords and lyrics and rhythm, that Pearl Jam has held its own, without compromising either its compelling messages or its ability to make music that is complex and accessible — and that really rocks. ■



AP Photo

Pearl Jam singer Eddie Vedder belted out a song recently in Rapid City, S.D.