

Latest tour shows Pearl Jam trying to polish image

■ The band, which has outlasted many of its contemporaries, finds a renewed determination during its tour.

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WEST PALM BEACH — Leave it to Eddie Vedder to put up a fight with Mother Nature.

"The last time we were in South Florida for Lollapalooza (in 1992) there was Hurricane Andrew. This time out we've got Georges," he mumbled to the sold out crowd at the Coral Sky Amphitheater in West Palm Beach on Tuesday evening.

"Bring it on, Georges."

It was a defiant footnote to the first night of the band's two-night stand in South Florida which capped off Pearl Jam's U.S. tour.

For all its well-publicized hand-wringing over their place in rock stardom, Pearl Jam has survived beyond most of its Seattle contemporaries who have fallen to the mainstream wayside in recent years. The Seattle grunge revolution of the early '90s has fizzled in the face of artificially sweetened pop the likes of Hanson and the Spice Girls.

Pearl Jam did little to improve the situation. A failed tour, a messy antitrust bout with Ticketmaster (which provided ticketing for this show) and almost no video or radio support for its last two albums have kept the band on the back shelf. Vedder's anti-rock-star brooding cast a bratty shadow over anything the band did, and fans and critics seemed ready to write the group off.

But with its latest album, *Yield*, the band approached the rock process with a little more humility while still keeping up its guard and, in turn, yielded to Ticketmaster and proceeded with a national tour.

For nearly two hours, Pearl Jam chugged through favorites from all five of its albums, each one bursting with energy and charisma. With rumblings abounding that Pearl Jam might be at the end of the line with its brand of guitar-charged rock, Tuesday's performance showcased a band with enough determination to last it for years to come. And the band seemed happy to deliver that to its fans.

Following a spirited set of marble mouthed combat rock from punk openers Rancid, Vedder and company came out bucking with *Carduroy*, their anti-fame anthem from *Vitalogy* ("I don't wanna hear from those who know / thinking that they can put on my clothes"). Ironically enough, plenty of fans walked away from the merch tent with \$10 Pearl Jam socks.

It's that contradiction that fuels the fascination with Pearl Jam. Against the Big Rock Show backdrop, there was a genuine sense of passion for the music and for its audience. The band pulled out all the big rock star moves, all the big lights and all the big songs for both encores (even a high-power version of *Baba O'Reilly*). Lots of mosh action from the lawn section.

Plenty of fist pumping and plenty of girls screaming "We love you Eddie."

But amid its bigness, Pearl Jam emitted an intimate magnetism that drew the audience closer in, turning Coral Sky into a giant humid living room. Signature hits such as *Jeremy*, *Betterman* and *Alive* had 19,000 Eddie Vedders drowning out the band.

Of all the voices in '90s rock, none has made more of a noticeable impact on other bands than Vedder's. One listen to Creed, Bush, Stone Temple Pilots or even Hootie and the Blowfish and similarities to Vedder's powerhouse baritone immediately come to mind. His trembling vocals powered every tune with urgency and vulnerability, sending the Zepplinesque *Given to Fly* soaring and grinding *No Code's Laktis* into the floor. For much of the show, Vedder strapped on a guitar and breathed life into *MFC*, *Daughter* and *Wishlist*.

Aside from Vedder's onstage intensity, lead guitarist Mike McCready set fire to just about every song he laid into, turning on incredible solos in *Evenflow* and the crescendoing *Red Masquito*.

Near show's end, Vedder crossed the stage, shaking fans' hands and tossing the microphone into a hanging light unit high above the stage. Rather than the moody, enigmatic Eddie Vedder people have come to expect, he seemed exceptionally gracious and satisfied to be the mega rock star that he has become.

"You've given us the best job in the world," he said after a front row fan shouted a thank you to the band. "We just want to thank you for that."



Pearl Jam guitarist Eddie Vedder and company came out bucking with *Carduroy*.