

PERFORMERS

Pearl Jam's classic lineup: Jeff Ament, Mike McCready, Eddie Vedder, Stone Gossard, and Matt Cameron (from left), Seattle, 2009

Pearl Jam

THEY ARE HARDCORE-PUNK IDEALISTS WITH CLASSIC-ROCK VALUES AND A STRING OF HIT ALBUMS.

BY DAVID FRICKE



In the late summer of 1990, Eddie Vedder was a singer without a band and a songwriter in limbo. He was working the night shift at a gas station in San Diego when his friend Jack Irons, the founding drummer of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, handed him a cassette tape. It was a demo of instrumentals by two pals of Irons' in Seattle, guitarist Stone Gossard and bassist Jeff Ament, founding members of the proto-grunge band Mother Love Bone who wanted Irons to join their new group. Instead, Irons gave the tape to Vedder.

That night, Vedder listened intently to the tape. He was a passionate surfer, and when he hit the waves the next morning, something changed. In his first *Rolling Stone* interview the following year, Vedder recounted the sensation of riding the water feeling “like every nerve” was “directly exposed. I started dealing with a few things that I hadn’t dealt with, and I had this music in my head at the same time . . . I was literally writing some of these words as I was going up against a wave.”

One of the songs to take root that day would become the majestic hit “Alive.” It reflected Vedder’s troubled childhood and adolescence: a turbulent home life and confusing parentage. Born Edward Severson in Evanston, Illinois, he discovered the identity of his biological father only after the man’s death.

Vedder dubbed his words and vocals onto the tape and sent it back to Seattle. Ament listened to the cassette over and over, then called Gossard, according to his 1993 *Rolling Stone* interview with the writer-film director Cameron Crowe. “Stone, you better get over here,” he told the guitarist. Vedder was soon in Seattle, writing and rehearsing with Ament, Gossard, and lead guitarist Mike McCready. “Alive” was the first song they ran through.

On October 22, 1990, Ament, Gossard, Vedder, McCready, and their first drummer, Dave Krusen, made their hometown debut at the Off Ramp club. The band’s name: Mookie Blaylock, after a pro-basketball cult hero. By March of 1991, they had renamed themselves Pearl Jam and began working on their first album, *Ten* (Blaylock’s jersey number). It was released by Epic Records on August 27, 1991.

Pearl Jam were just hitting the national club-and-support-act grind when, on September 24, the Northwest trio Nirvana issued their second album, *Nevermind*. Rock & roll – across America, around the world, and especially in Seattle, for Pearl Jam and the rest of their still-secret underground – was about to change in a loud, permanent way.

There are plenty of overnight-sensation stories in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And there are the artists who represent the endurance and legacy that come without hits – the long, uphill run to artistic recognition and lasting, inspirational heritage. Then there is Pearl Jam.

For more than a quarter century, Ament, Gossard, McCready, and Vedder – with fellow inductees Krusen and drummer Matt Cameron, who joined in 1998 after a decade with Seattle’s Soundgarden – have been a combination of the two unto themselves: hardcore-punk idealists with classic-rock values and an unbroken streak of ten Top Five studio albums, half of them Number Ones. Pearl Jam went from the rehearsal room to multiplatinum at breakneck speed. Driven by the singles “Alive” and “Jeremy” (Vedder’s harrowing account of a high school student’s suicide), *Ten* peaked at Number Two in *Billboard* in August 1992, eventually selling more than thirteen million copies.

Pearl Jam responded to their sudden, whiplash ascent and the compromising demands of that success by going to battle stations: the raw-power drive, songwriting exploration, and visceral lyric confrontation of *Vs.* in 1993 and *Vitalogy* in 1994. Both were Number One albums, the former selling nearly a million copies in its first five days out. “I think we’re doing fine,” Gossard told Crowe in that 1993 story. “Nobody’s out buying limos and thinking they’re the most amazing thing on Earth.

“The problem with getting too big is not, innately, you get too big and all of a sudden you stop playing good music,” the guitarist claimed. “The problem is, when you get too big, you stop doing the things you used to do. Just being big doesn’t mean you can’t go in your basement and write a good song.”



Pearl Jam were born out of a true garage-band bond. Gossard, a Seattle native, and Ament, an emigrant from northern Montana, met in the Seattle metal-punk band Green River: Gossard joined as a guitar player; Ament was already the bassist. The group put out its 1987 EP, *Dry as a Bone*, on indie upstart label Sub Pop, which prophetically touted the release as “ultra-loose GRUNGE that destroyed the morals of a generation.” Soon Green River split up; Gossard, Ament, and Andrew Wood, a flamboyant local singer, formed the progressive glam-rock band Mother Love Bone. They were just about to release their debut studio album when Wood overdosed and died. It was March 1990. Shattered, Gossard and Ament went separate ways.

Gossard fought off grief by jamming with McCready, a guitarist he’d first met in school who was obsessed with the power blues of Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan. McCready encouraged Gossard to seek out Ament and start writing together again. “Jeremy” and “Why Go” on *Ten* were among the first pieces of music from their reunion. “We had already done so much together,” Ament told me in 2016. Pearl Jam offered “a new lease” on songwriting. “And that has been our relationship ever since. We have our

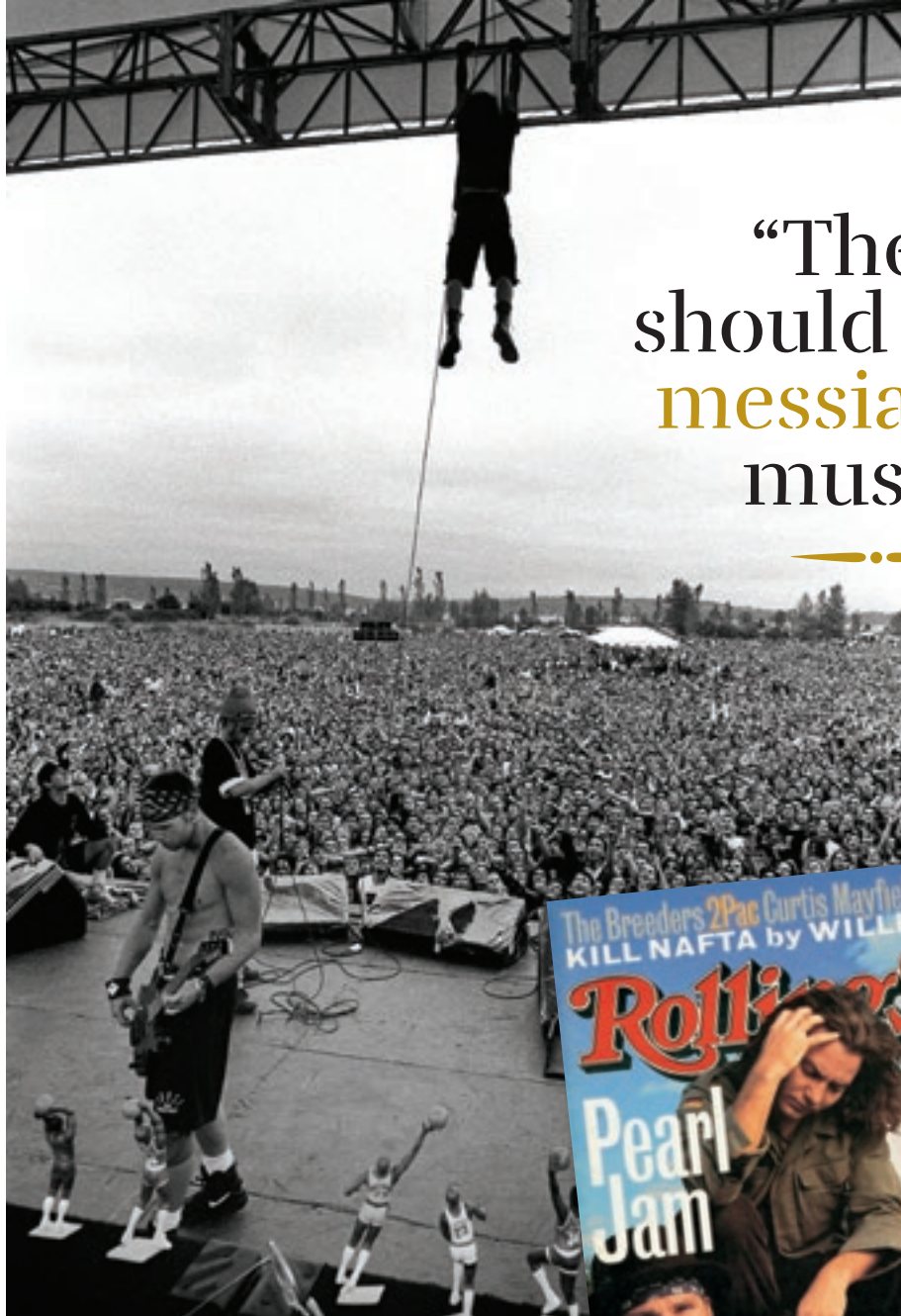


FROM TOP
Eddie Vedder surfs
the crowd, 1991;
Gossard, McCready,
Ament, Vedder,
and Cameron
(from left) in 2002.



FROM TOP McCready, Ament, Gossard, Vedder, and original drummer Dave Krusen (from left), ready to launch in 1991; McCready, Ament, Vedder, Gossard, and Matt Cameron thank another ecstatic audience in Boston, 2016.





“There should be no messiahs in music.”

Vedder, known for his daredevil stage antics in the band's early days, hangs from the staging in 1991.



own language about songwriting, and we drive everybody else crazy a little bit.”

During first rehearsals with Vedder, Soundgarden's singer, Chris Cornell – who had been Wood's close friend and roommate – asked the band to work with him and Cameron on two songs written in Wood's memory. The rapid-fire sessions would become an entire album, *Temple of the Dog* (1991), and featured Vedder's first lead-vocal appearance on a record, on the song “Hunger Strike.” (Cameron, it should be noted, helped Pearl Jam at the start by playing on their early demos.)

Vedder “was super-shy” and “very respectful” of the dynamics already at work in Pearl Jam, McCready recalled when *Temple of the Dog* was reissued in 2016. Vedder had been doing backing vocals on the album – Cornell was singing lead – but during one session, when Cornell was having trouble singing a part on “Hunger Strike,” Vedder took the mic. As McCready recalled, Vedder “had this crazy power and amazing voice. I felt that this was one of the best singers I've ever heard in my life.”

With his scouring baritone howl, emotionally searing lyrics, and hair-trigger stage temper, Vedder became a manic poster boy for the generational dramas and purifying rage of the Seattle renaissance. Like Nirvana's singer-guitarist Kurt Cobain, Vedder reacted to his celebrity with contempt and dismay. Unlike Cobain, who took his own life in April 1994, Vedder survived what Crowe – who cast members of

Pearl Jam in his 1992 romantic comedy, *Singles*, set in grunge-mad Seattle – called “the public effect of writing well about damaged personalities.”

“I was surprised and a little upset that so many people did relate,” Vedder admitted to Crowe in *Rolling Stone*. But, he went on, “there should be no messiahs in music. The music itself . . . I don't mind worshipping that. I've done that.”

The rest of Pearl Jam's nineties were a blur of world tours, drummer changes (Jack Irons joined in 1994, replaced by Cameron four years later), and striking collaborations. Pearl Jam played sidekick to their longtime hero Neil Young on the 1995 album *Mirror Ball*, and Vedder's compelling duet with Pakistan's Sufi-vocal master Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, “The Face of Love,” was a highlight of the soundtrack to the 1996 film *Dead Man Walking*.

The band also escalated its political and social engagement with benefit concerts for pro-choice and



Selected Discography

environmental causes. In 1994, the band declared war on the concert-ticket industry, filing an antitrust suit against Ticketmaster that cited monopolistic practices and fee gouging. Ament and Gossard testified against the company in Congress. Pearl Jam lost that campaign, but scored better with another fan-friendly initiative, building on the live-tape-sharing aesthetic of the Grateful Dead. In 2000, the group launched a series of soundboard-quality live albums from every concert on its tours – a now-common practice and income stream for many working bands. That October, five albums from European Pearl Jam gigs hit *Billboard*'s Top 200 in the same week, setting a record for simultaneous debuts on that chart.

One show from that year was not released: Pearl Jam's June 30, 2000, appearance at the Roskilde Festival in Denmark, cut short when eight fans suffocated to death in the muddy crush of the mosh pit. (A ninth victim died in the hospital.) It was, Vedder said later, the closest Pearl Jam ever came to breaking up. "Stone was ready to close up shop," the singer said. "And I thought that if anyone lost their lives at one of our shows, that would be it. I would never play again."

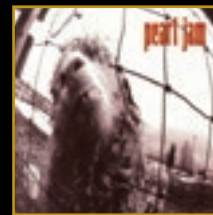
One month later, on August 3, Pearl Jam were back onstage, opening an American tour in Virginia Beach, Virginia. "Playing, facing crowds, being together – it enabled me to start processing" the tragedy, Vedder explained. The night before that show, he wrote "I Am Mine" – recorded for *Riot Act* (2002) with the chorus, "We're safe tonight" – to "reassure myself that this is going to be all right," he said.

Pearl Jam were back on the front lines as well – and in the crosshairs of right-wing talk shows – when Vedder protested America's invasion of Iraq in March 2003 by wearing a rubber mask of President George W. Bush while performing the *Riot Act* song "Bu\$hleaguer." As an unbowed Vedder put it during that tour, "If you can't be critical of a president during time of war, doesn't that encourage him to be at war?"

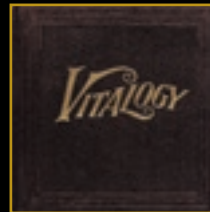
Twenty-seven years after that fateful cassette tape, Pearl Jam remain a continuing phenomenon: the biggest, most reliably explosive, and vigorously committed survivors of their Northwest generation and its revolution-rock ethics. You can take the band out of Seattle and put it in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. But when Pearl Jam take the stage tonight for their induction, it will be loud and clear to all: You can't take the Seattle out of the band.



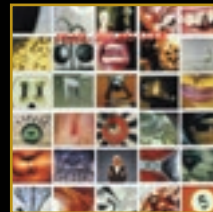
TEN
Epic 1991



VS.
Epic 1993



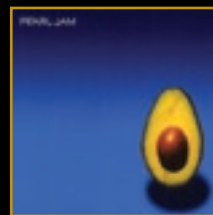
VITALOGY
Epic 1994



NO CODE
Epic 1996



YIELD
Epic 1998



**PEARL JAM
J**
2006



LIVE ON TEN LEGS
Monkeywrench 2011



LIGHTNING BOLT
Monkeywrench 2013

OPPOSITE PAGE
Neil Young and Vedder
share a brew and a
smile, 1993.

THIS PAGE Vedder
takes another leap,
Fenway Park, 2016.

