



The Gazette

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Political Pearl Jam raises Pepsi Center roof

The Gazette (Colorado Springs, CO)

April 3, 2003 | ROBIN A. ROTHMAN; THE GAZETTE

It was 11 p.m. when the house lights came up Tuesday at the Pepsi Center, but the guys in Pearl Jam weren't ready to vacate the stage.

They weren't concerned that they were 15 minutes past curfew. After all, it was the start of their 2003 U.S. tour and they had barely begun the third song of their second encore.

The crowd was equally determined to "Keep on Rockin' in the Free World" for at least a few more minutes. The song, both in performance and in sentiment - "Take to the streets! Raise your voice!" - was a powerful ending to a night of varied content and mixed response.

Amplly sprinkled with tunes from their latest release, "Riot Act," the set list adequately represented the group's catalog, but the selection was clearly geared toward those fans dedicated enough to own albums after the debut "Ten" and follow-up "Vs."

"Love Boat Captain," a touching tribute to the nine fans trampled when the band played in Denmark in 2000, opened the show slow and steady at 8:45 p.m. with the borrowed idea that "All you need is love."

"Corduroy" and "Better Man" were obvious crowd-pleasers, and unsurprisingly those rare, older, bigger hits like "Even Flow," "Porch" and "Daughter" prompted sing-alongs.

"I see you're into the song," frontman Eddie Vedder improvised during "Black," tying it in as if it were a standard lyric. Cuts like the fierce "Save You" and the distorted, pulsating "You Are" weren't as overpowering.

The banter mirrored the songs it separated.

"Guzzling gas is bad for your blood," Vedder semi-sang as an anti-SUV introduction to the more cryptically political "Green Disease."

The idea induced immediate cheers. The same cannot be said for his anti-war segue into "Do the Evolution," for which he was hit head-on by a chorus of booing; one fan actually audibly told him to shut up.

"I don't know if you've heard of this thing," he retorted. "It's called freedom of speech."

The moral of his poorly received preamble: His Vietnam veteran buddy "doesn't feel like we've evolved at all in 20 years."

Vedder dug into the vocals, however, and aided by guitarists Mike McCready and Stone Gossard, he quickly won back the crowd. Reiterating before the encore that his statements shouldn't be considered anti-troops, Vedder said, "They're not the ones who make foreign policy. They're just doing their job."

But Vedder wasn't done with politics. He soon took the stage wearing a plastic Bush mask and a silver jacket worthy of Elton John.

Mockingly dancing his way to the microphone - rolling his arms, poking himself in the eyes and grabbing his crotch - he didn't appear to think twice about delivering the unrepentantly scathing "Bush Leaguer," singing "Drilling for fear, makes the job simple/ Born on third, thinks he got a triple."

Propping the mask on his mike stand as if it were a head on a stick, Vedder then lifted the pole into the air, inverted it, and crashed it into the stage.

Finally the band put politics aside and lightened up for the second encore, which began with Vedder's solo acoustic ukelele rendition of "Soon Forget."

The band back behind him, including intermittent keyboardist Kenneth "Boom" Gaspar, bassist Jeff Ament, and drummer Mike Cameron, Vedder swigged some wine and launched into Victoria Williams' "Crazy Mary."

He eventually took his bottle again and, as the song goes, drank it down and passed it around - into the crowd, where a lucky fifth- row fan got the final drink, then held onto the souvenir for dear life through the rest of the show.