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RESTLESS SOULS

HOW PEARL JAM FOUGHT BACK AND SAVED THEMSELVES WITH VITALOGY

BY NICK TAVARES

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RESTLESS SOULS

The past 10 days had been a meat grinder.

The band played six shows in seven nights, including a three-night stand in Boston, before heading for New York to perform on *Saturday Night Live* for the second time. There were a couple of days off built in before the TV appearance, at least, and perhaps a little rest could be found.

But the band was weary, wired and, clearly, they had a plan and something to say. In typical industry practice, the obvious move would've been to play the latest single from the latest record, and the latest record, *Vs.*, was a monster that set a first-week sales record for *Billboard* just a few months earlier. "Daughter" and "Go" were on the radio and "Animal" had been released as the album's third single just two weeks before.

But in the wake of the devastating news of Kurt Cobain's suicide and the understanding that something should be done, the producers at NBC gave the group the green light to tackle three songs — rare for the show, then and now — and to let them play what they wanted.

Around midnight and following host Emilio Estevez's introduction, the camera swung over to the stage. Pounding drums and an unfamiliar guitar riff greeted the crowd. Eddie Vedder, in a green army surplus t-shirt, blue jacket and black shorts, was driving the band on guitar. Jeff Ament hung behind him waiting for the rebound before lunging at his bass. To his left, Stone Gossard marched in place and swung his arm when his cue came up, hitting the strings on his Les Paul and twisting the volume of the moment up exponentially.

This was a mysterious, violent song. The band was unleashing "Not For You," debuted just a month earlier on stage in Denver, on a national audience. Now the musicians were collectively walloping their instruments in a moment of cohesive chaos, and Vedder was screaming, releasing all of the tension, confusion and anger that had stacked up on top of itself in the past three years, railing against intrusive reporters and unwelcome invasions of privacy, unloading accusations and declarations intent on regaining some sense of self. The lives of the five musicians had changed drastically, for better and for worse, and the need to feel in command of an existence spinning out of direction was greater than ever.

Things were building to a crest. Media coverage was exploding and crushing a once-thriving scene. Control was slipping. And now, people were dying.

Pearl Jam was furious.

MAKER OF MY ENEMIES

As Eddie Vedder said in interviews around 1994, the band went from the audience to the stage in the space of three years. That time span allowed the band to experience the euphoria that comes with creating music that resonated with listeners on an emotional level and in sharing that connection night after night on stage. Every night was loaded with energy, hope and a gratefulness that came with being able to make a living through art.

But by the time the calendar turned to 1993, the pitfalls of that rapid rise began to reveal themselves. Pearl Jam, along with Nirvana, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains and a host of other bands from Seattle and elsewhere, were heralded as the leaders of a new musical revolution, and with that came the magazine covers, cameras and non-stop coverage that followed being part of this new, collective voice. It was, it seemed, part of the devil's bargain that accompanied success.

"I was in a small little coffee shop and someone stopped me," Vedder said, "and this waitress, this older lady kind of witnessed it, and said, 'oh, you're what's-his-name,' and I said, 'yeah, yeah.' And she said, 'What, you don't like it?' And it's just, it's no big deal, you know? I'm just this guy. And she said, 'Well, if you don't like it, you know, you certainly picked the wrong business to be in.' She had a really good point.

"The fact is, when you sit in your room playing guitar, you sit and play because you have to get this aggression out. The last thing any kid has to worry about is being on the cover of fucking *Time* magazine."

The surliness and seriousness that gripped the band first became obvious in the lead-up to *Vs.*, when the band decided to eschew the typical industry practice of making a music video to accompany the album's first single, or any videos for any singles. Interviews became scarce, and when the band did

PEARL JAM

Vitalogy

Epic 1994

Producer:
Brendan O' Brien

DIVISION ONE:

1. Last Exit
2. Spin the Black Circle
3. Not For You
4. Tremor Christ
5. Nothingman
6. Whipping

DIVISION TWO:

7. Pry, To
8. Corduroy
9. Bugs
10. Satan's Bed
11. Better Man
12. Aye Davanita
13. Immortality
14. Stupid Mop

speak, it was clear that Vedder was growing less and less enthused with the idea of being a celebrity.

"Someone wrote a letter (in a magazine) the other day about 'Eddie (It's So Hard to Be a Rock Star) Vedder,'" he explained before *Vitalogy*'s release in 1994. "Well, I just want to clarify. It's not hard to be a rock star. If you want to go around [fucking] women and cleaning a bunch of teenagers of all their dough because they like your band and charge them up the ying for T-shirts and concert tickets, that's easy. That's playing the game."

But without playing the game in a traditional way, *Vs.* was still a force, riding the wave of *Ten*'s triumph to sell nearly a million copies in its first week in Oct. 1993. Tickets were flying for their shows and kids were camping out for CDs and merchandise, while the band was still in demand as a source of news and entertainment for the folks who make their living on creating drama within the celebrity realm.

The pressure continued to build and squeeze at once, lifting Pearl Jam to the heights of commercial success and putting a strain on the relationships within the band and the music that was being made. Still, the band did its part in trying to control as much of the experience as possible. In addition to pulling away from the spotlight, they began to take greater control of their shows, giving fans preferential treatment with ticket buying in an attempt to circumvent Ticketmaster and scalping, playing fan club-only shows in major cities and keeping the band's merchandise affordable.

The songs on *Vs.* reflected that discomfort. "Daughter," "Dissident" and "rearviewmirror" were songs whose themes dealt with closing off from a troubled situation and running away. "Indifference" hinted at the struggle of fighting against negativity while wondering if there was any point to the exercise. Most pointedly, "Blood" was a blunt attack on the media circus, featuring the band burning behind a screaming Vedder. The scene was getting murkier, and the music was beginning to reflect that darkness.

But it would take a catastrophe to stop the ride and force major change, and that came from 3,000 miles outside of the band. On April 8, 1994, as Pearl Jam prepared to play a show in Fairfax, Va., the news broke that Cobain had killed himself in his Seattle home. Pearl Jam made the decision to finish the handful of shows remaining on the tour, and everything beyond that was up in the air.

"To be honest, right now, we had four shows left on this thing when we found out what happened in Seattle, and I didn't even think we should play the rest of those shows," Vedder said in Boston three days later. "So as it is I'm going to get through these shows. It seems like it's the best thing to do for us and for the people coming to see the shows. It's been healthy for all of us, though incredibly difficult, and after that, I might not, we as a band, we might not play for a very long time."

"It's a pretty intense thing to deal with," Ament said the same day. "Even being out here with Mudhoney and kind of being with a group of people that have coexisted with their band for the last seven or eight years. I'm really thinking about Krist [Novocelic] and Dave [Grohl], kind of the people that were around him, and I think a lot about Andy [Wood], having dealt with that in Mother Love Bone.

"I don't know. It just kind of brings up a lot of sour feelings, emotions, and it's just going to be different, it's going to be weird, and we're just trying to get through it."

The first order of business was the remaining tour stops in Boston and New York, plus the *Saturday Night Live* slot, where, at the end of their third song, "Daughter," Vedder improvised a section to include lyrics from Neil Young's "Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)." Cobain had quoted the now-infamous "It's better to burn out than to fade away" lyric in his suicide note; Vedder, in turn, recited the more hopeful "Rock and roll will never die / there's more to the picture than meets the eye," after flashing open his jacket to reveal a "K" written in marker over his heart.

They played one more show in New York — another fan club date — before heading back home. There was still music to be made, though. Recording on their next album had begun on the road in Nov. 1993 and would continue through spring and summer of 1994. The songs would be darker than they had been on Pearl Jam's first records, and the work that began with *Vs.* to assert more control over the rise of the band and the collateral damage that success demanded would continue.

The next album would be loaded with aggressive, confusing songs alongside tunes that would go on to be hits and fan favorites. It would be packaged in a relic-like book loaded with peculiar illustrations and antiquated advice on

healthy living. It would be sold on vinyl before its digital counterpart. There would, of course, be nothing made for MTV and not much more given to radio.

They called it *Vitalogy,* after toying with the title *Life*. It would go on to be another blockbuster in sales, but it drew a line in the sand. From here on out, Pearl Jam would do things their way or no way. It wasn't a move that came without casualties.

LET MY SPIRIT PASS

It starts as the opposite of the pulsing, thrashing burner it's about to become. Before the drums, before the guitars, before the spirited vocal, the band is noodling, off key and seemingly out of tune, not even playing for themselves and certainly not playing for any kind of audience. They're just plucking mindlessly like children slapping away at an available piano. Truly, this is for no one.

But there's a sharp turn and suddenly everyone is whipped back in line. Dave Abbruzzese starts with a cymbal crash and smacks the skins with a pulse, just before Gossard cranks up that tight, rhythmic riff. Soon everyone is locked in, and Vedder starts what could very well be a call to arms if it weren't so steeped in the metaphysical. "Last Exit" is a song warning against the rapid rise and fall that the failure-driven culture seems to demand from many thrust into the spotlight.

> "Ed immediately realized that getting bigger wasn't necessarily going to make any of us happier."

And this is the starting point for their most pointed commentary on the absurdity of celebrity, 55 minutes of music spread out over 14 selections and two sides of vinyl that was created as both an organic extension of the band's natural evolution and a statement that lashes out against anything that might hinder that musical journey.

"Ed was trying to break up our formula from early on," Gossard said. "He immediately realized that getting bigger wasn't necessarily going to make any of us happier. The song that you thought was going to be really great for the record wouldn't necessarily be the one he'd attach himself to. It would be some sort of third riff or silly little song: All of a sudden that would be the one he'd want to work on."

"It wasn't a hostile takeover," Vedder said. "It's not about our personalities. It's not about so-and-so and so-and-so. It's really about the direction of the music and maybe there being more fast songs or more intense or more experimental or whatever. You're trying to reach a different destination with the songs that you're creating."

"Lives opened and trashed / 'look ma, watch me crash,'" Vedder sings in the opening lines, a vague enough sentiment but forcefully directed all the same. It's an illustration of the reckless vision that guides not just musicians locked in the spotlight, but so many young people who can easily feel overwhelmed by the moment. "Grasp and hold on / we're dyin' fast," it continues later, with the roller coaster picking up steam and no real end or dip in sight. It's a rush, and it's going to continue to be a rush.

But that's not actually the case here. In the second verse (or maybe this is what counts as the chorus in this anti-pop experiment), the wave breaks and there's air to the music. "Let the ocean swell, dissolve 'way my past," the song now goes. Where Vedder was shouting and the guitars were churning, suddenly he's singing in a rising tenor and everyone is soaring. There's room to breathe and the space allows for the song to have a dramatic shift into something nearly anthemic.

And then it floors it again. Back to the grinding drums and overdriven guitars and frantic vocals, and before long, it opens again, letting the sun through and offering a glimpse of a more peaceful, energetic existence that could exist without the grind. That grind, of course, is what this fight is all about; rebelling and recoiling in an effort to protect the music. Within the confines of "Last Exit," Pearl Jam displays all their strengths, albeit packaged in a bipolar offering that could have easily lead to more questions than answers among curious listeners and critics when it surfaced in 1994.

It had actually made its live debut towards the end of 1993, in a period where much of the *Vitalogy* material would be given room to grow on stage. The band's shows, moreso than the studio, was their sanctuary, where the only lights were their own creations and the audience wasn't a mass-media fed group staring at a glowing box but instead fans who had bought tickets and made their way to the arenas and theaters to see the band. This was their haven, and they were more than willing to spring new songs on the unsuspecting crowd as they felt comfortable.

There was no time to question why nothing lasts. There is only this moment. If it's out of tune or if it's a screamer laced out over a killer riff, it will be what it has to be. The listeners can decide to keep playing along or to stop the tape; that's their part in this play. Every middleman in between the band and the ears that have tuned in, however, can and should all be washed aside.

WON'T TURN YOU AWAY

As the well-circulated story goes, when Vedder first heard a cassette demo of "Spin the Black Circle," he sped the guitar riff up to double-time and asked Gossard if it could be played that way. When that happened and the new arrangement was

finalized, the result was one of the more blatantly aggressive songs in the still-growing Pearl Jam cannon. Hard, fast and loud, it was their first tune that could've been pointed back towards the Dead Kennedys, a clear line to punk and also another sign of the shifting responsibilities in the band. Where at first, Gossard was the main catalyst and composer of Pearl Jam's music, Vedder was now directing how the band would sound beyond his own lyrics, even when he wasn't a song's primary musical composer.

On "Spin the Black Circle" the aggression that was already teased on "Last Exit" was pushed over the point of subtlety. This was not a play for the charts, it was just a punk song, loud and fast, and written in homage to the format itself, one that the band had all loved and continued to adore as they went from the underground to the mainstream. Naturally, it was chosen as the lead single ahead of *Vitalogy*'s release.

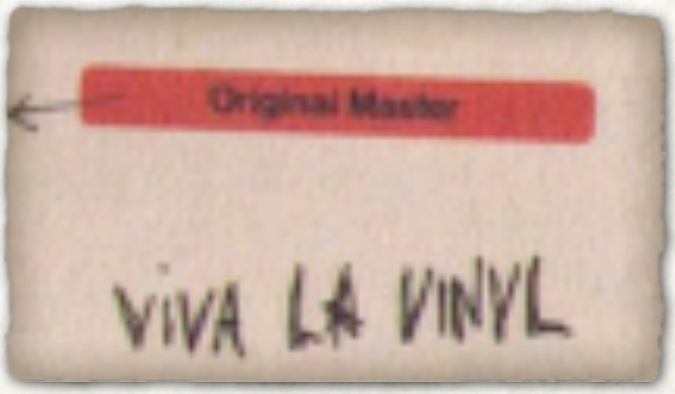
But the record's release was a statement in itself. Ahead of the CD and cassette that would eventually propel the album to no. 1 on *Billboard*'s charts in the United States, the band pushed for a vinyl release of the album, and for it to come out on wax before it came out in its big-box-friendly counterpart formats. That move was a throwback to the release of 1993's *Vs.*, but for *Vitalogy,* more attention was paid to this unorthodox move.

"Our first record didn't come out on vinyl, so I think that might've had something to do with actually being in a position to make sure that it came out on vinyl this time," Ament explained on a radio interview before the release of *Vs.* "And it sounds way better. If you A/B your CD player next to your record player—

"'A/B' means you listen to one, then the other," Vedder interjected.

"If you do that," Ament continued, "you'll find that records sound a lot warmer and more human."

Vitalogy was released on vinyl first on Nov. 22, 1994, two weeks ahead of its CD and cassette counterparts, and that early release helped push it into the top half of *Billboard*'s Top 200 album chart, hitting no. 55 in its first week, the best showing for a vinyl-only album in the five years since the compact disc had become the dominant format. It was an early gift to those devoted enough to this most hands-on of music delivery systems, and it played along with their lead-off single.



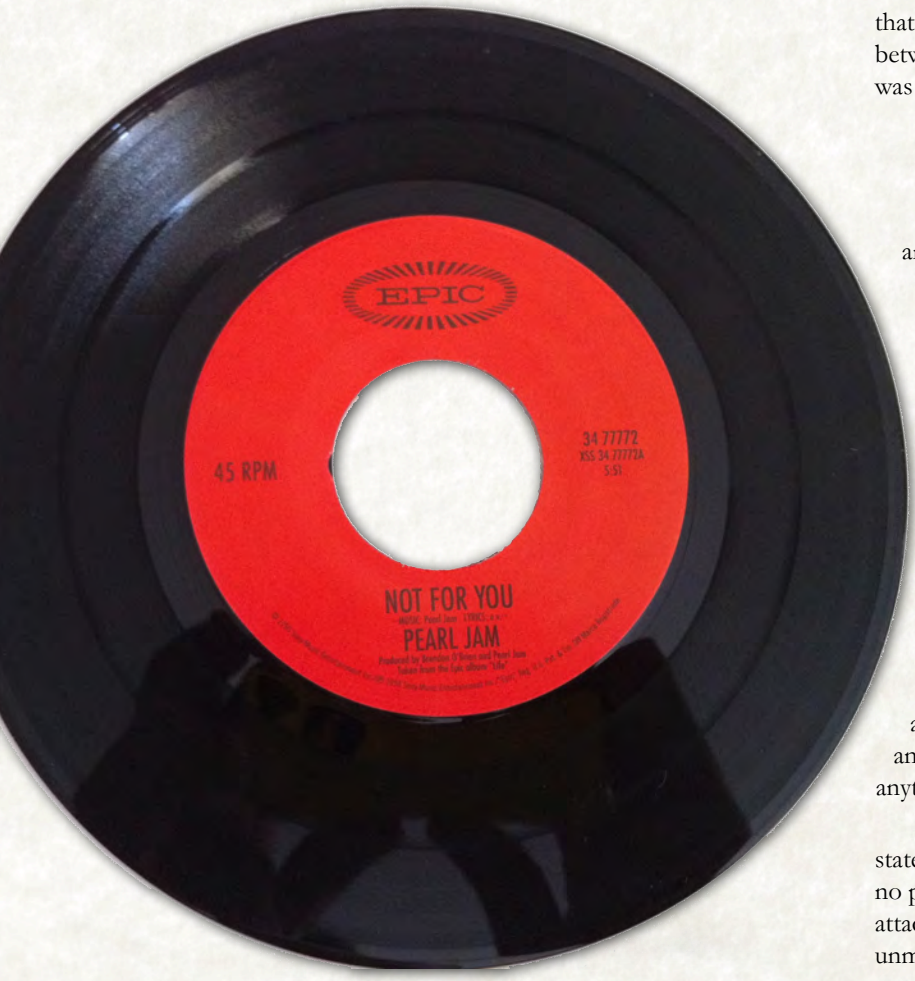
With that love of the physical medium already committed to tape, the subject matter for "Spin the Black Circle" couldn't have been much of a surprise for listeners. Apart from the usual abstraction or character sketches of Vedder's songs, here instead was just an intense music lover loudly and quickly declaring his passion. "Pull it out / a paper sleeve," Vedder wails on the song's second verse, "All my joy / only you deserve conceit."

This, behind all the violent force of the over-driven guitars, was basically an ode to music and all the hours of passion and obsession it breeds in the most driven of us. For years, Vedder had been the kid in his room with a pair of headphones and a stack of Who records, analyzing Pete Townshend's words as they were sung by Roger Daltrey. Ament had been in his home in Montana breaking down Ramones songs. Lead guitarist Mike McCready had slowed down and faithfully duplicated Jimi Hendrix's most complicated guitar solos. The solace that the music provided could not be taken for granted; it had to be acknowledged and paid the proper attention. So with that, the long-playing record was the first out of the gates when *Vitalogy* was unleashed on the public. A 45 of "Spin the Black Circle"

was the first bit of music sent to record stores and radio stations. And the music etched within the grooves was the priority, written and slaved over and eventually passed on for the fans to judge with their own committed ears.

Everything about *Vitalogy* felt different, including its detailed booklet, meant to mimic an 18th century medical text and all its dated musings on healthy living. Vedder had been carrying around an original copy of the book and was apparently captivated by it. Its most memorable was a page detailing "self pollution," which was, "the unnatural and degrading vice of producing venereal excitement by the hand or other means." It wasn't hard to see the parallels between its ridiculous medical advice and the expectations heaped upon Pearl Jam by the entertainment industry. Both lines of thinking belonged in the past, and this was the band's way of expressing that.

As a young listener not yet in tune to vinyl, the *Vitalogy* book was my first sign that not every bit of music had to come predictably pre-packaged. Cardboard digipaks hadn't yet become a popular packaging format, so before coming into contact with *Vitalogy*, one of the only variations within CD packages were clear jewel cases and those with a black backing.



Some bands utilized more ornate booklets or outer sleeves, such as the slipcase that housed Nine Inch Nails' *The Downward Spiral*, but nothing was on the level of this strange little book with its embossed type. The CD slipped into a cardboard pocket inside the back cover. And the pages within contained plenty of mysteries, from scribbled lyrics to the meaning of its strange advice sections.

I spent hours poring over its pages, taking note of Vedder's handwriting on the reproduced lyrics for "Nothingman" and "Better Man," studying the patterns and the lyrics that were added in or left out of the song. Being part of one of the last families in the neighborhood to get a computer, I pulled out my typewriter and began reproducing the pages for "Last Exit" or "Immortality" to slip into my binders for school. And all this mimicry and patterning started me on a path of scribbling down my own thoughts in strange ways, apart from a typical notebook and now into little notepads, leaving bits of paper inside my backpack and wallet. Now long past rewriting lyrics, I began scribbling my own thoughts down on legal pads and saving them for later. The simple act of buying an album and studying its contents inspired me to start thinking outside the jewel case.

The music, forever, was what was important. The connection between the band and the listener forged through that plastic disc was paramount. Everything and anyone in between that tried to claim ownership of that sacred artifact was the true enemy.

DEDICATION, NAIVE AND TRUE

"This song is about people who don't have taste but like us anyway."

Vedder introduced a new song to a fan-club audience at Boston's Orpheum Theatre on April 12, 1994, with a quick reminder of what mattered to the band and what didn't. What mattered was the music itself, and with that, the people who cared enough about the music to listen thoughtfully and share in the moment. What didn't was everything else.

"When I pick up a magazine, I just count how many pages of ads before the first article starts," Vedder said. "You go one, two … up to 15 to 20 or more. And then in the back you have phone-sex ads.

"So I've pretty much had it. I don't want to be the traveling medicine show where we go out and do the song and dance and someone else drops the back of the wagon and starts selling crap. I don't want to use our music to sell anything — or anyone else use it."

"Not For You" was the most aggressive anti-authoritarian statement on *Vitalogy*, a searing, mechanical crunch that pulled no punches in its attack against the third-party hitchhikers attaching themselves to the band's trip. It was loud, tight and unmerciful. Like "Blood" on their previous album, it was an attack at the machine that sought to use the band for

entertainment fodder, but it was much more pointed and, in its clarity, brutal.

"Can't escape from the common rule," Vedder sings in the first verse. "If you hate something, don't you do it, too." The lyrics painted a picture of a man backed into a corner, ready to make a decision to either accept his fate and play along with the powers that be or to fight back and find another way out. To play along would have been to continue lip-syncing along for MTV and smiling for the cameras. To fight back meant to focus on music first and only, and to deal with whatever fallout might occur, financial or otherwise.

"There are a lot of middlemen, somewhere between the band and the audience," Vedder said. "I know you need some people to help facilitate things for a live show, and I'm not saying I don't appreciate these people, but … In the last 10 or 15 years, there have been a lot of changes in music, and somehow the percentages being charged (by the concert industry) got out of hand."

"Not For You" was also written in the midst of the band's attempt to regain control of their shows, an effort that worked to keep ticket prices low despite Ticketmaster's practice of marking up prices with service fees that sometimes doubled the cost of tickets. This eventually led to the band briefly trying to circumvent use of Ticketmaster venues completely, and Gossard and Ament testifying before Congress to explain their position.

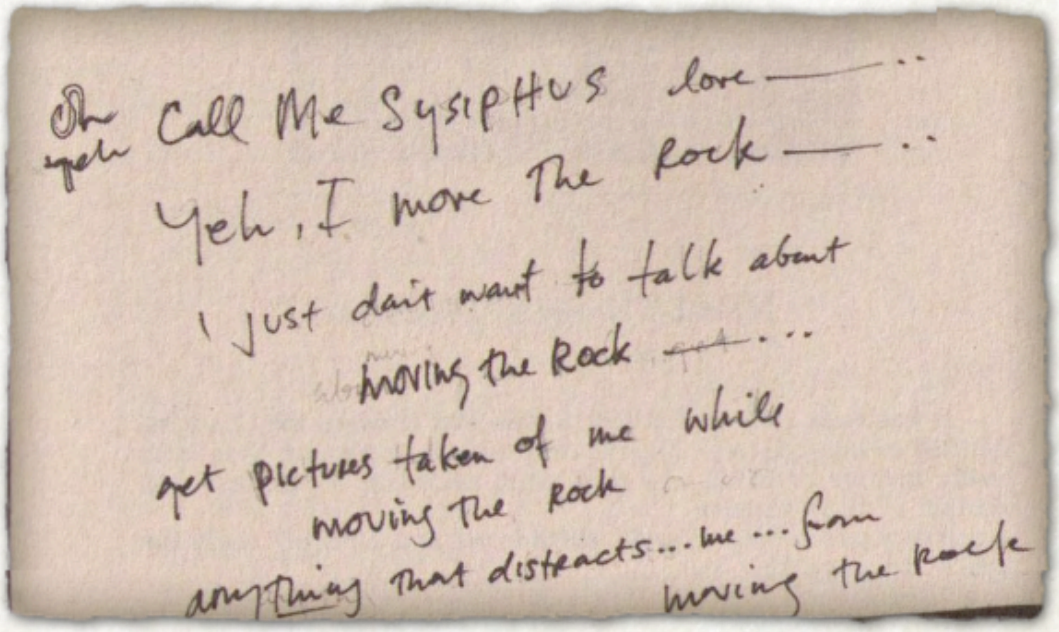
"That whole [Ticketmaster] thing was a joke," Ament later said. "The Department of Justice used us to look hip. Stone and I spent a week with our lawyer, John Hoyt; he was drilling us with serious questions that we were [supposedly] going to get asked, and then it didn't feel like we got to utilize any of it."

"We also don't want to be part of all the marketing tools or whatever, but believe me, we have been," Vedder said. "(That happened) on the first album and that's probably even why we are where we are now, but it was hell and I feel awful about it and I'm not going to do it anymore."

The band had been playing "Not For You" sporadically on their spring 1994 tour, and for their *Saturday Night Live* appearance, they made the decision to play that song first, a slot typically devoted to a band's latest single. The tension in that performance was palpable, with Vedder keeping his head down and his hair partly covering his face while he let loose with his most intense growl, eventually building to a scream before he jumped back from the mic for the song's closing jam — really, just a collection of notes mashed out at maximum volume.

For a young viewer, still impressionable and searching for a sound that was real and honest, this was a major moment. I first saw this performance two summers later on a re-run and, by now aware of the band's chronological history, was blown away by the idea that they would give an unknown song such a showcase. But it was the intensity of that performance that made its indelible impression. Whenever Vedder's hair parted and the TV viewing audience was given a glimpse into the man's eyes, what could be seen through those clear blue pupils was a slowly simmering rage. I had the VCR running that afternoon and kept the tape on a constant loop through that song for months after. Even on the second, third and twentieth run through, that rendition of "Not For You" was just as gripping. I wanted to know everything that was behind that song, everything that went into creating such an emotional wallop.

On its lyric page within the elaborate *Vitalogy* book, below its typewriter lyrics was an addendum scribbled by Vedder that connected the band's efforts to that of Syiphus pushing the



rock uphill for eternity. "Yeah, I move the rock," it reads, "I just don't want to talk about moving the rock." The song was chosen to be the second single off of *Vitalogy*, packaged in a plain, red "Epic" sleeve that mirrored the yellow sleeve chosen for "Spin the Black Circle." If this was to be the band's fate, they were going to take control of every aspect of a possibly futile effort and let their frustrations be known.

Ironically, "Not For You" became a huge song on radio, one of the very structures they were rebelling against. It was a sign that they could survive and even thrive without playing the roles that had been sketched out ahead of their arrival. And it was a signal that even their most aggressive, distorted songs could reverberate with listeners.

RANSOM PAID THE DEVIL

The metaphor of Pearl Jam in this period weathering a storm and avoiding all the sirens and rocks hiding below the water and attempting to lure the band to their doom would be an apt one. And it was illustrated in "Tremor Christ," a jarring song that took a haunting lyric by Vedder and married it to some of the strangest sounds the band had yet recorded.

Ament and Gossard were the likely musical catalysts behind "Tremor Christ," and it sounded as if they were trying to jam the two most dissonant chords together into one song. The result was a song that spun around the listener's head, jabbing and darting as it swirled as a darkly psychedelic drill.

Within the cacophony was one of Vedder's more interesting pieces of writing. In "Tremor Christ," he sings about a sailor lost at sea, navigating the waves and other various obstacles in his way, leaving victims in his wake and, ultimately, questioning all his decisions before blindly pushing ahead without fear of reprisal.

It's the classic epic tale shrunk down into the space of four minutes, and it's capped by one of Vedder's greatest vocal performances. An unholy scream caps the penultimate verse, with Vedder wailing, "Oh, you know what it's like?" By the end, the song's narrator is resolute in his judgments. Whatever the fallout may be, he's setting a course and moving ahead, inducements and trepidations be damned.

Not everyone avoided the temptations, though; this was a trying time for McCready. Like the rest of the band, he dealt with the Pearl Jam's rapid ascension with difficulty, and his method was to channel it through drugs and alcohol.

"We ended with 'Daughter,'" McCready recalled of their *Saturday Night Live* performance. "I remember talking to Stone the next day, and he asked, 'What'd you think of "Daughter?"' And I thought in my mind, 'We played "Daughter?"' I essentially blacked out on TV. I don't remember it."

"Mike was definitely not a good drinker," said Kelly Curtis, the band's longtime manager. "He'd do stupid things: taking his clothes off, passing out, pissing in the corner."

"Those are the things I'm not proud of," McCready said. "It's just what I had to go through. That was a heavy time, for

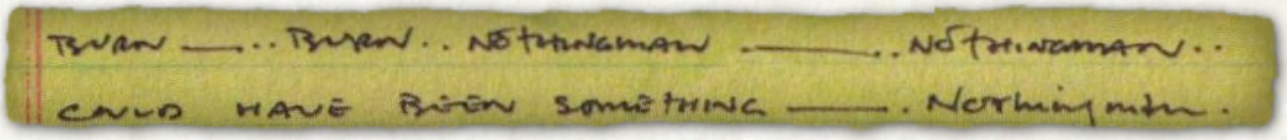
sure; some darkness. But that's how I dealt with it, for better or worse."

Following his recording duties on *Vitalogy*, McCready took some time away at a rehabilitation facility in Minnesota, where he eventually met bassist John Baker Saunders. That soon begat his next project, the one-off band Mad Season with Screaming Trees drummer Barrett Martin and Alice in Chains vocalist Layne Staley, and an album, *Above*, that was heavy on the blues and tied together by Staley's lyrics, himself a struggling addict. While the attempt to pull Staley into the mix so that he, too, could dry out was ultimately for naught, the resulting album was a positive experience for everyone involved.

"We did all the Mad Season music in about seven days," McCready said. "It took Layne just a few more days to finish his vocals, which was intense, since we only rehearsed twice and did four shows. So, this has been the most spontaneous thing I've ever been involved in."

It was a short-lived project, however. Saunders relapsed and died in 1999, and Staley followed him in 2002. Save for a concert video and some spare tracks released on a deluxe version of *Above* in 2013, the unit wouldn't make any more music.

McCready weathered his storm and continued the fight against addiction, though, and kept his place in Pearl Jam. Beyond his typically stratospheric solos, he would continue to



contribute music and eventually lyrics to Pearl Jam's songs, and would grow into a weapon to be unleashed in live shows. Not everyone survived the nineties, but McCready did.

CURSED THE DAY HE LET IT GO

There are songs that float around and invade our senses, digging away into our collective psyche and triggering catastrophic memories or those panicked flashes of hopes that may never be realized. Of the songs that fall within this category, there's usually one line or riff that really digs into the listener, burying itself deep and rooting forever, turning that single element into a trigger and the song as the host for a set of emotions that exist on their own, but seem to find a special home within the context of that tune.

> "It was a natural progression. But it led to the rest of us wanting to write ... complete songs."

Personally, Pearl Jam's "Nothingman" is a haunting song that speaks to several levels of living in the moment while realizing that loss can't always be undone. And as a young, impressionable listener, one line was the catalyst for several late nights left in deep thought, alone in my room with a set of headphones and a notepad:

"Caught a bolt 'a lightning / cursed the day he let it go…"

It's such a simple metaphor, too, that could apply to several losses or missed breaks. All the listeners affected by this song had their own; I certainly have mine, and the figurative lightning bolt changes as time goes on.

Of course, "Nothingman" works well beyond the pull of a single lyric. It stands alone on the album as a solemn narration on the lost opportunities that crop up in life. Without ever delving into particulars that could limit the song's power, Vedder created a full tale of loss and regret by harnessing the mood set by the music Ament had written and demoed ahead of time. Staring from corners of a shared prison cell, sinking slowly into the past, flying away and burning up in the sun, it's a poignant glimpse into a moment of total breakdown.

"I heard that David Bowie and Brian Eno worked twelve-hour shifts on this one album where they went back and forth playing on each other's material," Ament said. "I had this idea that Ed and I could do that over the course of the week.

"We had a studio booked and two different engineers. On the first day, I laid down the music for 'Nothingman,' and he came in and wrote the words. It took so much out of him that he was done."

"The idea is about if you love someone and they love you, don't [fuck] it up," Vedder said, "'cause you are left with less than nothing."

Vitalogy may have been notable for the shift in dynamic, with Vedder taking a more assertive approach to songwriting and getting more of his full compositions onto the final product, but "Nothingman" was the first sign of an approach the band would adopt more regularly after 1994, with each member contributing individual, complete pieces of music for Vedder, who would then write lyrics and finish the song.

"He was working harder at writing songs than we were, "Ament said. "He had the ability to write a complete song at the time, and the rest of us really didn't. It's certainly easier to write lyrics to your own music than somebody else's because you understand the rhythm, the spaces and the way you write melodies.

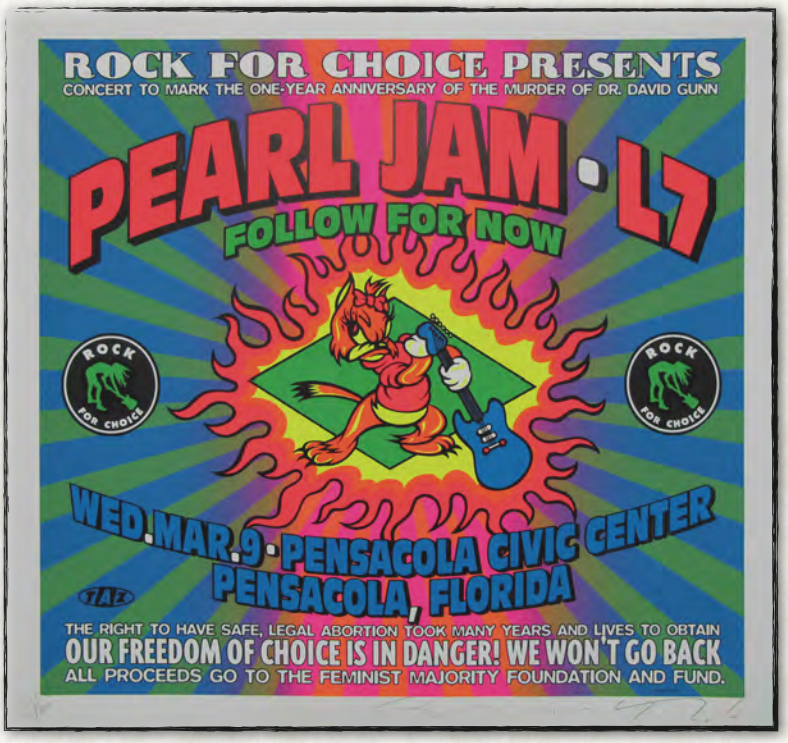
"It was a natural progression. But it led to the rest of us wanting to write pieces of music that lent themselves to being complete songs and that were more arranged from the beginning."

This was music created for music's sake, free of any pressures or expectations beyond the artists' natural inclination to push themselves to explore new territory. Here, the result was a song unlike any Pearl Jam had written before, and written in a method that would breed more songs that would dig their way into those forgotten caverns in our brains in the future.

DON'T MEAN TO PUSH...

The now-violent push and pull of artistic freedom and oppressive coverage was boiling over in the music, and never was it as frantic and frenzied as it was on "Whipping." In the thrashing two-and-a-half minutes that follow, the singer is pleading for freedom and revenge simultaneously, declaring his independence while decrying every obstacle around him.

"Don't need a helmet," he starts, stating that his head is hard enough and that he's ready for the blows. But soon, the



grievances start piling up, and Vedder's voice starts to push itself to the brink. "Don't need a hand / there's always arms attached," he sings later, and soon enough he's screaming, "Don't mean to push / but I'm being shoved," with the aggression increasing dramatically and the consequences becoming more clear. This is not a fair fight and not something our subject ever wanted, but reality has other plans and there are going to be repercussions for the intrusions. Where at the beginning, he was just wet and annoyed, now he's scarred and anyone obtuse enough to stand in his path is going to feel the same crush that has enveloped the past three years of his life.

Where Vedder and Pearl Jam usually like to paint the corners and leave more subtlety in a song's message or interpretation, here there's no confusion. Even without naming names, the vibe of the song is all that matters, and that's one of pent-up frustration boiling over into rage, and the call for change that it implies.

"Whipping" had actually been around and waiting in the Pearl Jam cannon for some time, written and recorded during the *Vs.* sessions and debuted live 18 months before *Vitalogy* would be released. It was composed as the mania of success was reaching its peak, with the band on the road and promoting *Ten* for two solid years with hardly a break built in.

It's telling, as well, that within the *Vitalogy* booklet, the lyrics for "Whipping" were scrawled on a petition to President Bill Clinton calling for action following the murder of Dr. David Gunn, who had been killed by pro-life extremists at a clinic in Pensacola, Fla., on March 10, 1993. This was another example of Pearl Jam stepping into the heat of an issue rather than sitting back apolitically. Vedder's views started to become apparent when the band played *MTV Unplugged* in 1992 and the singer wrote "PRO-CHOICE!!!" on his arm, and a few weeks later on *Saturday Night Live,* Vedder wore a t-shirt with a wire hanger drawn on and inserted pro-choice lyrics into the breakdown of "Porch."

Their commitment to a woman's right to choose led them to play a "Rock for Choice" benefit concert with L7 in Pensacola a year after Gunn's murder. Vedder opened with a solo rendition of Tom Petty's "I Won't Back Down" and brought David Gunn Jr. up to speak during the encore.

"When Dr. Gunn was murdered, Eddie called out offices looking to see how he could get in touch with David," Katherine Spillar, national coordinator for the Feminist Majority, told *Spin* in 1994. "This concert brought the issue home to Pensacola, where some of the most severe anti-abortion violence has erupted, and showed support to the men and women who work in the clinics and to the courage of Dr. Gunn and his family."

The band didn't abandon the issue that night. A few months later, studious listeners were given a glimpse of the band's position via the "Whipping" lyric page, and in one of their first appearances after *Vitalogy*'s release, Pearl Jam shared a bill with L7 and Neil Young and Crazy Horse in Washington, D.C.'s Constitution Hall for two more Rock for Choice benefits.

It was all another example of trying to take this moment, where the consequences of fame had been so unexpectedly thrust upon everyone, and turn it into something productive. If Pearl Jam was going to be on magazine covers and in nightly news features, it only made sense to try to take this moment and accomplish something good with it. In an era where they had so much influence over young listeners and privacy was at a premium, it was likely one of the more satisfying upshots of notoriety.

P • R • I • V • A • C • Y

Part of the concept of pulling together not just songs but sounds and patches to challenge expectations and reassert some semblance of artistic control meant the inclusion of small musical bits and vignettes meant to give the songs further context. Merely cobbling together songs that could be later portioned out as singles wouldn't be good enough to get the point across, and neither would simply writing a group of loud, aggressive songs. Everything needed to be weirder to work.

So, musical sound collages would find space on *Vitalogy* alongside the anthemic riffs, as would wordless chants, maniacal drones and haunting mantras. The latter would be the first strange noise outside of a song that would be exposed to listeners, a bridge between the violent "Whipping" and the pleading "Corduroy." There, in the empty space of those two songs, would feature what sounded like bad free jazz behind Vedder chanting unemotionally:

P - R - I -V - A - C - Y is priceless to me
P - R - I -V - A - C - Y is priceless to me
P - R - I -V - A - C - Y is priceless to me

Midway through the minute-long track, however, the music turns evil and Vedder's pleas become even more impassioned:

P - R - I - V - A - C - Y!
P - R - I - V - A - C - Y!
P - R - I - V - A - C - Y!

It's a strange, haunting exercise immediately preceding one of this album's more accessible moments. It's the sound of Vedder howling at the state of the band's sudden and seemingly irreversible fame, pining for the days of being in the crowd rather than the spotlight, lamenting the price that has come with artistic success. So here's Pearl Jam, laying out their grievances for the listeners who have joined this fame-fueled trip in bizarre but ultimately clear form.

And if that were the end of it, it would be an interesting enough exercise as-is. Little moments like these have popped up on bigger albums than *Vitalogy*, so even in a commercial setting, it's not unheard of to have this kind of diversion, albeit not common. But with albums that go on to have an audience as large as *Vitalogy* would, listeners start doing strange things to uncover hidden patterns that may or may not actually be present. And in that classic rock and roll set up, someone along the way decided to play "Pry, To" backwards and discovered that Vedder seemed to have a clear message under the murmuring:

Yeah, Pete Townshend saved my life
Yeah, Pete Townshend saved my life
Yeah, Pete Townshend saved my life

Pete Townshend's role in Vedder's development as a musician is well documented at this point, as is Vedder's long adoration of the British guitarist's work with The Who — *Quadrophenia* is a pivotal album to Vedder, and he told the Los Angeles Times in 1992 that, "I should be sending Pete Townshend cards for Father's Day. His records — that was more parenting than I got, just relating and having an outlet."

So was this really a coded message hidden in the track? It doesn't seem to have been discussed one way or the other, but the seeming clarity of the backwards lyrics, plus the title matching Townshend's "P.T." initials seem to signal that this was intentional. It's an incredible coincidence otherwise. Townshend has loomed large over the band — a massive portrait of him hung in Pearl Jam's Seattle rehearsal space in

their earliest days — and he was there to give Vedder some advice on his newfound position as a rock and roll statesman in 1993.

"The very first meeting we had, he said, 'Help me. I don't know whether I want this,'" Townshend remembered in the *Pearl Jam Twenty* retrospective. "I think I said, 'I'm not sure you have a choice. Once you've been elected, you have to serve as mayor.'"

The struggles continued from there, of course, but there was an understanding that this was part of the deal, and there had to be ways of dealing with the pressure and scrutiny that didn't involve running away to a surf board and anonymity. So, in the meantime, the listeners got a mildly distressing glimpse into Vedder's psyche, the part that longed to just be able to live the life he used to know, and perhaps a veiled ode and thank you to the man who he idolized for so long and who later helped him navigate the minefield of rock and roll celebrity.

ALONE LIKE I BEGAN

The invasions of privacy and of any semblance of personal space seemed inescapable. Open up a department store catalog and there would be pages on grunge fashion, flannel shirts, ripped jeans and even a replica of a corduroy jacket that Vedder had worn on occasion. It was another instance of the ridiculous commercialization of the culture surrounding the band that, its members felt, threatened to swallow and digest Pearl Jam, leaving behind the mess for

others to clean up after its usefulness was exhausted in the media.

"Yeah, that song was based on a remake of the brown corduroy jacket that I wore," Vedder said of "Corduroy." "I think I got mine for 12 bucks, and it was being sold for like $650."

Hence the line, "They can buy but can't put on my clothes" from "Corduroy," another rousing rock and roll take that would be destined for radio and arena triumph, even though it was explicitly not released as a single. The songs earmarked for the radio would share "Corduroy's" anti-commercial spirit, but none were as naturally catchy and hooky as this song. It was another example of Vedder hiding the message of a song behind a memorable riff and the natural musicality of the band.

The song's lyrics are fragmented pieces of arguments, with pleas alternating with declarations at an unnamed assailant. "I don't want to take what you can't give," Vedder sings in the first chorus. "I would rather starve than eat your bread," he continues, not looking to bite the hand that feeds him but rather reject that hand entirely.

That rebellious spirit is what drives "Corduroy." And for a song that's primarily about rejecting the overbearing demands of the audience and the surrounding forces that have pushed the band into these bizarre new surroundings, it's become one of the more popular songs in the band's catalog, likely because of the rousing emotion of that very message. Vedder's voice nearly cracks as he roars, "Push me and I will resist," an ideal that was exactly in keeping with the anti-authoritarian principles so many of their fans shared. Packaged together with the rising guitars and a hook of shouting along to "Everything has chains / Absolutely nothing's changed," and Pearl Jam, even as they were trying to punch their way out of a corner, had another hit on their hands.

"It is about a relationship but not between two people," Vedder said in 1994. "It's more one person's relationship with a million people. In fact, that song's almost a little too obvious for me. That's why instead of a lyric sheet we put in an X-ray of my teeth from last January and they are all in very bad shape — which was analogous to my head at the time."

While the unwanted burdens of fame was something that Pearl Jam carried together, it seems safe to suggest that it was felt more acutely by Vedder than the others. Certainly, drummer Dave Abbruzzese didn't feel nearly the same weight of the moment. Abbruzzese's drumming, as it is on most of *Vitalogy*, is a driving force on "Corduroy," with the fills slowly building until the rousing "Everything has chains" section, settling back down for the chorus, and then, during the jam at the end, everything explodes. McCready begins a searing solo as Vedder, Gossard and Ament riff away on their own instruments, while Abbruzzese crashes, with cymbals flaring and toms pounding into the fade.

But music aside, it was clear early on that Abbruzzese and Vedder were not kindred spirits. An argument over Abbruzzese's gun ownership directly led to Vedder writing "Glorified G" off of *Vs.,* and in a 1993 cover feature in *Rolling Stone*, Cameron Crowe even took notice of the gulf between Abbruzzese and the rest of Pearl Jam.

"There's a lot of intensity over decisions," Abbruzzese told Crowe. "And I think it's great. But every once in a while, I wish everyone would just let it go. Make a bad decision!"

It was that personality divide, and not the musicianship, that eventually led to Abbruzzese's time in Pearl Jam coming to a close. By the end of *Vitalogy*, he would be formally fired, with the news delivered by Gossard, and the process of hiring Jack Irons to fill the space behind the kit began.

"Dave Abbruzzese is a gentleman," Gossard said. "He is a nice guy and a fantastic drummer, and he added a lot to the band. But he was one individual in a situation where five people had to work it out."

"I felt like there was a time when I had a good friendship with [Ed]," Abbruzzese told *Spin* in 2001. "And then all of a sudden I didn't know him. But I understand—shit, if I was freaking out about stuff and having panic attacks, I can't even begin to fathom what the hell he was going through. I give it up to him just for surviving it.

"Stone showed up as a man, and as a good

friend. I hope to one day tell him how much I appreciate [that]. I had just soured. I didn't really agree with what was going on. I didn't agree with the Ticketmaster stuff at all. But I don't blame anyone or harbor any hard feelings. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't furious and hurt for a long time. But now I just wish there was more music from the band I was a part of."

"I think anyone who listens to those records realizes he is a great drummer," Gossard said. "It wasn't his drumming that was the problem. The problem was that he needed to fit in with a group of five very different, strong personalities and do it in a way that worked with those five personalities. I'm sorry that it didn't work out. I wish that it had."

TICKLE MY NAUSEA

With the dynamics of the band changing, the spirit to attempt new things was encouraged. In addition to simply writing songs, pushing the limits of what could be accepted as part of a Pearl Jam record was becoming the new normal. So there could now be weird asides next to the potential hits, and in addition to Gossard's riffs and Ament's plaintive retreats, there wasn't anything stopping Vedder from picking up an accordion from an antique shop and railing against insects invading his personal space.

And so it went with "Bugs," a strong contender for the title of "strangest song from *Vitalogy*." It's two minutes and 44 seconds of Vedder playing an accordion and speak-singing about the bugs invading his room, skin and life, wondering if he should eat them, befriend them or join them before eventually succumbing to their numbers. It's strange and it likely had some fans hitting "skip" or "fast forward" after their first few listens to the album. It's also earned a cult following among some of the more slanted Pearl Jam fans, and Vedder has even relented and played the song in concert three times as of Summer 2014: first at the last show in the Philadelphia Spectrum in 2009 and most recently at a rain-soaked marathon in Chicago's Wrigley Field in 2013.

But despite the (seemingly) clear metaphor of the bugs as the media and other leeches that Pearl Jam had been so fervently fighting off, the song had simpler roots: Vedder had come in contact with poison oak and had been scratching his skin. Couple that with the recent accordion purchase, and so goes the recipe for one of the weirder diversions on an already weird album.

"Before I went in the studio, I was walking around some little thrift shop, I found an accordion," Vedder said in a 1994 interview. "And I went in with the accordion and played something, and then spoke some gibberish over the top. I remember laughing and saying, 'That's the first single.'"

Whether or not its inspiration was simply a hazard that comes with spending so much time outdoors, the picture painted on "Bugs," with Vedder howling seemingly out of voice about everything crawling over him, was one that instantly left a mark. "Bugs in my bed / Bugs in my ears / Their eggs in my head," Vedder recites as the accordion wails away behind him.

Soon after recounting their presence, he begins detailing how they've invaded his life and the choices that he's left with to counter the situation. "Do I kill them? / Become their friend? / Do I eat them? / Raw or well done?"

Finally then he gives in, joining the bugs, and, "with them, I'll become one." From there, the accordion hits the floor and Vedder stomps away into the next song.

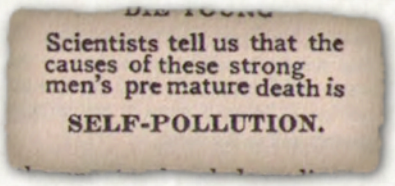
In addition to being another curiosity on an album that was shaping up to be purposefully different from the band's previous work, simply by the inclusion of "Bugs," Pearl Jam was testing their audience to see how much leeway they would be allowed.

"I think that it's almost confidence that enables us to record 'Bugs' or confidence in our listeners that they can open up to something like that," Vedder said. "[During *Ten*], I had my mind on the business at hand, and I probably wouldn't have felt so free to take up two hours of studio time working on Eddie's wank-off accordion piece."

BORN TO BE RICH?

If "Bugs" was an attempt to have a little fun with the listener in a purposely altered setting, then "Satan's Bed" was a chance to have fun within the boundaries of a demented Stone Gossard riff.

Following a few cracks of an actual whip, the drums begin to pound and the guitar revs up and plows ahead before Vedder begins screaming about avoiding the pitfalls of temptation at all cost, that he's still as real and gross as he's ever been and that he intends to stay that way.



Where "Bugs" had been a cautionary tale of the walls closing in disguised as a bout with poison oak, "Satan's Bed" was the story of a more fight-ready combatant looking to take on all comers and tell the more unsavory characters in his where to go and where they could shove it. All the while, he reassures the listener that he hasn't gone down the wrong path.

"Never shook Satan's hand, look see for yourself," Vedder sings in a weird, machine-gun stutter that never trips as much as it ping-pongs along through the verses. "You know that if I had that shit don't come off." Soon after is the suddenly soaring declaration that, "I'll never suck Satan's dick," underscored by a return to the staccato-style singing and the reassurance that, "you'd see it, you know, right round the lips."

The chorus is a rousing counter to the quick verses. Originally titled "Already In Love" on some of their earliest setlists, the refrain is shouted like an English football chant to thwart the devil character that's trying to lure the band into the pitfalls of stardom. Where "Not For You" and "Whipping" were addressing the same inducements with anger and aggression, "Satan's Bed" did it in a more playful manner.

And it wasn't just the words that had fun with the subject. This features some of the wildest playing to be found on *Vitalogy*, with Abbruzzese and Ament locking into a groove while McCready let loose with a quick, unhinged solo before the final real verse. Gossard is appropriately maniacal throughout, and on the choruses, it's not hard to envision the entire band jumping into the fray head-on, playing without fear or hesitation. "Bugs" and "Pry, To" might have had the band testing the limits of what a paying customer could sit through in the name of staying on message, but "Satan's Bed" was a sign that Pearl Jam could also have fun within their own five-man unit while saying their piece.

WATCHING THE CLOCK

In the midst of all these bizarre, aggressive songs that railed against the very machinations that turned Pearl Jam into a life-invading cultural phenomenon, there was one song that had been looming in the band's shadow that predated the moment that Gossard and Ament invited Vedder up to Seattle from San Diego to audition for and eventually join the group. It was a solid piece of craftsmanship that pulled from a troubled past and married the painful subject with an indelible melody.

It was part pop song, part anthem, part confessional, and it was destined to become one of the bigger hits the band would ever have, and one of the bigger hits of the decade. But it would have to come out first.

"Better Man" had its roots in San Diego as a song Vedder had written early in his days as a songwriter, and was demoed at home on a four-track machine and played around town with his band, Bad Radio. In the earliest recordings that have surfaced, the familiar fingerpicked guitar riff is still present, but some of the 1980s-centric guitar filters make it sound more like a Split Enz take rather than the unadorned, organic rock and roll that would become famous. But all the elements of the song — it's slow build up, the crashing, conquering chorus and the lyrics, word for word — are all present.


D. S. BURTON.

The above is an illustration of D. S. Burton of Harris, Pa., before the habits of secret vice had begun to tell on him.

The illustration on the following page shows the same young man three years later taken when he had become an inveterate victim of the vice.

D. S. BURTON.

The doctor's opinion was: "If this young man escapes the asylum he and his parents will be fortunate."

The instructions in this volume will save many a young man from swelling the list of the unfortunate that are in the asylums all over the country.

It's a deceptively written song as well, masking a tale of domestic abuse behind the rousing chords. It was influenced by Vedder's observations of his own mother and stepfather — "It's dedicated to the bastard that married my momma," he told a crowd on April 3, 1994, in Atlanta — and he guarded it accordingly, keeping it from the rest of the band until 1993. The song was another chapter in Vedder's life worked out through music, with his stepfather stepping into the role of antagonist.

"[My mother] came out with the specific purpose," Vedder told Crowe in 1993, "to tell me that this guy wasn't my father. I remember at the time I was like, 'I know he's not my father, he's a fucking asshole.' And she said, 'Oh, Eddie, he's really not your father.'"

Pearl Jam first tried to record the song for *Vs.*, but Vedder pulled it away from producer Brendan O'Brien before it could become trivialized as a hit. The move killed O'Brien — he could already see the song's power — but it was another move made to protect the music.

"He was resistant to that song on a certain level because I think he felt like it wasn't rocking enough or something," Gossard remembered later. "And it's such an undeniable melody, undeniable lyric, undeniable arrangement. It's an instant classic. It just is. It's just the nature of that song and his voice and the lyric and that perspective. It's unique."

After work finished on *Vs.* and the band resumed touring, "Better Man" started becoming a regular in concert, unleashed on unsuspecting listeners and giving the song a more natural lift and pull than what had been engineered the first time around in the studio. As the band reconvened for the *Vitalogy* sessions, the song — now aided by an introduction that paired Vedder's voice and guitar with a solemn organ backing — lost the happy, celebratory feel and instead became a more modest story, but one that still kept every strength the song had displayed since day one.

> "We started playing it live, and, finally, we got the vibe right. It just never happened in the studio."

"Even when we'd tried it before, it didn't have the right feel and the right lift," Vedder said. "Then we started playing it live, and, finally, we got the vibe right. It just never happened in the studio."

The first time I saw Pearl Jam play "Better Man" live was in New York City's Madison Square Garden, on June 8, 2003. The moment is preserved on the band's *Live at the Garden* DVD, but the video only augments the feeling of being there in that frantic crowd for that song.

Aping the studio arrangement (save for O'Brien's chilling organ introduction), Vedder starts the song picking the guitar solo in front of the stage. And as he begins to sing the opening "Waiting," he's overwhelmed by the audience tunefully shouting his words back to him. The masses in attendance bellow that it's four o'clock and it's got to stop, taking the song all the way to the first chorus, and even then, Vedder sits back, playing guitar and smiling, happy to let the crowd take the painful words he put to tape so long ago and relay them as a reaffirmation of life.

While this was a powerful moment for the fans in attendance, this was hardly a unique sitation at this point. It's not a case where the crowd decides to sing the first few lines of the song, it's whether or not Vedder lets them. Sometimes, he takes ownership of his words and, sometimes, he lets the audience do the heavy lifting. Regardless of his decision, though, the crowd always sings that song at top volume. It's a sign that "Better Man" was always a hit in waiting, the song that Ament now claims, "arguably, it's the biggest song that we have." And the way it became a hit is likely part of what makes Vedder smile so much when the crowd sings it back to him. This was a song that was left off of an album, *Vs.*, that sold well into the millions, and when it was included on *Vitalogy*, it was only after it had been honed on stage and given a treatment in the studio that did not make it feel like a celebration. And while it attained enormous radio play, it did so as an album track — no single (or video, of course) was ever released for "Better Man."

If it became a hit, it did so at the insistence of fans, the folks who lined up for concert tickets and bought albums and taped shows on their walkmans and added the song to mix tapes and CDs and found comfort in the words and music that the band put to disc. It didn't ride the wave of mainstream coverage, it wasn't a preordained blockbuster that was pushed to radio or forced into the Top 40 (though it did wind up at the top of *Billboard*'s US Mainstream Rock Tracks chart in 1995). All of its success was a byproduct of the music itself, from the band to its audience. It was a sign that commercial success could work without the hype and hallucinations that accompany so much of the starmaking in the culture.

That it all came out of a painful moment had to have been special. Like "Alive" from the first album, it took a period of personal trauma in Vedder's life and transformed it into something positive, an artistic creation borne out of grief. And that creation was shared and embraced by the listeners, and on and on it goes, 20 years later, whenever that song is played on stage, or in someone's home, or even on the radio.

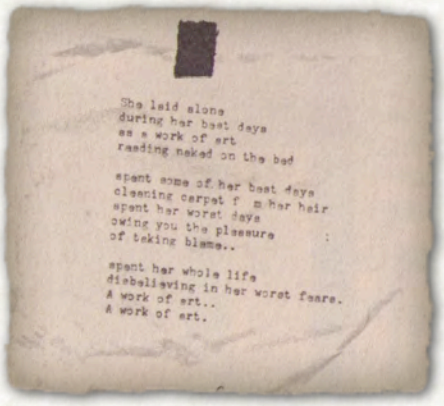
THE SONG WITHOUT WORDS

Another diversion, for lack of a better term, on the record was "Aye Davanita," sub-titled "The Song Without Words" and sounding as though it had been born out of an in-studio jam and included for color. In this sense, it does its job admirably, bridging the gap after the cathartic rise and fall of "Better Man," fading in, showing the band plugging along with Vedder singing the pleasing nonsense, something between humming and muttering, ahh ooohm biddy daptah, aye davanita, while guitars chime and sputter. It fades out after nearly three minutes, giving way to the intense spiral that "Immortality" has in store for the listener.

But that will come soon enough. "Aye Davanita," to these ears, has always been intrinsically linked to its page within *Vitalogy*'s elaborate booklet, with the titles mashed out on a typewriter and a scrap of a poem taped below on a torn piece of paper. The sheer experience of listening to *Vitalogy* was linked to its book, shaped in CD form as a jewel case tipped

on its side and opening to a bizarre world of divisions, contents, guides for the proper health of young men and women and all the lyrics scratched out on various mediums and surfaces.

Taped below the title was a poem that served as a sort of sad epilogue to the previous page and track, "Better Man," sketching in sparse detail a tale of a beautiful woman, herself a work of art, who has had the belief in her own worth stripped from her, and she's left wondering and worrying, never realizing the power she likely has within.



It's not the only poem that stands out within the booklet. On the next set of facing pages is another lyrical fragment, where the protagonist wishes someone else had just stayed a little longer, basking in the meaningless frivolities of life that inevitably become the memories burned deepest within our collective psyche. "Should have stayed for the sunset … if not for me," that scrap concludes, the narrator left hanging and wishing.

But that's the opposite end of longing. There, the speaker is still someone in control of his destiny, looking to the past with an all-too-long gaze but at least capable of creating a new future, if motivation ever presents itself. On this page, the subject seems doomed to relive the same broken present on repeat, unable to break free of an abusive spirit and letting herself be wasted by a violent character. It's the fate of the hero from "Better Man," stuck in the same toxic relationship not out of conscious need but merely inertia. And paired with "Aye Davanita," the song becomes a musical representation of the main character in "Better Man" after that night ends and the next day begins, wordlessly chugging along and silently living a life that isn't being lived to its fullest.

It's a song without words, in the most literal sense, but paired with its appropriate artwork, it speaks volumes towards the themes of control and living with purpose the album displays in spades. Here, all is not well. There's no voice, no message, just the meanderings without end, not silent but not loud enough to be heard.

SOME DIE JUST TO LIVE

The opening refrain, seven notes in quick succession, repeated four times, sings like a bell being rung for the fallen and those on their way to the depths. That electric guitar introduction soon falls in with the rest of the instruments but always feels weary, even as the music picks up and gives way, rising and halting. "Immortality" is a song almost wholly unlike any other in Pearl Jam's catalog up to this point. It is a haunting rumination on the past three years, the toll it extracts and how the survivors make sense of it all.

In the midst of all the pain and frustration of the time, the primary goal of the band was still, as ever, to write songs, create art and keep the flow of ideas moving in a positive direction. Throughout the period in late 1993 and early 1994 when the bubble seemed at its biggest and about to burst, the band continued to write and record songs. In addition to holdovers "Whipping," "Better Man" and "Hard to Imagine," which would finally surface on 1998's *Chicago Cab* soundtrack, the band would debut "Corduroy," "Not For You," "Last Exit," "Spin the Black Circle," "Tremor Christ" and "Satan's Bed" in concert before the tour ended on April 17.

The last new song to emerge before then, however, was "Immortality." It was a bleak treatise on life and the difficulty that can come with living it, and given the timing, it seemed inexorably linked to Cobain's death — it was first played on stage at Boston Garden on April 11, 1994, three days after Cobain had been found. And though that event may have spurred Vedder and the band to break it out on stage, the singer's death hadn't inspired the song.

"No, that was written when we were on tour in Atlanta," Vedder said upon *Vitalogy*'s release. "It's not about Kurt. Nothing on the album was written directly about Kurt, and I don't feel like talking about him, because it (might be seen) as exploitation."

A Los Angeles Times interview from 1994 clears up some of the more obvious misconceptions as well. The cigar box, for example, was not in reference to the box found near Cobain's body but rather the cigar box where Vedder kept his tapes. And the song wasn't merely a reflection on one person but of the idea of what it meant to live and live well, and the lengths that some tortured souls will travel to find peace.

"A truant finds home, and a wish to hold on," Vedder sings, "But there's a trapdoor in the sun…" He then shifts from character to character, one as privileged as a whore, the victims in demand for public show, the next volunteer ready to be sacrificed at the alter of demand. It's all spread across the music and the years, one suffering being after another, all pressed together in mutual agony, until the final words radiate a haunting shadow on the entire album, this study of life that has for so much focused on the negative as a method to stay vital:

Some die just to live…

The effect of that one line is nothing if not chilling. It's a terrifying reminder of how far some people will go just for the chance to find solace. It's an awful solution but in the moment, it may seem like the only answer. And the intentional vagueness of the subject, this incalculable "some," leaves the question of "who" forever open-ended.

However, the song debuted with an entirely different set of lyrics that night at the Garden, and the next night at the Orpheum Theatre, many of the words had already been shuffled and rewritten entirely. And while the arrangement that later night mostly resembled that of the finished *Vitalogy* track, the lyrics still bore little resemblance to the final version.

Even so, the subject matter and themes were obviously linked, and the main difference was in the perspective of the singer. The *Vitalogy* track that led so many to believe the song must be about Cobain was originally pointed inward and sung from the first person.

Take me as is
I don't need this
I die just to live

I won't stay long
I'll be long gone
I'll die just to live…

In this original incarnation, there is no ambiguity. "Immortality," as originally written, was Vedder's farewell to celebrity life, a frustrated "Dear John" to the mounting pressures and expectations of a machine he had long decided he wanted no part of. If this had remained the final word on "Immortality," it would have been a solid track and likely a long-time fan favorite; the melody and message are strong enough to resonate even as-is.

But the changes to the song made it universal. Instead of reflecting inward, Vedder reshaped the lyrics to hurl out towards the world and the anguished listeners who look to darkness to silence the pain. It's how he felt, of course, but it's how many people feel, and the shift in tone took the song to new heights.

In either version, from the final words came the second instrumental sojourn. In the first one before the final verse, the guitars chop and dart before building together, growing louder and louder to a crescendo, then falling in at once back into the main theme. But the second, which served as the final, proper musical sounds on *Vitalogy*, was primarily acoustic, with Ament's bass loping in the background and percussive guitars marching along in tandem until a fade out.

From there, 20 seconds of silence separated "Immortality" from *Vitalogy*'s final, confusing collection of noise. After such an emotional five minutes and nine seconds of intense music, contained within those 20 seconds were the sounds that those who are no longer here can make. They were given the last word on the album's crowning track.

I DON'T KNOW IF THAT'S MY IMAGINATION, BUT...

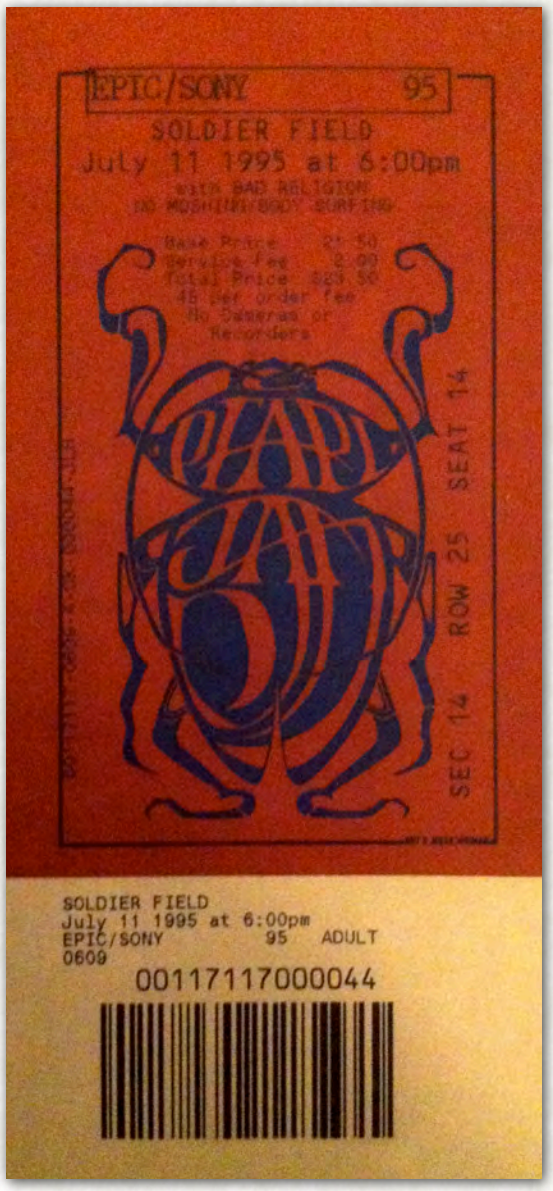
With Abbruzzese officially out of the equation, the most pressing task on top of finalizing everything that would be included with *Vitalogy* was to name a successor, someone who could adequately fill the drum seat and handle the music as well as the personalities of the band.

"Jack entered the band right at the end of making *Vitalogy*," Gossard said of Jack Irons. "Jack's a breath of fresh air, a family man. Everybody had a strong sense of friendship with him immediately. He was just there to play drums and help out."

Irons, of course, turned down an opportunity to initially be Pearl Jam's drummer in 1990, but had made sure to pass along a demo tape made by Gossard, Ament, McCready and Soundgarden's Matt Cameron to a singer he knew from San Diego — Eddie Vedder. It turned out to be better than a great fit, and years later, Vedder gave Irons another chance to be in the band.

"I think Ed felt like Jack made it all happen, you know?" McCready said. "Jack gave the tape that he got from Stone to Ed, so Ed wanted to repay that favor. Ed wanted that to happen, so it did, and we all liked him. He's a killer drummer."

"When it got to the point where it looked like I was the most likely guy to get the gig, I spent a bunch of time with Stone," Irons said. "We rehearsed in his basement studio. We never really confirmed that I was totally in the band. I went and did the Bridge School



shows [in October 1994], but I didn't really feel confirmed until we started touring a few months later."

Irons' first task in Pearl Jam, however, would be as strange a project as any the band would undertake in their career. Titled "Hey Foxymophandlemama, That's Me" on the back of the cover and "Stupid Mop" within, *Vitalogy*'s closing track was a bizarre sound collage of stomping drums, dissonant guitar wails and unsettling voices.

"I had taped something off the TV when I was maybe 17 or something," Vedder explained, "and I think it was people who had mental problems who were being let out of the hospitals early because the states were taking away funding for mental hospitals."

The idea of taking voices of those who had been set free into the world without being properly equipped, emotionally and otherwise, and later filmed for distribution via television, was clearly one that resonated with Vedder. Taking these tapes, the spoken pieces were cut up, spliced and doubled, while Irons drummed in primal fashion and McCready summoned the darkest of his guitar sounds to accent the floating proverbs.

The end result was haunting. The voice of what sounds like a small child but is apparently an old woman begins by reciting that a spanking is "the only thing I want so much … because you get closer to the person … just like a person having sex feels cared for…" As the voices drone on and repeat themselves, the guitar sounds get stranger and more sporatic, while the drums become louder and more pronounced.

The final words spoken at the end of this extreme exercise, after nearly 8 minutes of relentless weirdness, end the song and *Vitalogy* on a haunting note:

Do you ever think that you actually would kill yourself?
Well, if I have thought about it real, uh, real deep,
Yes, I believe I would...

All of the questions of life and control boil down to these final tortured moments, while drums pound and bizarre guitars wail away in the background, pulsating more than playing. "Would you kill yourself? Well, if I have thought about it…" Through the past three years, Pearl Jam had dealt with their share of adversity, scaling the highest highs of fame and navigating the minefield of extreme fame, from which no one could leave unscathed. Some emerged no worse for wear, some with battle scars. Some were left behind before the next phase, and some decided to die rather than to live, negating all the pain and insecurity and doubt with a single blast to render it all, within the first person context, as if it had never happened.

It was as challenging as anything released on a major label could have been. At the end of *Vitalogy*, just after a masterpiece in "Immortality," here was an aggressively strange patchwork of sounds that bore no resemblance to the band that had been plastered over magazines and across TV for so long. For every tape that was left running in the car or every CD that was left buzzing, this was a reminder that all was not well, and perhaps a hint to the listener to hit "stop" and move on to something else.

HE'S OFF AGAIN

While *Vitalogy* would be certified five-times platinum by the RIAA before the end of 1995, its release began a systematic shedding of the band's audience. While they were still writing and recording songs that would become radio anthems, their efforts to limit access from outside the band certainly cost them in the short term. Their issues with Ticketmaster would keep them from launching another full-scale tour of the U.S. until 1998, and efforts to shut out the media eventually led to hatchet pieces in magazines like *Rolling Stone*.

But the audience that remained were treated to a band that doubled down on delivering music without restrictions. Shortly

after *Vitalogy*'s release, the band broadcast a four-hour pirate radio show from their Seattle rehearsal space, dubbed "Self Pollution," via an open satellite feed that was available to any radio station that wanted it. There, the band performed live, played D.J., took phone calls, played mix tapes and invited other bands to take turns at the mic, including Soundgarden, Mudhoney, the Fastbacks and McCready's Mad Season.

"The idea was to make sure that the Fastbacks played and Mudhoney played and bands that weren't getting the same kind of attention that ours was but deserved it maybe twofold," Vedder said. "And it worked."

That pirate radio idea took hold on the road, too. As the band moved from city to city, playing unorthodox venues that allowed the band to utilize its own ticket distribution system, the shows were broadcast to low frequency FM signals out of the band's van. Dubbed "Monkeywrench Radio," it was another method to cut out the middlemen and break down the walls between entertainer and listener.

Not every decision worked out in the long term. Refusing to play Ticketmaster venues made it harder for fans to make it to the band's concerts, and eventually they relented while still working to limit service fees and giving fans the first chance at tickets before each tour. The tight control on media access also became a blueprint for future promotional cycles and led to the band actually opening up in later years, more comfortable with the process after enough of the dead weight had been shed.

"Better than any other band almost in history to have that kind of enormous success, they dealt with it really eloquently," Soundgarden's Chris Cornell said. "I think that set a great example to other musicians that, you know what, you can actually control the media spotlight. I think they stayed vital."

From then on, it became easier to put the music first. Shortly after *Vitalogy*, the band wrote and recorded *Mirror Ball* with Neil Young in the space of a week. Their next album, 1996's *No Code,* took even more chances and was also packaged in unorthodox fashion, in a sleeve that folded out four ways and came with lyrics scribbled on the back of Polaroid pictures. In 1998, after recording *Yield*, Jack Irons ceded the drum kit to Matt Cameron, who has occupied it ever since.

Tours and albums followed regularly, the band's live reputation grew and soon every aspect of the band's musical life, from concert bootlegs to books and films, were made available to fans via a direct channel from the band. If there's still a fury and a fire, it's channeled into the music. The best decisions reveal themselves from there, and an appreciation for the statistical unlikelihood that the band could still be operating 20 years later doesn't seem to be lost on Pearl Jam.

"The last time I watched Pearl Jam, I sat on the side of the stage and cried, because I thought, Wow, man. These guys survived," Dave Grohl said in 2010, after responding to a magazine's claim that Kurt Cobain didn't like Pearl Jam. "They fucking survived! Out of everybody else, they're still fucking going. It made me really happy."

"I think right now we're in a bit of a renaissance for the band," Gossard said in 2011. "There really is a collective understanding of how lucky and how fortunate we are to still be playing music, with the same group of people."

"We set out to make music to satisfy ourselves," Vedder said. "I think that was originally the plan." ⊙

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