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For Mom, who made me listen.

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Introduction

My Generation Loved Their Town

California, 1993. I'm nineteen, naive, a human-shaped mass of anxiety and insecurity. I'm living at home, attending community college, procrastinating, fretting over acne. I work in the Garden Center at my hometown Walmart. Billy Ray Cyrus makes an appearance in the music department there—the same place I bought a *Nevermind* CD—on my day off; I don't go, as my brief country phase ended in junior high. My gangsta rap phase is history, too. My hair is long, my goatee scraggly and spare. Every day I wear jean shorts, thermal underwear, clunky boots. Flannel. I want to be someone, somewhere else.

Pearl Jam is my favorite band, thanks almost entirely to my mom. She loved the Beatles—was one of those smitten, TV-glued teens when the British boys crossed the pond. Though a deep dive into Christianity derailed her musical interests for a time—I had a half-hearted Christian rock phase, too—her ear for a solidly crafted song had not diminished.

“You have to watch this MTV video,” she'd said one day. I think I'd already heard the song, but didn't know what Pearl Jam looked like, didn't know who they were, hadn't paid close attention. “The singer is so intense,” she'd added, clearly

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taken—as she'd been with the Fab Four—with what she'd seen and heard.

Well, I soon watched “Jeremy,” and that was it. Everything changed. A new phase began that still endures: long live rock. Mom was right there with me, listening and encouraging. We read about, and tuned in to, Seattle's music scene (at least to those acts that were publicized on and beyond MTV in my state). I started dressing like I belonged in that dank, fascinating Pacific Northwest city, despite the arid heat. My meager tape and CD collection began to grow, to get grungier.



Late that summer, I learned that Pearl Jam would be playing in San Francisco around Halloween. A close friend and I lobbied our folks to let us drive down (from north of the Sacramento valley) because their house rules still applied. Go have fun, but be careful, mine said when the time came. I think my mom was at least a little jealous. Dad wasn't much for rock music, but understood the draw.

One small problem: we didn't have tickets, and the show was sold out.

The plan was to arrive at the Warfield Theatre early and find a scalper who wouldn't scalp us too deeply. We had a combined \$110 in cash. We might have been in for nothing but a long-ass drive and a lot of disappointment.

But no! Two days after I attended a Tower Records-hosted Vs. release party, I parked my dad's drafty old Ford Courier in San Francisco and we walked toward the venue—anxious, hopeful, scared—until we came upon a loose crowd of

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similarly dressed young people chatting, laughing, smoking. We tuned our ears toward talk of tickets, offers to sell. We'd never bought from a scalper before. Hell, I'd never been to a real concert before.

Finally, something promising: a girl had a ring of people in eager postures around her, and tickets in her hand. Just two. We made a beeline for her. She was offering the seats, but clearly uncomfortable; I got the feeling she'd never played the role of scalper. A first for her, too.

A surprising assertiveness suddenly bloomed inside me. "We'll give you \$110!" I nearly shouted, risking our entire wad right off the bat. But the offer swayed her, we swapped paper rectangles, and my friend and I were *going to see fucking Pearl Jam!*

In a beneficial coincidence that wouldn't reveal itself for twenty-five years, I was there for the band's first US show to support *Vs.* (And now you have this book.) I witnessed Eddie Vedder throwing Halloween candy to the crowd, Mike McCready smashing his guitar to shrapnel (and slicing open his hand in the process), bassist Jeff Ament jumping with splayed legs, guitarist Stone Gossard grimacing and working his neck in pigeon fashion as he played, Dave Abbruzzese fluidly machine-gunning the drums, and, of course, the magic of a powerful, emotionally invested rock band. I was in the same building as the guy who bared his teeth and soul in the "Jeremy" video, and got to personally see him do that very thing.

My friend and I were on another plane when we emerged from the dark theater after the last notes of "Indifference" had faded. We were barely tethered to the ground. The

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microphone shoved at us didn't register for what it was at first. Then an eager voice, shouting in our faces, "Hey, I'm a writer with *Kerrang!* magazine. What did you think of the show? What do you think of Pearl Jam? Are they your generation's Led Zeppelin?" The questions came fast and our answers were inept, incoherent, sent from another planet. The microphone found other faces. The journalist, I didn't appreciate until years later, was just one emissary from the throngs making "grunge"¹ a culture-changing thing. The guy was just as responsible for how I was dressed as the members of Pearl Jam were.

Fittingly, I waited in line to buy (charge) band merch. I got the only T-shirt available, a black one that didn't even bear the band's name, which was both cool and disappointing. It had a weird street sign graphic and the song title "W.M.A." on the front. "POLICE" was emblazoned in white on the back. I would wear it, without really understanding its significance, for several years.

I was nineteen. Pearl Jam *was* my Led Zeppelin. Music had made itself an inextricable part of me before I was even sure what "me" was. I was the grunge generation.



Ten days earlier, on October 18, 1993, Vedder and Ament had rambled about Vs. and their band, and bantered with telephoning fans, on the Seattle-broadcasted Rockline radio show. I revisited the recording in 2019 out of professional and personal curiosity and was struck by how telling of a document it remains. It's a lo-fi form of promotion that

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Vedder approved of at the time and contains repeated, enthusiastic takedowns of mainstream media; reveals an easy camaraderie between the frontman and bassist; and showcases Vedder's unwillingness to speak more than anecdotally about his lyrics or himself, which he then oddly (and endearingly) countered by giving listeners his actual phone number. The show was, like *Vs.*, a snapshot of young artists who were both reeling and careening, riding a wave and thrashing away from it.

During that broadcast, the bandmates unknowingly presaged—and proactively dismissed—countless pieces that would be written about Pearl Jam, its members, and its music in the years to follow. As would become a hallmark of the band's career, Vedder and Ament emphasized art over press, creation over observation.

“That’s why we picked a beautiful art form like music. All your thoughts and emotions, they come out much clearer and much more intense, you know, when coupled with music,” Vedder said. “All this talk about it. There shouldn’t be so much talk. People act like they know about all these bands. But it’s just from what they read. They don’t even really listen to them anymore.”²

Ament added, “Whenever I try to explain a record that I really, really like to somebody, like if I just bought a record, like the new Liz Phair record, like if I was gonna explain what it sounded like, I could never really explain it. I always end up getting caught up and stuttering something, and then I say ‘Just go buy it, ’cause it’s really cool.’”³

Now, I’m guessing you bought a copy of *Vs.* long ago—or maybe you stream it via your favorite music platform now

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and then—so you're already invested in the music. And you're reading this book, so you're open to my "talk." I hope, then, that you'll find it adds to your understanding of the record (and the history of the band), that it complements the sounds and songs you may be intimately, or perhaps only vaguely, familiar with. I hope it opens your ears to take something new from your next listen.

Vedder actually said it best: "Whatever is printed seems like gospel. I don't know. Your interpretation is the most important one."⁴

This is my interpretation. It's far from gospel, but maybe it will help you shape your take.

Band versus Fame

