

Crowe, C. (1993, October 28). 5 Against the World. Rolling Stone, p. 50.

OVERVIEW

Just four years ago, the grunge band, Pearl Jam, was completely unknown. Today they reign as champions of rock, thanks to their first album, "Ten," and their most recent release, "Pearl Jam." Pearl Jam is a Seattle-based band who, many claim, are following the footsteps of Nirvana. They play a grinding type of music that is difficult to define. Most people refer to their style as alternative, but a more accurate description is probably grunge.

Grunge, a style developed in Seattle, is characterized by grinding guitars and voices, messages dealing with real-life issues, rebellion, and anger. Grunge bands are intensely popular with teenagers, and they automatically form a cultic following. In the past five years, this style of music has become the hottest on the top-40 charts, although alternative bands originally sought to throw the system for a loop. Why these bands have become so popular?

PEARL JAM'S STYLE AND LYRICS

Pearl Jam's music almost always begins quite softly. The guitar is extremely mellow; characterized by picking one string at a time. The voice, too, is very quiet. Slowly, as the heartfelt message builds up, so does Vedder's voice and guitar. The chorus is characterized by loud grinding on the guitar and a shouting voice. It's almost not classified as singing anymore.

The lyrics always deal with a deep issue. Vedder says, "It's got nothing to do with melody or timing or even words; it has to do with the emotion behind the song... You have to sing them from a feeling." "Vedder has learned the public effect of writing well about damaged personalities."

Most of the songs display a great deal of anger, to which teens obviously relate. Cameron Crowe's description of a practice session is, "The room is filled with his (Vedder's) anger." The band plays out its emotions as is seen in the painful lyrics of "Ten": "Daddy didn't give attention/To the fact that Mommy didn't care."

Another of Pearl Jam's songs, "Alive," is described by Vedder: "Alive is...it's torture. Which is why it's so f---ed up for me." It's about a child who has to take over the position of the father in the family when his father dies. Eventually he becomes just like his dad, and his mom begins to love him in the same way as she did her spouse. Vedder says, "The son is oblivious to it all. He doesn't know what the f--- is going on. He's still dealing, he's still growing up..."

PEARL JAM'S VIEW OF SUCCESS

Typical of grunge bands such as Nirvana and Smashing Pumpkins, Pearl Jam claims not to care about it too much. In fact, Vedder says he does not like it. Their turf statement is "music over idolatry."

They may not be lying about their apathy. Dave Abbruzzese cannot believe the way the rest of the band reacts to selling a million copies of its debut album. He states, "I thought the band would get together and jump up and down for at least a minute...But it doesn't happen that way [in this band]. Me, I flip out. I jump up and down by myself."

Vedder even yelled at a group of hitchhikers for singing Pearl Jam's song, "Black." He asked them not to sing it anymore. Coincidentally, the song has come to symbolize the overcommercialization of the band. Vedder was so opposed to this that he even fought to keep it from being overplayed and did not want a video made of the song.

This is all characteristic of Pearl Jam's image and beliefs. They are examples of the "baby buster" or "13th" generation, which love to despise authority. Their purpose is to communicate what they want, not what anyone else wants to hear.

PEARL JAM'S FANS

As stated, Pearl Jam is extremely attractive to teenagers today. The topics, emotion, rage, and various levels of tone and intensity draw the kids to the music. Their music is powerful and attracts an extremely devoted following.

VEDDER'S HISTORY

Vedder had a dysfunctional childhood and never finished high school.

Vedder hated his stepdad. He says, "There were fights and bad, bad scenes. I was kind of on my own at a pretty young age." Eventually, the man ran out on him and his mom. Vedder has never spoken with him again.

It was not until Vedder was living alone in San Diego that he found out that this person was his stepdad. All his life, he was told that it was his biological father. When his mother told him, he responded, "I know he's not my father, he's a f---ing a--hole."

Vedder had actually met his biological father three or four times before. He died of multiple sclerosis. It was tough for Vedder to deal with all of this. The man that he thought was his dad he hated, but now he has a different dad. The problem is that his real dad is dead.

Vedder's biological dad had never married his mom. Vedder seems to be scarred from these experiences. He was not loved much by his stepfather, and his real father ran away from him. Vedder feels that he was a big secret. This probably accounts for much of the anger and emotion which rage in his music today.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Pearl Jam is so popular with teenagers?
2. Why are Pearl Jam's fans so much more loyal than most pop bands' fans?
3. Do you think it is healthy for teenagers to immerse themselves in this band as they do?
4. In a day that lacks of heroes, is it beneficial for kids to accept a band such as Pearl Jam as a hero?
5. What is the overall impression you get of Pearl Jam from this review?
6. Why is the new trend of intense anger in music so popular these days?

7. What can you do to lead kids to a music group that will relieve them of everyday stress instead of contribute to their anger?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Kids who become fans of Pearl Jam (and other grunge bands such as Nirvana) will generally become highly devoted fans.

2. The anger being emitted from the band may be transferred to its listeners.

3. Teenagers, who desperately need heroes, often make their favorite musicians their heroes.

4. Because of the emotion in Pearl Jam's music, kids often relate well to the music, and may become emotionally attached to the group.

5. In a time of great need or pain, this music may not relieve a teenager.

6. The anti-authority message that the band communicates may feed a teen's desire to rebel.

7. Youth workers should openly, nonjudgmentally listen to teens' music and then ask the kids to listen to the youth workers' preferences. At that point, one can discuss similarities and differences, and help kids learn to discern music themselves.

8. It is important to not impose one's music on another without a clear invitation.

Kevin Bauer and Dean Borgman cCYS