

‘I know someday you'll have a beautiful life': Pearl Jam's *Ten* and the road to authenticity

Introduction

Pearl Jam's debut album is a special and important record in the context of both the alternative music *grunge* phenomenon of the 1990s and the band's own growth as important rock musicians and artists in the subsequent twenty years. Indeed for many, Pearl Jam's debut album, together with Nirvana's *Nevermind*, is synonymous with the word grunge itself. The album is a seminal work that marked the mainstream breakthrough of guitarist Stone Gossard and bassist Jeff Ament, the founding members of grunge pioneers Green River and so has an important place in the genealogy of Seattle rock. It remains a commercial and critical success, selling nearly ten million copies, and being certified platinum thirteen times. It regularly features in 'best of' lists in the music press and popular journalism¹.

However, the commercial success of Pearl Jam and other bands from the region such as Nirvana, Soundgarden and Alice in Chains, raised questions about the authenticity of grunge as a musical style since it had initially presented itself as an underground and unreservedly alternative movement that shunned mainstream acceptance. Furthermore, the album's highly polished style and intricate production did not sit comfortably with critics who claimed it was not faithful to a simpler, pared back 'grunge sound'. The success and all of its associated trappings pushed the band into a position where they recognised the album as an emblem of inauthenticity. It was this very inauthenticity that later Pearl Jam albums and the band's actions rallied against in subsequent years. The intrigue of *Ten* lies not only in its rich musicality but in its status as a symbol of how the 'Seattle sound' was on its way to becoming

¹ See for example Von Appen and Doehring (2006), who compile a meta-list of thirty-eight 'best albums of all time' lists from the period 1985-2004. *Ten* is placed at number 26.

nothing more than a self-parody. More perhaps than any other album in recent times, it gave the band the perfect opportunity to redefine themselves as one of the most musically and culturally important acts in modern popular music.

1. Seattle: Grunge, Place and Authenticity

Although Seattle rock and grunge² might appear to be late 1980s and early to mid 1990s phenomena, the region had a long and rich music history and legacy. The city had been the home of 1960s and 1970s bands such as The Wailers and The Sonics, which gave the city a strong underground punk scene and a vibrant musical community. The reasons given as to why a geographically-isolated location in the north-west pacific became a cultural hotspot have ranged from the economic - the fall of Seattle's aerospace economy led to reduced employment opportunities for the city's youth and consequent boredom (Wiederhorn 1998) – to the meteorological – the region's climate is grey and drizzly. Azerrad (1995) claims that the music movement was underpinned by a strong urge to rebel against the suburban middle classes in a city where repressive alcohol laws meant that the movement had to go underground to survive. Given the relative isolation of the city and region, few bands included Seattle in national tours in the 1980s and the music scene primarily relied on self-promotion through amateur fanzines and promotional material. The reluctance of local radio stations to give exposure to local acts, instead choosing established and mainstream artists,

² Establishing a uniform definition of *grunge* has proven to be difficult since there is little consensus as to either its exact meaning or its genesis (see Mazullo 2000: 713; Tow 2011: 160-70, 223; Yarm 2011: xiv, 194-7. In this chapter, I use *grunge* to refer to a particular kind of music initially from the Seattle/Washington region that had certain attitudinal and cultural characteristics, notwithstanding the fact that the term later became used to refer to bands from other parts of the United States and indeed the world.

was broken only by *The Rocket* magazine and radio stations that began to promote and play alternative and even local forms of music (see Tow 2011: 25-9). Alden and Gilbert (1993) suggest that the city's isolated, claustrophobic position paradoxically allowed for greater artistic freedom since artists were not under any national spotlight and could innovate freely without fear of overt criticism.

From what Mudhoney's Mark Arm termed the 'the two i's: isolation and inbreeding' (Azerrad 1992) came a shared sense of purpose and a developing movement. These very characteristics established a scene, a *sonoric landscape* (Crang 1998: 92) that fostered a sense of belonging. Seattle as a geographical space becomes a cultural *place*, which provided

an anchor of shared experiences between people and continuity over time. Spaces become places as they become 'time-thickened'. They have a past and a future that binds people round them.

(Crang 1998: 103)

For Seattle bands, these shared experiences manifested themselves in the form of an identity that was less concerned with a set of shared musical characteristics and more about being defined in terms of their attitude (Tow 2011)³. And, central to this attitude was the question of authenticity. As Frith (1992) notes, the competing elements of authenticity and commercialism are pervasive in popular music with the tension particularly acute in alternative bands for whom being authentic is a way of defining themselves as outside of a mainstream and an often despised set of norms. For grunge, being authentic was about maintaining a sense of artistic integrity through an alternative style of playing and avoiding

³ Bell (1998) does in fact try to identify a Seattle/grunge sound based simply on loudness and musical honesty. Strong (2011) stresses grunge's socio-political commitments and its adherence to a strict fashion and mode of living, whilst Shevory (1995) draws on analogies between grunge and punk and defines the genre's primary concerns as being subversion, the championing of the rights of the marginalised, and the occupation of 'an emotional terrain in which the need for self-help devolves into the desire for self-annihilation' (1995: 34).

the obvious trappings of commercialism. However, once Seattle bands had been signed to major record labels and began to receive considerable national airplay, this sense of authenticity became endangered as they became public property and commercial fodder. Nowhere was this more evident than in ‘from Seattle’ being stuck on the front of records, the marketing of a Seattle/Grunge dress-code by fashion magazines and in the rise of ‘copy-cat’ bands, often from other parts of the country (see Pato 2009: 320; Yarm 2011: 350). The appropriation of one of its most powerful signifiers of authenticity in its overt dress code, and the metonymic use of the name as a brand harmed not only musical integrity but also spatial and cultural identity. Seattle as cultural place, in Crang’s terms, became fragmented and its anchoring elements dissipated to the point where it ceased to stand and recognise its own authenticity, instead merely existing as a set of readily transferrable and potentially profit-making properties. As both Bell (1998) and Wood (2011) show, nowhere was the response to this more evident and tragic than in the reaction of Kurt Cobain to Nirvana’s popularity and success and his subsequent suicide.

2. The paradoxes of *Ten*

The genesis of Pearl Jam as a band is well documented (for example, see Neely 1998; Pato 2009: 247-8). The spine of the band was the pairing of Stone Gossard and Jeff Ament, who had been musical partners in the grunge pioneers Green River⁴ and later, in Mother Love Bone. The original line-up of the band that began performing as Mookie Blaylock⁵ was

⁴ Anderson (2007: 24) considers Green River’s *Come on Down*, released in 1985 to be the first and prototypical grunge album.

⁵ The name of the New Jersey Nets basketball player, Mookie Blaylock, was chosen before the band’s first ever show at the Off Ramp Café in Seattle in 1990. The band later changed their name from Pearl Jam in the face of potential legal and marketing problems (see Neely 1998: 63-74).

completed by the addition of drummer Dave Krusen, Mike McCready, a lead guitarist with a distinctive blues-rock sound and Eddie Vedder, a vocalist who had auditioned with the band by recording lyrics over three Stone Gossard tracks onto a tape that been sent to him in San Diego, having initially been introduced by former Red Hot Chili Peppers and future Pearl Jam drummer Jack Irons.

As an album, *Ten* is a series of quite subtle paradoxes. Firstly, as Anderson (2007) suggests, its cover and inner sleeves draw attention to one of several inconsistencies that begin to emerge when the album is considered as an alternative/grunge album. Anderson draws attention to the use of basketball symbolism on the front cover and inner sleeve, where the five band members raise their hands in group unison as though ‘they have called a time-out and are about to get back into the game’ (Anderson 2007: 75). He argues that this deliberate foregrounding of sports imagery deviates considerably from the conventional model of grunge music as incompatible with the type of mainstream behaviour associated with sport-playing. Furthermore, it can be argued that the highly staged and self-conscious nature of the band’s appearance both digresses considerably from an established authentic look yet contains nothing of the irony evident on the cover of Nirvana’s *Nevermind*. Following Anderson’s argument, to all intents and purposes, it looks inauthentic. And yet, read in an alternate way, the image provides a visual symbol of the coming together of a movement in the five hands bound and anchored by the music inside the album. Read in this way, the cover’s iconicity highlights the band’s position as the natural successor to Green River and Mother Love Bone as the prototype of the Seattle sound.

This potential for plural and often conflicting interpretations is indicative of an album that refuses absolute categorisation. Musically, its sound, alternating between the heavy metallic riffs evident in ‘Once’, to the drenched blues of ‘Deep’ to the more plaintive yet

equally emotional 'Black' and 'Release' demonstrates an eclecticism unlike that of any of Pearl Jam's contemporaries. At the same time, Vedder's lyrics and voice, angry at times, soulful and mournful at others visits a spectacular range of emotions, situations and thematic concerns; this frequently does not sound like and should not be a grunge album such is the range of content. The focus veers at a dramatic pace from the narrative autobiography of 'Alive', to the social commentary of 'Jeremy', based on Vedder's reading of a newspaper story about an isolated schoolboy in Texas who committed suicide⁶, to the melancholic 'Black' with its focus on unrequited love and the subsequent loss of the cherished other. In addition, the musical complexity with interlaced guitars, innovative bass effects and multi-tracking used to its limit, are representative of a highly wrought and genuinely thoughtful work.

Yet, the album seems strangely formulaic: drums, bass, two very distinctive guitar sounds that could fit quite easily in any seventies rock classic, Mike McCready's ubiquitous pentatonic solos and a staple diet of 'catchy' verses and choruses. The production sounds suffocating and the effect of vast amounts of reverb applied to the tracks in postproduction make the album sound glossy and even mainstream⁷; it feels and sounds like the type of flamboyant rock that the grunge movement was reacting to. And of course, this particular aspect was not lost on Kurt Cobain, who criticised Pearl Jam's more extravagant musical tone simply as 'cock-rock fusion' and questioned the band's claim to authenticity by stating that he found it 'offensive to be lumped in with bands like Pearl Jam....They were never part of

⁶ This focus on the marginalised individual became a key recurrent theme in Pearl Jam's second album *Vs*, for example in 'Daughter', 'WMA' and 'Elderly Woman Behind the Counter in a Small Town'.

⁷ The remix of *Ten* released in 2009 was in part due to the band's dissatisfaction with the original sound.

the underground' (Neely 1998: 123). Robert Roth, guitarist-vocalist of the Seattle band Truly sums up this attitude.

It wasn't punk rock, it wasn't underground, it wasn't rebellious to me...I mean they imported their singer from San Diego, they had auditions. It just seemed like a weird kind of way to go about it. It wasn't quite the organic, 'from the streets' thing that other bands were.

Pato (2009: 258)

Ten's ability to be both a critical and commercial success epitomises the album's position as both a symbol of a movement and the prototype of a scene and a sound that had been appropriated into a brand. If *Ten* was partly responsible for grunge's arrival into the mainstream, then it also marked the beginning of its end. And, it could be argued that the band quickly sought to distance themselves from what the album came to represent if not from the music itself⁸. The magic of *Ten* therefore becomes not so much in its own sound but the shift in direction that it triggered.

3. Redefinition and Authenticity

In the backlash and uncertainty that surrounded the commercial explosion of Seattle bands, and later the death of Kurt Cobain, *Ten* became the perfect benchmark from which Pearl Jam could stress their authenticity and in doing so redefine themselves on their own terms. Perhaps, part of this shift was natural since as Mike McCready, reflecting on *Ten* had explained:

we were a band for only three and a half months when we recorded it – but I don't think it's the best we can do.

(Gilbert 1998: 78)

⁸ The popularity and longevity of songs from the album is evident in the fact that according to statistics from the band's official website, the top five songs performed from 1990 to the end of 2011 are from *Ten*: 'Even Flow'; 'Alive'; 'Black'; 'Jeremy' and 'Porch'.

However, much of this was a conscious movement away from a grunge *code* and was most significantly evident in their third and fourth albums *Vitalogy* and *No Code*. Here, Pearl Jam deliberately marked themselves as more proto-punk, anti-materialist and anti-commercial; their refusal to develop and movement away from *Ten*'s initial sound is striking. *Vitalogy* saw the band attack the trappings of fame through the nihilistic and scathing cynicism of 'Not for You', 'Nothingman', 'Corduroy' and 'Satan's Bed'. Its raw, aggressive rhythm guitars, and the less refined leads than had appeared on both *Ten* and *Vs*, served to wipe away the polish of the band's first album with its edgy garage sound. Most striking of all was the 1996 release *No Code*, which turned the *Ten* sound on its head, all the way from the skeletal, opening revelation of 'Sometimes' through to the proto-punk and indecipherable 'Lukin', to the spoken-word ballad 'I'm Open' and the closing lullaby of 'Around the Bend'. *No Code* – the title itself is an explicit rejection of categorisation – is *Ten*'s antithesis, from its collage cover of random Polaroid images right to Stone Gossard's lead vocal on 'Mankind', a natural contender for the song that doesn't sound like it could ever be on *Ten*.

The push towards becoming more authentic was not restricted to the band's musical output. They famously stopped making videos, refused interviews to promote tours and records, transmitted *MonkeyWrench Radio* from Eddie Vedder's house, including sets from Seattle bands and musicians, and decided, following a series of disagreements with Ticketmaster, to accept an invitation from the Department of Justice and make a formal complaint about the corporation's monopoly of concert ticketing⁹. Perhaps, most tellingly, the sacking of drummer Dave Abbruzzese in August 1994, amidst claims that he was both too careerist and musically divergent from the style that Pearl Jam now wanted to embrace, was a

⁹ Although Pearl Jam ultimately withdrew from their battle with Ticketmaster, it was and still is seen as a battle of artistic authenticity against the 'corporate machine'.

clear move towards positioning the band as more authentic (see Yarm 2011: 474-8). Later, they released live CDs of their shows in a bid to prevent illegal bootleggers from profiting from their fans, and have worked tirelessly and, more often than not, inconspicuously for charitable causes. Their fan club with its international network of rabid followers has redefined the intimate authenticity of the physical notion of space into a virtual internet community. Nils Bernstein, a former publicist for the renowned Seattle independent record label Sub-Pop, crystallises the work of the band over the past twenty years into an acknowledgement of true authenticity when he suggests that

in a sense, [Pearl Jam] have been the punkest band of any of them.

Pato (2009: 455)

4. Conclusion: lifting the curse

Fast-forward to 2006 and following a further three commercially and artistically successful albums, two full sets of tour bootlegs, a greatest hits album, a live album and a collection of B-sides and rarities, Pearl Jam broke further innovative ground by releasing their eighth self-titled album on the back of a deal with Clive Davis's J Records. The album, which was critically acclaimed was hugely symbolic in that it represented the band's first release away from a major label¹⁰. On 1st July 2006, Pearl Jam performed a ten song set on VH1's *Storytellers*, where before playing 'Alive', Vedder spoke about the song's autobiographical lyrics which outlined his discovery that his father was not the man he had grown up believing him to be. He explained how the pain in the song had over the years been diluted through the fans' transformation of it into a self-powering anthem. 'They lifted the curse. The audience changed the meaning for me' Vedder said.

If anything, the story serves as an analogy to the band's journey over the past twenty years: the band created the archetypal era-defining rock/grunge album, breathtaking in its

¹⁰ J Records was still owned and operated by Sony Entertainment. However, Pearl Jam released their last album *Backspacer* (2009) on their own *Monkeywrench* label.

musicianship and depth of emotional intensity, only to spend the rest of their careers working against what it came to stand for and instead seeking more authentic connections on their own terms. So, how appropriate to openly acknowledge that part of the band's growth has been in the shared experience between performer and listener as inhabitants of that cultural notion of place: a mark of true authenticity.

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