

## Cameron Crowe's 'Pearl Jam Twenty' is Amazing Rock Doc

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on September 29, 2011 - 8:30pm

- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [Cameron Crowe](#) [3]
- [Eddie Vedder](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [Mother Love Bone](#) [6]
- [Movie Review](#) [7]
- [PBS](#) [8]
- [Pearl Jam](#) [9]
- [Pearl Jam 20](#) [10]
- [Soundgarden](#) [11]
- [Television](#) [12]



Rating: **5.0/5.0**

Very few music documentaries in the history of the form have more successfully conveyed the inner workings and outer artistic expression of a band than Cameron Crowe's brilliant "Pearl Jam Twenty," a joyful, inspirational examination of the importance of creative integrity and great rock 'n' roll. Pearl Jam has survived for two decades as so many of their peers have come and gone by staying true to their music and their fans. And one of our best filmmakers was there for most of the journey, resulting in a documentary that plays well to hardcore fans and those who haven't bought anything related to Eddie Vedder since "Ten." Like all great music docs, it works for both.

Crowe ("Jerry Maguire," "Almost Famous," the upcoming "We Bought a Zoo") moved to Seattle at just the right time, just as the music scene there was about to explode. He became fascinated by the sense of community within the musicians he met – men who would become household names (at least in households you want to hang out in) like Chris Cornell, Kurt Cobain, and Andy Wood. Wait, who? Wood may never have become a household name but he should have and probably would have if the lead singer of Mother Love Bone hadn't succumbed to a drug overdose just as he was on the verge of superstardom. It left two of the band members – Stone Gossard and Jeff Ament – without a lead singer and uncertain of their future. They put together a musical track in hope of finding a new lead singer and a young man named Eddie Vedder wrote the lyrics to go with the melody, which would result in the song "Footsteps," and the rest is history. Pearl Jam was formed.



Pearl Jam Twenty

Photo credit: Abramorama

Rarely has a music documentary assembled more fascinating footage of the formation of a band than “Pearl Jam Twenty.” Not only do we hear the actual cassette tape that Vedder sent to Ament & Gossard, called “The Momma-Son Demo,” but we see black & white footage of the second time Pearl Jam ever played on stage. Early interviews with the band, never-before-seen performances, and current reflections by not just Pearl Jam members but other contemporaries (mostly Chris Cornell, who serves as not just a perfect witness for how and when Pearl Jam was formed but played a crucial role with his Mother Love Bone tribute project Temple of the Dog) tell the story of how a bunch of kids went from playing guitars in their basements to Lollapalooza as well as any music documentary in years.

“Pearl Jam Twenty” is more than mere archival documentary. It works as a concert film as well with dozens of remarkable performances from the well-known (the career importance of MTV’s “Unplugged” and what that did for the band) to the rarely-seen to the current (and all with some of the best sound I’ve ever heard in a rock doc). Crowe cuts back and forth with his musical selections, often using them as commentary on where the band was in their careers and personal lives. It’s one of the director’s most notable accomplishments – the way he doesn’t just tell the tale chronologically but brilliantly weaves their entire career into one piece about creative integrity and the importance of artistic expression. It makes sense within Crowe’s vision of the film that a current performance of “Release” could be used to talk about the importance of the songwriting process to a young Vedder. The song still has resonance for the lead singer. It still means something. And that’s one of the reasons the band has not just survived but thrived for two decades. They’ve never lost sight of what’s important to them. The songs always mean something.

More than any rock doc in years, a band has found a filmmaker who completely understands them. Crowe tackles a lot with “Pearl Jam Twenty,” jumping from the band’s early days to the Ticketmaster hearings to Bush protests to today – with a ton of stories and musical performances along the way. “Pearl Jam Twenty” runs over two hours but never sags. If anything, it feels like it could have been longer as the band’s recent creative endeavors are somewhat skipped over as the film nears its close. If there’s one complaint, it’s that the film moves awful quickly through the second half of the “Twenty.”



Pearl Jam Twenty  
*Photo credit: Abramorama*

One of the many interesting things about “Pearl Jam Twenty” to this viewer is how much of the band’s trajectory was a stroke of luck, fate, destiny, or whatever you want to call it. If Andy Wood had never died would Mother Love Bone still be rocking? Would Eddie have found another band? What if Chris Cornell hadn’t help give him the stage confidence he needed? What if Kurt Cobain’s death hadn’t taught the band to re-assess their priorities in light of the mainstream’s eye? What if...? Great bands are as much a product of unexpected meetings – the right demo, the right performance, the right audience for the right show – as anything else, and “Pearl Jam Twenty” makes that crystal clear.

Which is not to say that it also doesn’t prove once and for all that this band totally rocks. Vedder naturally takes a lot of the center stage and offers some of the most interesting current interview footage but the movie is FAR from a one-man show. Ament, Gossard, and Mike McCready all have a ton of interview time and performance footage that makes clear their equal (if not greater) importance to the success of the band.

Cameron Crowe got to Seattle at just the right time and essentially started making this movie on that day. He was smart enough to see what was going on around him and not just watch it but actually help propel it into the spotlight (with "Singles"). This has been a two-decade labor of love for one of our best filmmakers about one of our best bands. It is a love letter to not just Pearl Jam, but all rock and roll. And it rules.

*"Pearl Jam Twenty" was directed by Cameron Crowe and opens in Chicago at the Siskel Film Center on September 30th, 2011 and plays for one week. It also plays on PBS on October 21st, 2011 as a part of their American Masters series.*



[13]

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