

late teens and his parents had divorced that he was told that, no, he wasn't. More than that, his real father had since died. "I felt alone," Vedder has said. "Except for music." This was the early 80s.

After trying and failing to support himself through high school in San Diego he joined his mother and brothers in Chicago and worked as a waiter while he finished school there. In 1984 he and his then musician girlfriend Beth Lieblich moved back to San Diego, where he recorded demo tapes at home, vented his angst in a variety of bands, moonlighted as a security guard and petrol-pump attendant and went surfing. A lot.

Surfing is an essential part of Vedder's make-up, as much a means of relaxation and escape as a sneaky way to still get his adrenalin fix. He likes it that the ocean demands a high level of respect regardless of who you are. That when you're riding the big waves — be it at Yallingup in Western Australia or King Island off Tasmania, both of which he has done — you can only think of how to catch that wave and stay on it.

Friends with famed surfers Laird Hamilton and Australia's Mark Richards, Vedder speaks of them in the sort of awed, slightly goofy tones that a family member may speak of him. His notebook has a Richards surf shop logo on its cover. When there isn't much swell, he thinks of lyrics.

It was while out surfing in San Diego in 1990 that Vedder came up with the words for three of Pearl Jam's early hits: *Once*, *Footsteps* and *Alive* (about a youth who is lied to about his paternity). His friend, former

Red Hot Chili Peppers drummer Jack Irons, had given him a demo tape by a band in Seattle that was looking for a singer.

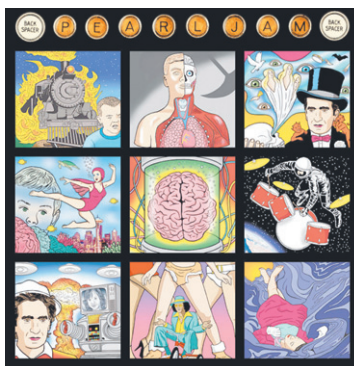
Vedder recorded the vocals, mailed the songs back and was duly invited to join the band. That first Pearl Jam album, *Ten*, went on to sell more than 12 million copies, making it one of the highest selling rock albums.

Ten was reissued earlier this year in a package on which the group remixed the original tracks with regular collaborator Brendan O'Brien, who also produced the comparatively up-beat *Backspacer*.

This time Pearl Jam knows how to handle the hype. Back then its surge in success nearly drove the band — and Vedder in particular — crazy. Everyone wanted a bit of him. In 1992, fearing that with any more popularity the band's "heads would pop like grapes", he took to wearing army helmets for a while. It had all got too much.

"I don't hate success but I never wanted to be the spokesperson for my generation," he once said. "So I just kind of sat it out for a while and waited to see if it would pass."

Pearl Jam took its fame and subverted it. It refused to release videos or singles from its second album, 1993's *Vs*, and has endeavoured to call the shots since. For a few years it even took on corporate ticket vendor Ticketmaster, boycotting relevant venues in



Eddie Vedder, main picture, in London, and Pearl Jam's new *Backspacer* album

outrage at the latter's surcharges, and arguably harming its career in the process. The members have their causes and, says Vedder, their boundaries: "I don't know how someone like Bono deals with it. He's built a little differently. You just have to step back a little sometimes."

Vedder has had mentors, luckily, unofficial ones such as Johnny Ramone, Bruce Springsteen, Pete Townshend and Young, weighing in from left-field rock's hall of fame. Even old roue Ronnie Wood (whose new solo album has a track featuring Vedder on vocals) has played his part in keeping him grounded. It amazes Vedder that he mixes with the musicians he idolised 20 years ago and even more that they seem to respect him back.

Springsteen has given him tips on performing. Grumpy old Young turns out to be so avuncular, the band calls him Uncle Neil.

"So in this way you're learning more about music and the fourth dimension of it all," says Vedder brightly. Fourth dimension? "Outside of all this." He sweeps a flannelled arm around the room. "Past the records, past the live shows, past the

interviews and the movies" — Vedder wrote the Golden Globe-winning acoustic soundtrack for 2008's *Into the Wild* — "you have to see the human being behind all that." He pauses and sighs. "There's no other way with this stuff than from the inside."

The family tree, then, has many branches. But for Pearl Jam fans Vedder is the star at the top. He waxes rapturously about the way many of the band's followers have embraced the band's causes as their own: lobbying for corporate responsibility, voting for (Democratic) change, doing grassroots activism for peace, equality and love. Singing along all the while.

"Yeah, it's incredible, isn't it?" says Vedder, looking pleased. "I like to think that because they know all the words, all the content, that they're absorbing their meaning. So even though it's loud and the vocals are mixed in with drums and guitars and things, anyone who doesn't know the songs will still feel their impact."

While Pearl Jam played 26 such songs in last night's 2½ hour show, there were many they had to leave out. "It's a good problem if you don't have time to play all the songs that are favourites. We always vary the combination." Vedder flashes a grin. "Most people are coming to more than one show, anyway," he says. "After three shows you've usually got all of it."

***Backspacer* is released September 18.**

***Pearl Jam's* Australian tour opens in Perth on November 14, with concerts in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane to follow.**

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