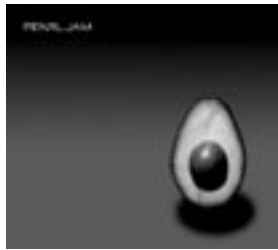


# LEFT *of the* DIAL



**Pearl Jam**  
*Pearl Jam*  
 (Sony/Monkeywrench)

Pearl Jam have never been critical faves. When they broke wide as unlikely MTV darlings during the glorious grunge takeover of the early 1990s, many unfairly derided them as classic rock retreads while neighborhood rivals Nirvana, always getting critic's backslaps, were consistently heralded as the coming of a new age of punk. The band's stop-gap release between their last record, 2002's *Riot Act*, and this latest album was a rare tracks collection called *Lost Dogs*. I can already see ageist rock scribes and of-the-moment music bloggers detouring a title like that and saying that Pearl Jam in 2006 have gone from lost dogs to old dogs that aren't going to learn any new tricks. The notion that the band's eighth album is nothing new for them is silly. but, like the days when Pearl Jam was just a pup, this self-titled record bursts at the seams with impassioned, intelligent and inspired rock and roll. In a career that has now stretched to 15 years, Pearl Jam is sounding younger, hungrier and more explosive than ever before. And, for the record, Pearl Jam has never really worried about the critics. So much like the artists after whom they have purposely molded themselves (Neil Young, Patti Smith), Pearl Jam long ago made the decision to create music on their own terms and eschew the passing fancies and tastes bound for the wane. That strong constitution has proven them built to last. While catalytic frontman Eddie Vedder has his hands in every one of these 13 tracks, the band's four other members share the songwriting chores for what arguably results in the Seattle's quintet's most realized, fully formed record to date. The stirringly translucent "Parachutes" is an engaging meditation where Vedder contrasts love ("One can't seem to have enough") and war ("Break the sky and tell me what it's for.") War is on the agenda throughout this record but Vedder is a smart enough writer not to time-and-date-stamp this album as entirely about Bush's Iraq snafu. He abstracts his thoughts and words enough but still plainly expresses outrage, pain and disgust with directness. "World Wide Suicide," though, booms with anthemic verses that pointedly berate the greed, corruption and bloody hands of the current administration. But, as serious as their mission and message is, Pearl Jam are a band delighting in their youth—regardless of what the wrinkles might suggest—delivering rock and roll like they haven't since their earliest albums. "Comatose" is a pounding, existential investigation highlighted by drummer Matt Cameron. Clocking in under three minutes, reckless abandon earmarks the power of "Big Wave," while the angular guitars of "Unemployable" pit Stone Gossard and Mike McCready in a Verlaine/Lloyd-like tradeoff. This powerful record is among Pearl Jam's two or three best and is more proof that, for a decade and a half, Pearl Jam has deservedly sat at the forefront of American rock on their own merits and by their own rules.

—donny kutzbach



**Sam Roberts**  
*Chemical City*  
 (Universal)

Every musician is at least partly a product of his or her record collection. I don't know the Canadian-born Sam Roberts, but I do know what his stacks of CDs and albums look like. Roberts shows his taste for modern rock flavors of Brit acts like the Charlatans, the La's and Embrace as well as Sweden's beloved the Soundtrack of Our Lives. Take the lot with a twist of Roberts' personal magic and you have *Chemical City*, Roberts' followup to the 2003 Juno award-winning breakthrough, *We Were Born in a Flame*. Roberts recorded this new album in Australia and its best track is something of an ode to that continent. Titled "Uprising Down Under," it is an acoustic gem that is outrageously addictive. It's one of those songs that could have a packed crowd at Wembley Stadium (or pick your favorite 50,000+ European soccer venue) holding up lighters and singing along. It sounds like a vastly improved version of "Look What You've Done" by Australia's own Jet. Roberts and his band are hardly trying to be something they are not, but it appears they have dreamed up a fairly brilliant formula for this record: Take your own song, pick a great band and imagine them doing your song. From the radio-friendly "An American Draft Dodger in Thunder Bay" and the unfolding psychedelic sprawl of "The Gate" to the expanding rock of "Mind Flood," *Chemical City* hammers hard with some good and proper sounds. *Chemical City* has a feel that few records these days can boast: A sound that you know could fill the air in a sold-out arena. I first saw Roberts when he opened up for Oasis back in 2002. Oasis' massive sound could move a small planet. Roberts was solid but not quite at that level yet. With *Chemical City*, it just might be a different story in 2006.

—anthony chabala

Sam Roberts plays Town Ballroom with LaRocca Thursday, May 11 at 7pm.

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