

LINE OUT

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# The Return of Soundgarden! (Plus Queens of the Stone Age, Meat Puppets and Mastodon) @ the Gorge

by [Brenn Berliner](#)

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## Soundgarden

I'd been waiting for this weekend for months. Saturday was the **long-anticipated Soundgarden reunion**—their first Washington show in 14 years (not counting last year's Nudedragons teaser). Even though the Gorge has a 20,000 person capacity, I got my tickets the day the fan club announcement went out (getting the chance to say “Fuck you, Ticketmaster” is always an added bonus). Time for a road trip!

I'd never been East on I-90 before, and it's definitely a cool drive, watching the classic Pacific Northwest scenery gradually turn into desert. We pull into the Gorge parking lot around 5 pm. It's 90 degrees and already packed with **beer-guzzling tailgaters** as far as the eye can see. We've come prepared—there's a trash can full of ice and beverages in the back seat of my car, and a Four Loko seems like a solid bet to start the night (official motto: if you're not drinking Four Loko, you're too sober).

Within a few minutes, we're approached by a shirtless, tattooed dude selling **bootleg tour t-shirts**. He only wants \$20, compared to \$35 at the official merch booth, so I decide to pick one up. Only later do we discover the dirty little secret of this particular too-good-to-be-true deal (I'll give you a hint: one of the bands is not who they seem). Dammit, Eddie Vedder! You're not even within two hundred miles and you still manage to make me cringe. By consolation, it could be worse; at least I'm not the guy who still thinks a Korn shirt is appropriate.

Although the starting time was listed as 6 pm, we hear the Meat Puppets break into their set while we're still in the parking lot. It's surprisingly easy to get through the gates, despite the growing crowds. Having evidently led a sheltered life by Washington standards, **I'm still a Gorge virgin** at this point. Walking over the crest of the hill, my first view of the amphitheater is mind-blowing. The stage is perched on the edge of the cliff with the river laid out in the distance behind it. I'd seen photos, but nothing does this place justice like being there.



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Get your Eddie Vedder out of my QOTSA!

The Meat Puppets are solid—playing a relatively short set, but still including most of their best-known songs. They close with a ten-minute psychedelic version of “Lake of Fire,” and it's gratifying to see them holding their own in a venue this size. Next up is Mastodon, who I'm not as familiar with, so I head back up the hill to try to score a beer. **\$10 for a Bud Light?** Yeah, I did it. I don't know if that makes me a sucker or a Real American. Anyway, Mastodon is decent as well, though their reliance on double-bass is a little too extensive for my taste. Don't get me wrong, I love heavy music, but when the drums sound more like a helicopter than a musical instrument, you need to lay back a bit.



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**Mastodon**



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**Mastodon**

We decide to indulge in a little harmless substance abuse, in honor of the occasion. As expected, one can smell it in the air already. Aside for a certain couple next to us (Really? You're going to **bring a newborn baby to a rock show** and expect there won't be drugs?) everyone seems suitably relaxed. Queens of the Stone Age take the stage and the excitement rises immediately. They open with a surprise—“You Think I Ain't Worth a Dollar, But I Feel Like a Millionaire,” originally sung by Nick Oliveri, who's no longer with the band. QOTSA sounds fucking great. It doesn't hurt that the acoustics are leagues better than the last time I saw them at KeyArena. They also keep the set somewhat short, with an emphasis on *Songs for the Deaf* and some of the more widely-known tracks.



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**Queens of the Stone Age**



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**Queens of the Stone Age**

Then comes the moment everyone's been waiting for. As soon as Soundgarden walks into view, **20,000 people stand up**. They stay standing for the duration. In the excitement, I fail to keep track of the setlist, but I note that they throw in a couple of unexpected picks (“Gun,” “Head Down,” “Room a Thousand Years Wide”) along with the singles (“Black Hole Sun,” “Blow Up the Outside World,” etc.—I’m sure you already know all about those). They even play “Hunted Down,” the very first Soundgarden single from 1987. The band is flawlessly tight, and Chris Cornell can still belt out those signature high notes none of the rest of us can dream of singing. He’s even grown his hair long again for the occasion. I do notice some changes in some of the melodies at times, though that could be chalked up to artistic license, assuming you’re feeling generous.



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### Soundgarden

Particularly cool is the fact that the stage backdrop is the *Badmotorfinger* logo, a nice throwback to the pre-Timbaland glory days. That was my first Soundgarden album and is possibly still my favorite—an extended jam version of “Slaves and Bulldozers” by itself lives up to the billing. The band seems genuinely happy to be there, with Cornell repeatedly thanking the audience for their continued support over the years. Interestingly, he mentions that “**Next time you see us we’ll be playing new stuff**”—works for me! If there’s any evidence of changes over the years, aside from Kim Thayil’s gray beard, it comes near the end of the set during the requisite band member introductions. “...and on guitar and LEAD vocals, ME, Chris Cornell!!!” Oh, so THAT’s who that guy is! All this time I’ve been wondering... In any case, I’m not begrudging him the limelight; he’s earned it. Even if he is sort of threatening to become the grunge version of Bono.

All in all, this was a fucking awesome show, well worth the five hour round trip drive. Plus I finally got to see one of the world’s most spectacular venues in person. On the way home, I start thinking about the history of these particular bands. If you consider the combination of technical prowess and great songwriting, it’s not hard to make the argument that Soundgarden and QOTSA are two of the **most innovative bands** of the '90s and '00s, respectively. But I’m a lowly tech guy, not a music critic, so feel free to take that for whatever it’s worth.



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### Kim Thayil and Kim Thayil’s Beard

**Addendum:** I was fortunate enough to get tickets to the **sold-out QOTSA show** at the Showbox the next night. All corniness aside, this, too, is the culmination of a dream of sorts. The opening act is Le Butcherettes, whom I’d never heard of before. My initial speculation about a secret show (Screaming Trees! C’mon!) is quashed after a quick Google search, but they actually turn out to be noteworthy. The singer is intense, a combination of Diamanda Galas and Brody Dalle from the Distillers (aka Josh Homme’s wife). Plus, stage diving will win you points in my book most of the time.

All of my hopes are confirmed when QOTSA kicks things off with “Regular John” and “Avon,” the first two tracks of their recently re-released first album. They proceed to play virtually the **entire first record**; standouts being a thunderous version of “Mexicola” and an extended, somehow even-more-trippy-than-usual rendition of “You Can’t Quit Me, Baby.” Josh Homme is in fine form, repeatedly bantering with the crowd, all of whom are obviously thrilled and feeling lucky to be there. This show is a homecoming in a sense; according to Homme, “You could say we’re from Seattle—our first show was at the OK Hotel.” Even though Homme is the only remaining original member, the band is basically perfect on all fronts, including veterans Joey Castillo on drums and Troy van Leeuwen on guitar.

Not to be outdone, after a few minutes QOTSA returns for what turns out to literally be a 45-minute encore. They play a couple of the hits (“Turning On the Screw”, “No One Knows”) before proceeding to take requests from the audience—the highlight coming with “In the Fade,” usually sung live by Mark Lanegan. In contrast to the previous night’s more time-

limited show, we're treated to cuts from all of the albums. And lest I forget, **topless girls!** (Homme: "This is a Queens of the Stone Age show, they can do whatever they want.") Seems fitting, considering the artwork for the first album—I'm not going to post it here, but if you have a copy, you know what I mean.

I only have one complaint. For some perverse reason, Homme is wearing a **giant, garish gold cross**. I have to assume this is some kind of sick joke, considering the context ("All of our songs are about getting high or fucking, or both")—so let's just pretend that didn't happen, OK? Stick to playing killer riffs and copping Elvis moves on stage, and just maybe we'll forgive you this once.



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