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# Guitar World

## EDDIE VAN HALEN THE WORLD'S GREATEST GUITARIST?

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# EDDIE VAN HALEN

by John Stix

*Just give me some of that rock-and-roll music*

*Any old way you choose it*

*Its got a back beat you can't lose it*

*Any old time you use it*

*Gotta be rock-and-roll music*

*If you want to dance with me. \**

**C**huck Berry wrote those words over twenty years ago. Edward Van Halen, guitarist for the group sporting his last name, couldn't agree more. At 23, you might just say he's respecting his elders. Along with brother Alex on drums, Michael Anthony on bass, and lead vocalist David Lee Roth, the group Van Halen pumps out hard rockin' music that was born in the basement, fused in the bars, and explodes on stage.

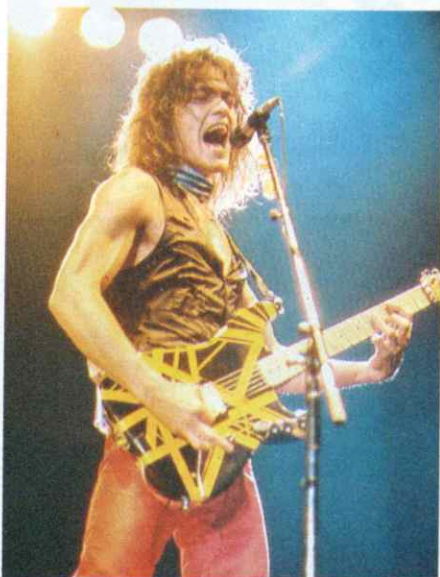
Describing himself as a kid "living his rock-and-roll dreams," Eddie Van Halen has been heading there since the fourth grade. He was born in Amsterdam, Holland, where his father, a professional musician, got both brothers to the piano at an early age.

His musical knowhow was born in the classics, but his spirit was in rock-and-roll. "Who wants to sit at the piano!" he exclaimed. "I want to go crazy. Everybody turned me on. I grew up on a lot of early Beatles, DC5, Cream, Clapton, Page, Beck, and Hendrix."

He was ten when the family moved to Los Angeles, "land of opportunity." After the high school dances and diploma, he graduated to the bars and the start of the band that bears his name. "We were all in various bands in the L.A. area, and when we got to the college age everyone started flaking off; wanting to be doctors. We got stuck with each other. There was nobody left that was into it." They played all the bars and all the oldies, including a version of the *Kinks' Your Really Got me* which Eddie calls "a hot tune we turned into a jet plane."

The crowds got bigger and Van Halen were able to draw 3000 people

## THE NEW KING OF



Photographer: Mark Laita

## HEAVY METAL GUITAR

to a gig they threw themselves. Kiss' Gene Simmons paid for their original demo sessions and Mo Ostin, Chairman of the Board at Warner, and Ted Templeman, V.P. of A&R, caught their act at the Starwood Club. They were signed the next day. Three years ago they played the bar scene, today they headline arenas. "I never imagined that we would get to where we are this quick," Eddie reflects.

Eddie Van Halen is not the arrogant, brash, or angry young man I had imagined. In fact he wears the kind of smile that could sell soft drinks on television. And he wears it well. Because Eddie Van Halen is one happy fella. The explanation is easy. "Everything I did is because I wanted to do it," he says without arrogance. "If I weren't playing this arena, if I were playing a club, I'd still be doing it because that's what I want to do. I love playing the guitar."

More than just playing guitars,

Van Halen builds them. In fact, when we met for this interview, he was surrounded with guitar parts, preparing to put together the instruments for a performance only two hours away. As the pickups, bridges, necks, and strings found their way together, I began to see the picture of a young guitarist whose success in high voltage rock has left his spirit intact and his feet remarkably on the ground. In essence, Eddie Van Halen travels in overdrive while the visions in his rearview mirror remain clear.

"I'm not a rock star. Sure I am to a certain extent because of the situation, but when kids ask me how it feels to be a rock star, I say leave me alone. I'm not a rock star. I'm not in it for the fame, I'm in it because I like to play."

**G.W.** Were you as good a piano player as you are a guitarist?

**V.H.** I won first prize four years in a row at Long Beach City College for my category. The piano is a universal instrument. If you start there, learn your theory and how to read, you can go on to any other instrument.

**G.W.** Sounds like you had a solid foundation in the basics.

**V.H.** Well, I'm not a good reader. I would read and remember. The one thing I do have is good ears. I don't mean perfect pitch, but ears for picking things up. I developed my ear through piano theory but I never had a guitar lesson in my life, except from Eric Clapton off of records.

**G.W.** Do you have the ability to think something and play it immediately?

**V.H.** Not automatically or perfectly, but that's the thing. I don't think when I play. It's spontaneous, it's feeling. It's not calculated or figured out ahead of time. That's why you might say I play off the wall. When I was in junior college at Pasadena City, I took scoring and arranging class with a Dr. Fischer. Frank Zappa had also been his student. Dr. Fischer was very avant-garde and the one thing he taught me was f--k the rules. If it



Photographer: Kirk West/Photo Reserve

experience, and that's usually when I come up with weird stuff. It just flows. I can't force myself. I don't sit down and say I've got to practice.

**G.W.** Can you be specific about how you play better today than, say, when the first album was released?

**V.H.** I don't consider myself a better player. I consider myself different. With the technical ability I have, I can play just about as fast as I'd like to play. Any faster at the volume I play and I'd have distortion. So technically there's no reason to get any faster.

**G.W.** But do you still reach any new plateaus?

**V.H.** Sure I do.

**G.W.** Can you point some out on your records?

**V.H.** The solo on *Cradle Will Rock* is different. One guitar player who I respect and think is the baddest, is Allen Holdsworth. I do one short lick on *Cradle* which is very spontaneous, that came out because I've been listening to this guy. On the second album I expanded a little more on harmonics.

**G.W.** You're talking about hitting false harmonics by using your right hand to hit the fretboard?

**V.H.** Yes. First I just used my first finger on the right hand to hit a note (Heard on *Eruption* from the first Van Halen album). Then I discovered the harmonic by hitting the fret an octave above where the left hand is positioned.

Now I'm expanding on that, by using all the harmonics in between the octave. I also use the slap technique, which I got from black bass players.

Jimi Hendrix influenced me on how to hold the pick when I do the harmonics. I saw the Hendrix movie and discovered where the pick goes when it disappears. He holds it between the joints of his middle finger. I pick weird too. I use the thumb and the middle finger.

**G.W.** One thing that strikes me about your playing is that of all the high-energy players, you don't take long guitar solos.

**V.H.** I haven't heard anyone do a long interesting guitar solo outside of early Clapton. I do a guitar solo in the live show which is long and some people may think boring, but I have fun. Clapton was my favorite. With his feel he'd hit one note where someone else would hit twenty, and his one would do something to you, whereas the other person's twenty would leave you flat.

**G.W.** I'm going to turn that against you pointing out your own notyness.

sounds good it is good.

**G.W.** I take it you took to the guitar fairly easily?

**V.H.** Not to sound egoed-out, but I was a natural. My father has been a professional musician all his life, and he said, 'Kid you've got it.' Some people have got it and some people don't. Even people who don't have it can practice long enough to get it down to a point. But there's always a difference between a person who has the feel and those who don't. The difference is in the amount of emotion expressed in your playing. I listened to Debussy by two different pianists and it was like day and night. One guy had it and every note was beautiful. The other guy had lead fingers.

**G.W.** Did you go through a period of imitation before your own days of invention?

**V.H.** Definitely—and Clapton was it. I knew every note he played. That's what I was known for around home. Me, Alex, and another bass player called ourselves Mammoth and we were the junior Cream. (Shortly before going on stage Eddie played Clapton's *Crossroads* solo for me, calling it "one of the best live recorded songs ever.") It's funny; when I do

interviews and tell people Clapton was my main influence, they go 'who?'

**G.W.** Because they're thinking about Clapton doing *Lady Down Sally*, not the Bluesbreakers or Cream. Your current trio and a singer format is not much different than Cream. Have you ever thought of working with another guitarist?

**V.H.** I've never played with another guitarist because I make enough sound on my own. What I loved about Cream is that everybody had to put out. It was three people making all this noise and you could hear each person. The Allman Brothers feel is something I never got into. Duane was an excellent slide guitarist, but I never cared for Dickie Betts. I found their music too cluttered for my taste.

**G.W.** In your Clapton days I'm sure you did some intense studying on the instrument. Do you still work as hard to improve your playing?

**V.H.** Yes, but I don't call it practice. This will sound real funny to you, but we tour for eight weeks and then take eight days off. When I'm home on a break, I lock myself in my room and play guitar. After two or three hours I start getting into this total meditation. It's a feeling few people



Photographer: Neil Zlozower

**V.H.** I'm not Eric Clapton. I might play fast but there's a lot of people who play fast with no feel at all. I think I'm high-energy, but I think I combine a little more feel and some different techniques than other high-energy players.

**G.W.** What do you think of other high-energy players around, like Joe Perry, Ted Nugent or Jimmy Page?

**V.H.** I hate doing this because you're gonna make me come off like an asshole. Enough people hate me already.

**G.W.** Do you like Joe Perry?

**V.H.** I don't like him because I don't think he likes me. I met him once and walked up to shake his hand and he looked at me and walked away. As a guitarist I don't think he's that good. He lacks feel.

**G.W.** What about Ted Nugent?

**V.H.** Nugent is a very nice guy. Playing-wise he doesn't have the tone I like.

**G.W.** And Jimmy Page?

**V.H.** Jimmy Page is an excellent producer. "Led Zeppelin One" and "Two" are classics. As a player he's very good in the studio. I've never seen him play good live. He's sloppy. He plays like he's got a broken hand and he's two years old. If you put out a good album and play like a two-year-old, what's the purpose?

**G.W.** Have you ever thought you may now be part of the guitar heritage you once studied? Thinking of players like Beck, Page, Clapton, and Hendrix, you may be next in line for guitar hero?

**V.H.** It's very hard to say, that's like me telling you I'm the best. I can't say that. I'm not. I can't say I'm going to influence people, but I know a lot of people are using their right hand on the fingerboard now that never did it before.

**G.W.** Would you like to be thought of as a great player?

**V.H.** I'd just like people to like what I play. I don't want people to say, "You're Number One." It's a matter of taste. To me Allen Holdsworth is Number One. Other kids might listen to him and not even understand what he's doing. Older people might think I suck.

**G.W.** Hard rock is usually associated with a younger crowd. I think it's something you grow *through* more than *with*. When I want to rock-out I put on the albums that were happening when I was 15. Does that make sense to you?

**V.H.** Yes. It might be that's what you remember as the good times. It could be because you don't like what's on now. Rock-and-roll is for 12- to 21-

year-olds. When you get past that age people have more responsibilities. They don't buy records anymore, they stop going to concerts, they have jobs, and a lot more troubles.

**G.W.** What about your quieter side? Beck, Page and Leslie West all put out acoustic guitar pieces that contrasted with their normal styles.

**V.H.** There's a lot you haven't heard yet. I had more of an acoustic intro to *In A Simple Rhyme*, but the reason we didn't do it is because everyone would immediately go, "He's pulling a Zeppelin." We did *Could This Be Magic* but it's a joke.

**G.W.** Have you started thinking about the fourth album?

**V.H.** I've got a load of ideas, but we don't know what we're going to do until we walk into that studio.

What we do is tour for ten months, come home, go to the basement, and make songs out of the ideas. We invite Ted (Templeman, producer) down and he picks what he likes. We argue a bit, compromise, and we usually have a final say on what material goes on. We spend a week rehearsing in the basement and go straight in the studio.

**G.W.** Sounds like you like to work quickly.

**V.H.** For "Women and Children First" (Continued on page 60)

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# EDDIE VAN HALEN

(Continued from page 38)

it took four days for the music and six days for the singing. *Dance The Night Away* (on "Van Halen II") was written on the spot, in the studio. I never played slide guitar before *Could This Be Magic*. I had something totally different in mind for the song, and Ted says, "Try playing slide?" I did it right there on the spot and that was it. *Cradle Will Rock* was first take. A bunch of songs were first takes. We don't go for perfection, we just go for spirit. There are mistakes, but I'm happy with everything that's on our records. That's not to say when we do them live we might do it differently.

**G.W.** Do you have a preference between live work and recording?

**V.H.** Performing of course! I play for self-satisfaction, but it makes it even better when other people enjoy it.

## Van Halen Equipment

**G.W.** How did you learn to work on guitars?

**V.H.** Trial and error. I've ruined many guitars. I ruined a beautiful old 335 mainly learning how to refret, but now I refret them all myself.

**G.W.** Do you start building them from scratch—carve out the wood yourself?

**V.H.** The natural wood instrument was a very rough cut that I jigsawed out, contoured, and put the frets in. My main guitar, the red one, which as you can see is front loaded, used to be a Charvel copy of a Strat. A long time ago I used a 59' Strat. But at the volume I played, the single pickup buzzed a lot and the sound was too thin, unless I used fuzz box stuff. After trying a 335, I tried the Strat again and thought, "Why don't I cut my own pickguard and put a humbucker in it?" It worked, except Fender wood isn't as dense as I'd like. The Charvel is made out of Ash, which is a little denser. It was my idea to rear load it.

**G.W.** Pickup-wise what do you use?

**V.H.** I have Gibson PAF's, DiMarzios, and Seymour Duncan. I'd say out of all the super distortion garbage that's out, I like Seymour Duncan best. It's a matter of taste. I prefer old PAF's because they get the tone I like. Live it's hard to get exactly the sound I like. I get a good ballsy sound and it's decent for me but not exactly

what I want.

**G.W.** What about necks?

**V.H.** I always use unfinished maple necks because I like to feel the wood. They're made by Lynn Ellsworth at Boogie Body in Seattle.

**G.W.** Why only one pickup with one volume control?

**V.H.** In order for me to get the front pickup to sound the way I like it, the back one would sound like shit.

**G.W.** Your tuning pegs are Schaller; that's no surprise. But your nut and bridge piece look like custom gear. I've never seen anyone cut off the ball of the string before they run it through the bridge.

**V.H.** Those pieces (nut and bridge) are made by Floyd Rose. I only use them for performing. I don't use them in the studio because they're too bright sounding for me. I use the same guitar with a different neck. a different PAF, and a Fender bridge. The only thing about the Floyd Rose stuff is if you break a string, the whole thing goes out of whack. I needed

the guitar like this because we tune a little differently than most people. We use the Peterson Strobe Tuner (model 420) to tune down a step and a quarter. Actually you do lose something. The guitar was made to be tuned to A 440. When you start taking away from that, you lose harmonic overtones and get more slack in the strings.

**G.W.** What about this snake guitar, who dreamed that up?

**V.H.** It used to be an Explorer, and a friend of mine, John Sterry, came up with the idea. The neck and the body are the rarest wood you can buy. Carina wood from Africa.

**G.W.** Are particular amplifiers important to you?

**V.H.** Very important. I don't use any kind of pre-amp (boxes) distortion. I go for total tube distortion. I have Mark II Marshalls which I've changed back to tubes. In the studio I use my old baby 100-watt Super Leads with Marshall bottoms.

**G.W.** Do you use any outboard devices at all?

**V.H.** The equipment I use is probably more primitive than most people use. My pedal board is a piece of plywood with an MXR Phase Shifter, an Echo-Plex and an MXR Flanger. Ted Nugent laughed his ass off when he saw it the first time. I like making different sounds by using different techniques as opposed to pedals.