



Interview

Eddie Van Halen

When you talk about guitar greats of all time, the name Eddie Van Halen is sure to be mentioned. Edward is also a brilliant composer, keyboard player and very friendly and funny guy.

Van Halen have been around since the mid 70s with only one change in personnel (vocalist David Lee Roth was replaced by Sammy Hagar in 85), and each new release and tour is an exciting major event. In 1995 they sustain this tradition with *Balance*.

Are Van Halen going to get down to NZ this time?

"I hope so. I think we're coming to Japan and Australia, and I'm sure if we do Australia we'll be coming to New Zealand also. It'll probably be the end of the year though. We're touring here until the middle of May, then we go to Europe, probably until the beginning of July, then we come back to the States and do a couple of months here till the end of August, then we'll be coming to the Orient and South Pacific."

How's the tour been going?

"Excellent. I was a little nervous on the very first show which was Saturday night (four days ago) because I recently stopped drinking alcohol (about five months ago). Besides being nervous, it being the first time on stage completely sober, we also recorded and filmed the whole show for MTV. It was pretty nerve wracking for me, but everything went really smooth. Then Sunday night we played Jacksonville, Florida, which without the filming and recording went way better."

Did you give up alcohol when you cut your hair off?

"Actually yes. Our manager had passed away last October, things were so crazy. All of a sudden the band was managing itself, and we as a band weren't even getting along 'cause we had so much of the outside, bullshit things to deal with. I was just literally ready to pull the hair out of my head. I was so crazy so I ended up shaving it off! My whole life just came to a head. I just had to do something with my life and stopping drinking helped me to cope with things a bit easier."

The group seems to be on an almost telepathic level now.

"Yeah. For one, I'm very lucky to have my brother Alex to play with — we're so connected it's ridiculous. And I think Sammy's finally,

after the fourth studio record, realising how much of a band we really are. We're becoming tighter and tighter."

It's cool to hear weirder things like 'Strung Out' on *Balance*.

"Actually, it was just some silly thing I did. I don't know what possessed me. I have about 6 hours of me basically ruining a piano back in 83. Bruce Fairburn, our producer, had heard a little taste of it and said: 'Hey, this'd be really cool to use for an intro for 'Not Enough'. I was too lazy to listen to all the six hours of tape of noise I had so I let him do it, and he picked a minute of stuff he liked."

Sammy appears to be contributing more to each album.

"Well, he's always contributed the lyrics and that's basically the same. We each in the band have our own creative domain. I write all the music, Sammy writes all the lyrics, then we all, as a band, piece together the melodies and the arrangement."

On stage, does Sammy push you even more as a guitar player?

"On stage we're kind of on autopilot. It's very unrehearsed, we never know what we're going to do physically. The vibe is different from night to night — sometimes we run like crazy, other nights we don't, it all depends on just how we feel. We've been doing this for 18 years and people ask me all the time how I stay excited. Well, to me, it's just my life. This is what I do, and if you don't get some kind of adrenalin rush when you have 20,000 screaming fans out there, something's wrong with you!"

Has the set list changed quite a bit since the *FUCK* shows?

"Definitely, yes. We're doing just about all of the new record. Sometimes it's difficult to choose just which of the older songs to do. If you don't play 'Jump' and 'Panama' some people get pissed off, because they're big favourites, but I like to change them up a lot. I'd say it's a good mix of the older stuff and 80 percent of the new record."

It's pretty brave of Bon Jovi to be sharing the bill with you.

"I think it's a great package. It's really for the fans. I think the same fans who'd buy a Van Halen record will also like Bon Jovi. To me, it's not in the least competitive. I really don't think music is about blowing someone else off the stage. I think a band gets up there, does their

thing and, if they do it well, the people enjoy it."

What guitar equipment are you using?

"The same stuff. I'm using my Musicman guitar with my 5150 amps. I use about three or four of them during the show because I have a couple of songs where the guitar's tuned different. I also have a new Musicman which is a prototype. I'm not sure if we're going to sell them or not. It also has an acoustic guitar pickup built into the bridge. It's for 'Can't Stop Lovin' You', which is the combination electric/acoustic sound. Basically the Musicman does for me whatever I need."

What were you using on the 1984 album?

"The Kramer and the old Marshall."

Some of that flange guitar sound on the new album like 'Aftershock' sounds like 'Ain't Talking About Love' or *Fair Warning* period.

"Yeah. I ended up using on this record a combination of my new Peavy amp, the 5150 amp and the old Marshall. I took that one out of the closet. It's the same old amp I did all our old records with."

Do you still have fond memories of the early days at the Whiskey and breaking through to the big time?

"Oh sure. Actually, two years ago, when we released our live record, we played a club show there at the Whiskey, just for our 15 year anniversary. But it's difficult for us to do that sort of thing in the US, 'cause if you play a 300 seat club and you've got 5,000 kids outside that can't get in, they get pissed off. We tried to do it unannounced, but somehow the word got out, like it always does. It was actually more trouble than it was worth."

What would be the compositions you're most proud of?

"I write all the music so everything is very personal, very close to me. I tend to look at each song like it's one of my kids. I love 'em all and they're all a little different. On the new record everything, from 'Not Enough' to stuff like 'Aftershock'."

"I'm very proud of the new record because I think we've kind of reached a new loud. I think working with Bruce Fairburn was a definite plus because he brought a lot of organisation to us. A lot of times, if we're left alone we tend to get kinda scrambled. Bruce really brought us together and made us focus on one song at a time."

Would you say your musicianship is a com-

bination of natural ability and a hell of a lot of discipline?

"I think it's definitely a gift. At a very early age I could pick up pretty much anything and play it very easily — anything from violin to guitar to drums or piano — but of course you have to work your craft. I can't not play for two months and expect to play well. I have to work just like everybody else."

Do you think your son Wolfgang will be continuing the family tradition of musicianship?

"Well, it's hard to say. He's going to be four years old on Thursday. He shows tendencies of loving music. He loves to plink on the piano and beat the drums, kinda the same way I started when I was his age. But at the same time, I'm just exposing him to it, I'm not forcing him to do anything. It's his life, his choice."

Have you ever considered releasing a solo album of material that didn't fit into the band context?

"It's funny, people ask me that all the time. But the thing is to me, the only reason people do solo records is because they can't express themselves in the band they're in. I write all the music for the band anyway, so I have complete freedom to do whatever I want within the band. So, if I ever did a solo record, I know for sure I'd have Alex play on it, and I'd probably have Sammy sing, and I'd probably have Mike play bass, so what's the difference [laughs]?"

Do you think Van Halen will still be rocking into the next century then?

"I don't see why not. My father was a musician and he played till he dropped dead. It's what I do. I'm not a rock star, I'm a musician, and music is my life. I just turned 40, and a lot of people say: 'Wow, you can still play rock 'n' roll when you're 40?' I think that's bullshit. I don't think music has any age barrier on it. Put it this way, if there was no MTV or videos, if you just listen to a CD, you can't tell how old people are. If you had never heard of the Rolling Stones and you put on their latest record, you wouldn't be able to tell me just by listening to it that Mick is 52. It's only because of video now that younger people can see how old you are, but I don't think that's a factor. I think if you write good music and put your heart and soul into it, I'm sure you're bound to touch somebody with it, and that's what it's all about to me."

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