

PERFORMERS

# VAN HALEN



BY DEBORAH FROST





**T**he National Weather Service labels a blizzard as severe when winds reach 45 miles per hour, snowfall is dense, and the temperature drops to ten degrees. What started smacking Boston on February 6, 1978, was no mere severe blizzard.

Winds hit 83 m.p.h., generating a tidal surge and coastal flooding. Snow drifts towered fifteen feet. The blizzard took fifty-four lives, destroyed two thousand homes, sent ten thousand to shelters, and did more than \$1 billion of damage. Driving was forbidden for six days to all but essential relief workers.

Some of us, who didn't thaw or dig out till April, hardly noticed. The stripper next door to me, lawfully restrained from her daily grind downtown, had Van Halen's eponymous debut, officially scheduled for release on the tenth, and blasted it, "Runnin' With the Devil" in particular, for the duration. It wasn't just that the cradle was rocked – the whole neighborhood was. Unfortunately, for those who did not appreciate repeated baptism in the roiling brine of

raw, young Van Halen, all authorities were otherwise occupied. I still can't hear a note of that album without the extra after-market percussion provided by the rattling of an entire community's teacups and tchotchke collections and the distinct feeling that, along with one genuine non-man-made disaster, a Concorde, a stampeding herd of rhinos were imploding in my living room. No doubt that was precisely the intended effect.

Just when you thought new wave and punk had stripped rock down to three chords and the black/white grit of urban New York and London, Van Halen rocketed in neon Technicolor from Pasadena backyards to proclaim that rock stars could still be reinvented. And even BIGGER – thanks, largely, to the sheer size of Edward Van Halen's talent and David Lee Roth's chutzpah – than any previous life form imagined by man, god, or arena.

Van Halen was not just the most wildly popular American rock band of the late seventies and eighties, selling fifty-six million albums, accumulating outrageous records for every-

Van Halen in its first incarnation: Alex Van Halen, Michael Anthony, David Lee Roth, and Eddie Van Halen (from left)







**Alex Van Halen beats the drums wildly.**

thing from the number of onstage somersaults (three) to concert fees (\$1 million for 1984's US Fest); Van Halen forever changed the way the guitar and the game were played. Eddie Van Halen was the first innovator since Jimi Hendrix (or anyone in his pantheon) to redefine the parameters of his instrument. Eddie pretty much single-handedly invented the art of shredding with the blistering speed, two-handed tapping, and whammy-bar raising perfected on his homemade Frankenstrat, probably the most influential piece of literal wood-shedding in hard-rock history. David Lee Roth is to the science of rock shamanism what Freud is to psychiatry: daddy. He distilled the essence of the beast – not merely copped the attitude or pose of any Jagger, Plant, satyr, pirate, Byron, or Puck – and articulated it with a slap, cackle, and pop all his own. Entire careers and at least one decade of MTV were predicated on his prototype, although if just the Bruce Lee-gone-Borscht Belt figment of his multifaceted eccentricity were as easily padded as his spandex

or as bottle-able as his peroxide, we'd be genuinely amused by, never mind moved to honor, the motley frontmen cloned in his wake.

Van Halen only happens when strange worlds collide. As with dust swirling in the cosmos, its origins were fairly humble. Jan Van Halen, a Dutch clarinet and sax player desperately seeking a wedding band during Beatlemania, emigrated from his native Holland to California with his Indonesian wife and their two sons, Alexander Arthur (born May 8, 1953) and Edward Lodewijk (January 26, 1955). Van Halen père tootled out a living at affairs where country-club members prided themselves on their closeness to the Mayflower and distance from the melting pot. For boys who'd probably never seen a football, much less tossed one, it must have been tougher to pass in the land of the Rose Bowl. Their father insisted they continue the classical-piano training begun in Europe (although Edward, whose keyboard proficiency is no secret, now claims he can't read music). Rock may have provided the rare opening for the brothers to cross into alien territory, but more important, it was a common language in which to communicate with the natives.

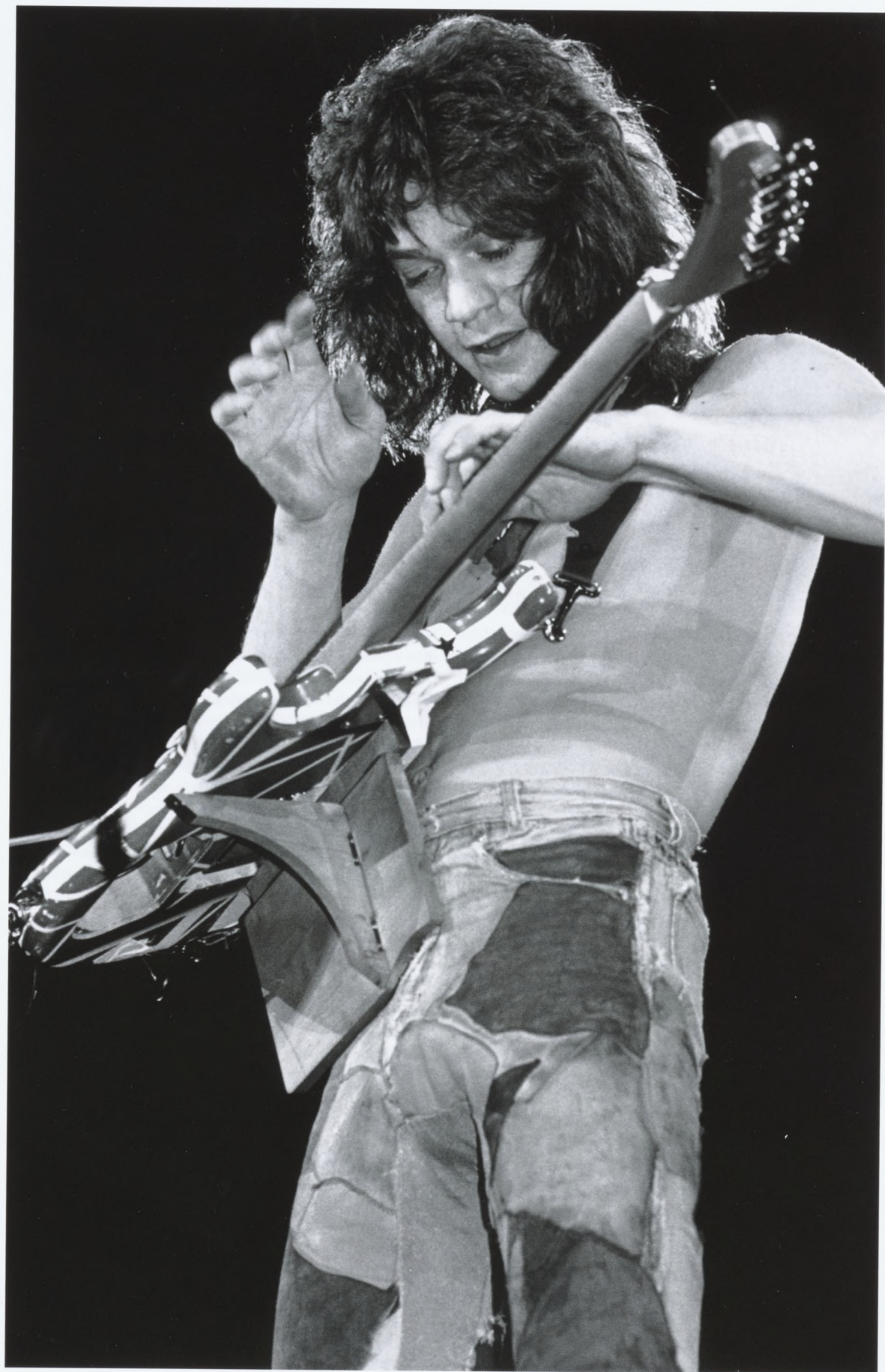
Edward initially went for the drums, but after Alex co-opted the set and mastered the "Wipe Out" solo while his brother was busy pedaling the paper route to pay for it, Edward got stuck with the guitar. By high school, he was playing and singing lead with Alex and a buddy on bass in a power trio called Mammoth.

For want of a P.A., a monster was born. Michael Anthony (born June 20, 1954), another mid-sixties California transplant, originally from Chicago and a musician's son, began studying trumpet, his father's instrument, at age seven. He was also, as his physique still suggests, a jock. Although his first "bass," a natural transition for trumpet players, was a

**BELOW: David defies gravity, live in the 1980s. OPPOSITE: Eddie demonstrating one of his many guitar-playing innovations.**











Double trouble: Sammy Hagar joins Eddie front and center, c. 1990.

friend's Fender Mustang minus two strings, it soon displaced his catcher's mitt and let him slither with another trio, Snake, around the same ZZ Top-heavy repertoire and teen party route as Mammoth. He endeared himself to the Van Halens by lending them Snake's P.A. system when they shared a "festival" at Pasadena High.

David Lee Roth (born October 10, 1954) also discovered that equipment mattered. A Jewish prince, he'd toured some of the better-manicured U.S. zip codes until his father, an eye surgeon, established a West Coast practice in 1963. When he auditioned for Mammoth because Eddie was tired of singing, the Van Halens were more impressed by his P.A. than his vocal ability. After paying him \$35 a night to rent it, they graciously lowered their standards in order to use it for free. Another bonus was rehearsal space at Dave's parental abode, although Dave was apparently not present the night the Van Halens, having decided to oust Mammoth's bassist, jammed with Michael Anthony and offered him the gig. That may have been as telling a portent of the future as Anthony's background vocals were integral to the band's signature sound.

Discovering that another outfit had dibs on the Mammoth moniker, the band, after considering "Rat Salad" in homage to a Black Sabbath song, christened itself Van Halen at Roth's suggestion. Van Halen focused on the clubs in and around Hollywood, playing the Aerosmith, ZZ Top, Led Zeppelin, and Bad Company for which proto-head bangers' hearts always lusted, no matter how hard industry tastemakers tried to wrap skinny ties around their throats. As L.A. observer Phast Phreddie Patterson noted in a 1978 *Waxpaper* piece, one of the earliest hints of the band's global domination, Van Halen performed this material as well as "if not better than the originals." That's what got Van Halen running, with or without the devil. They judged what

worked the same way Dick Clark's *Bandstand* kids did: what had a good beat, what you could dance to. The three-minute Motown and British Invasion epiphanies that made little David Roth twitch when they jumped out of his transistor in the golden moment of Top Forty were no less ass-shaking when Van Halen whipped them on a whole new rock generation. And that, even more than the fact that girls were all too aware that Roth, unlike prior model Jim Morrison, was sexy *and* alive, or the jaw-dropping effect Eddie Van Halen's digits had on every boy who ever saw him, was the secret of Van Halen. They weren't out for shock, speed, desire, or awe or in search of some holy grail of blues. They built it so people would come. For fun. To dance.

"Punk rock was the heavy thing," David Lee Roth told me in 1984. "It totally dominated the scene. You couldn't get printed or pressed unless you had the right haircut. We said, If we're gonna make a record and be popular around the world, then we're gonna be popular on this teeny club circuit. If you expect to sell out the Madison Square Gardens and Forums of this planet, then you sure can do it in 400-seat clubs all within an hour's driving distance of one another, and that's what we did. We played and played and played and played."

Van Halen never even attempted to record, much less peddle, a demo until Gene Simmons tumbled into the Starwood and produced one that was promptly rejected by his management. When Warner Bros.' Mo Ostin and Ted Templeman ventured down, perhaps at the suggestion of Rodney Bingenheimer, who'd booked them, on a sparsely attended Monday night, they'd played enough. Templeman, having evolved from his groovy beginnings in Harper's Bizarre to produce classic albums by artists as dissimilar as Captain Beefheart and the Doobie Brothers, could handle even a Diamond Dave in the rough.



Templeman did not simply wrangle the two-headed beast of Edward's genius and the live show (as dependent on Michael Anthony's and Alex Van Halen's solid muscle and musicianship as the world-is-my-Friars Roast flights of the freeform bumblebee Roth) in the captivity of the studio. He let it erupt. If they had never done anything but that first album – its impact has been that great – Van Halen would probably be worthy of the Hall of Fame. The debut instantly changed the vocabulary of hard-rock guitar – heavy metal, particularly its solos, and its myriad speed-metal, glam-metal, and pop-metal offshoots would not otherwise exist as we know them. But Van Halen the man and Van Halen the band transcended the confines of any genre. Guitar players all over the globe immediately devoted lifetimes to unraveling Edward's tuning, unorthodox chord structures, and palette of sounds Hendrix might never have imagined – the double-locking Floyd Rose vibrato technology Eddie pioneered notwithstanding. But even the plucky prestidigitators who've approached Van Halen's speed, mastered his effects, or pulled off a hit or the cover of a guitar mag beloved by adolescent boys of all ages, have never enjoyed his wealth of melodic gifts, wizardry, or uncanny knack for the pure pop hook evinced hand over track on "Runnin' With the Devil," "Eruption," and "Jamie's Cryin'." Van Halen even managed to take the Kinks' "You Really Got Me," the primo-genitor of the power chord, which was never broke in the first place, and fix it. The album went platinum within months, as Van Halen blew veteran acts out of their arenas.

Subsequent albums *Van Halen II*, *Women and Children First*, *Fair Warning*, and *Diver Down* provided moments of invention and pleasure. But by 1982's *Diver Down*, filled with covers from Roth's middle-school set list, it seemed the band was creatively treading water. Nothing could have prepared Van Halen's loyal live audience, or anyone else, for 1984. The biggest hit, "Jump," the only Number One single of Van Halen's career, was dominated by synthesized keyboards, the guitar with which Edward once changed the world so MIA in the mix that someone should have called an Amber Alert. The opening chords still sound like the best thing Journey never did. But Van Halen was back – badder and more worldwide than ever. On one hand, the album was its biggest commercial success (helped perhaps by Eddie Van Halen's cameo on Michael Jackson's "Beat It," which provided the former Motown boy wonder hitherto unimaginable shred cred). Van Halen was suddenly welcomed on radio stations and dance floors where rock was not spoken, much less stomped. But more characteristic mosh-pit infernos like "Panama" and "Hot for Teacher" were proof that Van Halen hadn't gone soft but only, as on 1984's cover of heaven's most cherubic angel sneaking a smoke, more subversive. Van Halen's most immediately successful effort, 1984 sold four million out of the gate, at least ten million to date, and is generally acclaimed its masterpiece. No sooner was it delivered than they broke and tossed the mold.

With more trash talk and chest thumping than the average Wrestlemania, Roth was out, and after a consultation with Edward's Lamborghini mechanic, Sammy Hagar was in. An ex-boxer and yeoman rocker with at least a decade on the boys in the band, Hagar emerged from the Bay Area with the Bill Graham-managed Ronnie Montrose, a guitar contender who could have been a hero before Edward reset the default. He had developed a solo career with a sense of



Sammy, Alex, Eddie, Michael (clockwise from top left)

humor (though, like "I Can't Drive 55," the auto-neurotic anthem that introduced him to the MTV generation, somewhat less outré than Roth's) and rare inspiration (his cover of Patti Smith's "Free Money"). Neither of those qualities was exploited fully during his tenure as Van Halen's frontman, but having been around the block, he was contemplating an investment as much as an artistic quest.

Where Roth is primarily a raconteur, Hagar is a legit crooner. Few bands can replace such a key personality, never mind their mouthpiece, and satisfy their audience. Hagar, whose solid guitar playing gave Eddie new freedom to solo onstage, not only helped sustain Van Halen's core but expand it. In concert, he recovered the lost melodies of the band's early oeuvre and allowed Edward to explore new frontiers of his fixation with pop, namely, the ballad. Hagar collaborations, such as "Why Can't This Be Love," permitted Eddie to follow in the fretwork and traverse the mature chart terrain of his first role model, Eric Clapton. It's a testament to Hagar's talent that the band could talk about love that wasn't "rotten to the core" for the first time in its career, and to a more massive crowd than ever.

But in 1996 Hagar stalked out, and Roth, for a highly anticipated triumphant live performance at the MTV Video Awards, was back in. After a backstage punch-up, he was out again. During the subsequent decade, there has been little music other than a greatest-hits compilation. Will Van Halen kiss, make up, and kick ass again? "I see it absolutely is an inevitability," Roth told *Billboard.com* in November 2006. "It's not rocket surgery. As far as hurt feelings and water under the dam, like what's-her-name says to what's-her-name at the end of the movie *Chicago* – so what? It's show-biz!" ❧



# GUITAR GODS

*Nothing defines the sound of rock & roll more than the sonics created by a legion of guitar-playing innovators.*



BY ASHLEY KAHN

Click. *Buzzzzz*. Chang! *Changahh* – *kkkkkrrraaannngg!!*  
*SSSSccccrrrrreeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!*

**N**o single sound summons the sheer magnitude of rock – its swagger, its *danger* – more than the scream of the electric guitar. It is the instrument through which the snarl of youthful rebellion is amplified and made manifest. Its vocabulary of twangs, crunches, stutters, and squeals is how rock speaks loudest and at its most reverberant. The silhouette of the rock guitarist – legs spread wide, guitar slung low – forms the *A* of rock's alphabet. When rock regards itself proudly in the mirror, it is inevitably clutching a Fender Stratocaster, or a Gibson Les Paul, or a Rickenbacker, a Gretsch, a Vox, an Ibanez, a Paul Reed Smith, or some other curvaceous make and model as satisfying to hold as to behold.

The electric guitar is the defining sound of rock ascendant, the Promethean fire that was stolen and handed down to generations after, allowing mere mortals to turn it up to ten, hurl heavy metal thunder, and challenge the gods themselves.

To properly name each member of rock's great ax-wielding pantheon – those who left their mark on the legacy and many who continue to do so – would take barrels of ink. But it's a worthy exercise if only to mark the ridiculous range of the music they represent. From Steve Cropper, Steve Marriott, Steve Howe, and Steve Miller to Stephen Stills, Steve Jones, and Stevie Ray Vaughan, from Mick Taylor, Mick Ronson, and Mick Jones; to Joe Walsh, Joe Perry,

and Joe Satriani. From Leslie West to Elliot Easton. Andy Summers to Johnny Winter. Duane Eddy to the Edge.

There's Chuck and Buck (Berry and Dharma), Lonnie and Bonnie (Mack and Raitt), Eric and Derek (Clapton and Trucks), Mickey and Dickey (Baker and Betts), Grohl and Lowell (Dave and George), Lita and Cheetah (Ford and Chrome), Beck and Becker (Jeff and Walter), Hodges and Hedges (Teeny and Michael). There are at least three Kings (B.B., Albert, and Freddy), a Duke (Robillard), an Earl (Ronnie), a Bishop (Elvin), a Page (Jimmy), a Queen (well, founding member Brian May), and a Prince.

Think of our own Hall of Fame: There's many a rock & roll pioneer – Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and, of course, Chuck and Bo – whom we can't picture without a guitar in hand. And is there a band whose guitarist is not seen as the active ingredient in the band's chemistry? Could there be John, Paul, and Ringo without George? The Stones with no Keith? The Dead less Jerry? The Ramones but not Johnny? Van Halen sans Eddie?

The proof of guitar's primacy in rock goes beyond the names and numbers. It's in the music itself, in Chuck Berry's alter ego Johnny B. Goode, who plays "the guitar like ringing a bell." It's there when Harrison and the Beatles sing about his instrument gently weeping, and when the Rolling Stones dream of a steel-guitar engagement. And when the Band's Robbie Robertson promises to "bring over his Fender," Mott



the Hoople pulls out a "six-string razor," and Paul Simon sees the Mississippi delta "shining like a National guitar." It's there, straightforwardly, in the Talking Heads tune "Electric Guitar."

Today the guitar is to rock as the microphone is to hip-hop, as tenor saxophones are to jazz. And as opera has always had its aria, so rock must have its guitar solo.

But it wasn't always so.

A long time ago, when swing was king, a guitarist would sit near the back of the bandstand, chopping away at chords on a large acoustic, more serving as a timekeeper for the band than being heard and enjoyed out front. If the guitar was ever given a chance to solo, the entire band would drop out and the drummer would take out the brushes. Guitars were for hillbilly and bluegrass music, and most audible in that acoustic context.

Then, at the height of the big-band era in the late thirties, along came the miracle of the coiled, single-string pickup, yoking together the powers of electricity and the plucked string. Charlie Christian and Django Reinhardt, the founders of modern improvised guitar, began performing on and recording with the first generation of electric guitars. While their initial efforts proved their virtuosic talents, their magic would have happened with or without amplification; they served to beta test the new technology.

It would take blues guitarists like Texan T-Bone Walker and Mississippian Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup to begin to plumb the possibilities of amplified guitar. And it took two inventors – Les Paul and Leo Fender – to help the amplified guitar evolve into a phenomenon all its own. From the close of World War II and into the fifties, the electric guitar evolved, doing away with the hollow, resonating spaces within the instrument and relying wholly on the amplified string itself, and ultimately gave birth to the solid-body models we know so well.

Again, the bluesmen were in the lead, popularizing the idea of plugging in. Guitar Slim, Johnny "Guitar" Watson, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, B.B. King, Ike Turner, Elmore James, Hubert Sumlin, John Lee Hooker, and Muddy Waters all lugged axe and amplifier from club to club and studio to studio, electrifying the licks and riffs that are the foundation of modern rock guitar.

R&B and rockabilly players took notice and added their own ideas: Chuck Berry provided meat to his teenage anthems with two-string bends. Bo Diddley worked the strings like a percussion gourd, syncopating the rhythm. James Burton, playing with singer Dale Hawkins, pioneered riff-based rock & roll with the defining lick on "Suzy Q." Link Wray, looking for a more threatening sound, developed the idea of letting all six strings ring at once, and the power chord came into being.

Paul Burlison, with Johnny Burnette's Rock and Roll Trio, knocked loose a tube in his amplifier, which yielded a fuzzy tone that worked perfectly with the band's version of "Train Kept a-Rollin'." And so the eternal search began for louder, thicker, nastier – *raunchier*. More gain and more sustain. Over time, hardware manufacturers pushed to keep up with the impromptu innovations of rock guitarists: from tremolo bars to wah-wah pedals, Marshall stacks to voice boxes.

Through the sixties, the electric guitar and its language progressed at warp speed. The sounds created by a second generation of blues guitarists – Buddy Guy, Freddy King, Otis Rush – crossed the Atlantic, providing primary influence on future heroes like Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, and Peter Green. What was revolutionary in guitar sounds in 1964 – John Lennon's use of feedback on "I Feel Fine," the Kinks' two-chord attack of "You Really Got Me" – seemed antiquated by the close of the decade, when psychedelic rock and heavy metal were pushing the six-string envelope.

It was during those waning years of the sixties that groups like the Who, Cream, and Led Zeppelin in the U.K. and the Grateful Dead, Santana, and the Allman Brothers in the U.S. solidified the guitar's leading role in rock. As the music drew in larger and larger numbers, and concerts moved from dance halls into coliseums and arenas, extended improvisations became a standard part of the rock experience: Guitar solos – when played by the hands of youthful maestros like Duane Allman, Carlos Santana, and Pete Townshend – became as important as the songs themselves.

It was a pivotal time, and guitar legends seemed to be arriving on a weekly basis. But none pushed the limits of the instrument farther, or expanded its expressive ability more, than a former R&B sideman from Seattle.

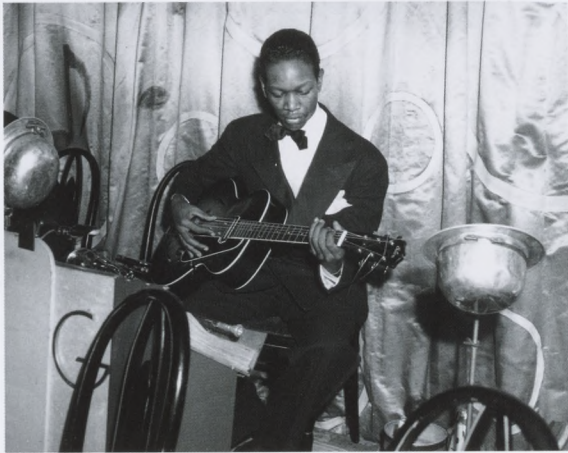
**"My guitar wants to kill your mama.  
My guitar wants to burn your dad . . ."**

**– Francis Vincent Zappa**



Chuck Berry and his signature Epiphone guitar

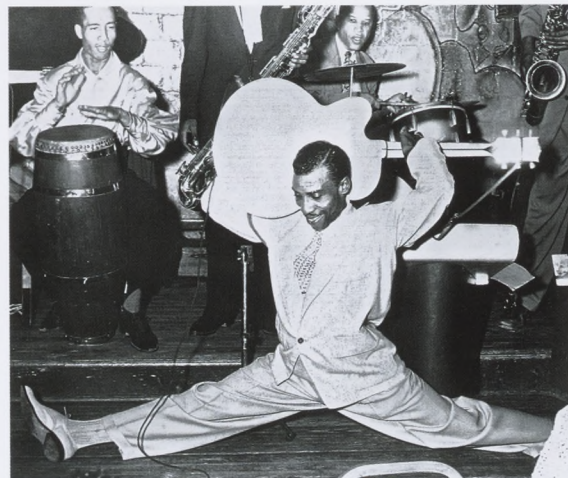




Charlie Christian



Django Reinhardt



T-Bone Walker

Jimi Hendrix was a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon, whose all-too-brief career left music that continues to be cherished and studied by generations of guitarists. While playing his re-strung, flipped-over Stratocaster, he could manipulate the switches with his elbow to create different voices answering one another within the same tune. He was able to control and play with feedback like a lion tamer, maneuvering a low-end growl into a piercing, feline squeal. He reached back to the tricks of the blues masters who first heard the possibilities in the electric guitar and found a way to make us all hear the future.

That Hendrix achieved what he did before the advent of pedals and other effects speaks of his supernatural power over his instrument. That he successfully launched the electric guitar onto rock's center stage with such flair and flamboyance explains why the rock-guitar time line should rightly be measured B.H. – before Hendrix – and A.H.

Despite Hendrix's gargantuan shadow, every guitarist mentioned in this essay (and many who aren't) deserves equal time in the spotlight for the singular contributions each made to the development of the electric guitar. With some, like Roy Buchanan's uncanny control of harmonics and Eddie Van Halen's fretboard tapping, it's about the mode of expression. For others – think of 1,001 speed-metal shredders – it's about the manner. But no matter the approach, as the technology of the instrument has improved (now acoustic and electric can compete on equal amplified footing), the brother- and sisterhood of rock guitar remains open to one and all.

Which may well be the guitar's defining and distinguishing characteristic: the best example of rock's equal-opportunity philosophy in action. Because of rock, the amplified guitar is now at home in any musical genre – punk, heavy metal, and hardcore; blues, country, and Latin; R&B, funk, hip-hop, and any stylistic fusion one can imagine. It's the portal through which the music of other cultures enters and intermingles with rock, free from cultural or verbal restrictions. A guitar doesn't give a hoot about where a sound is from, or what language it originally spoke. It hears technique and touch and listens for ingenuity and originality.

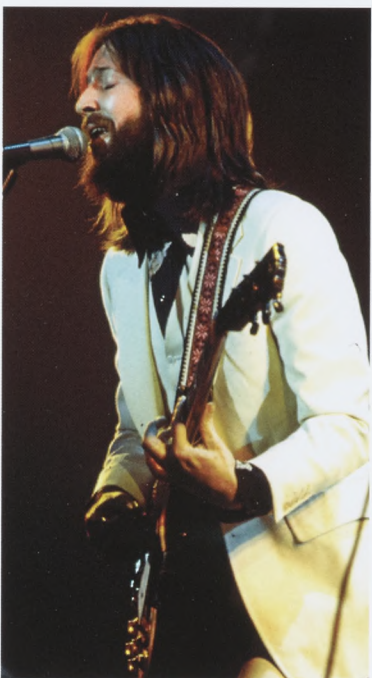
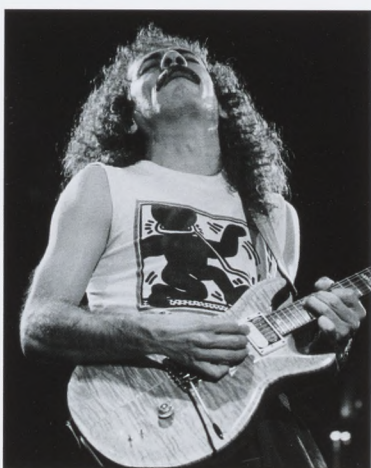
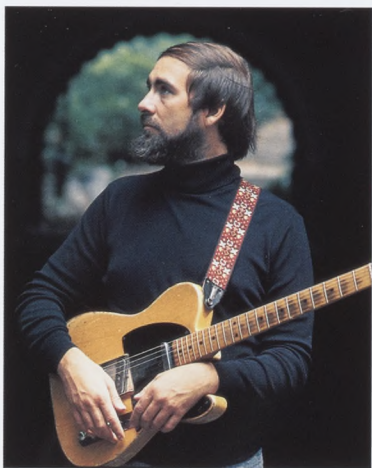
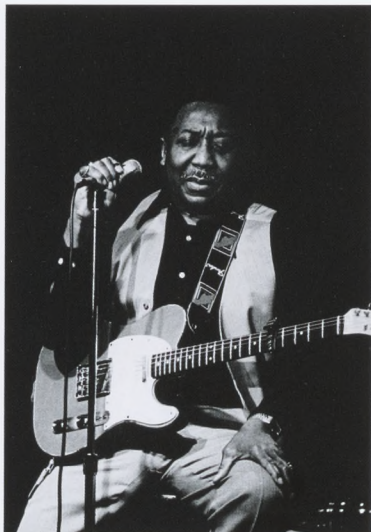
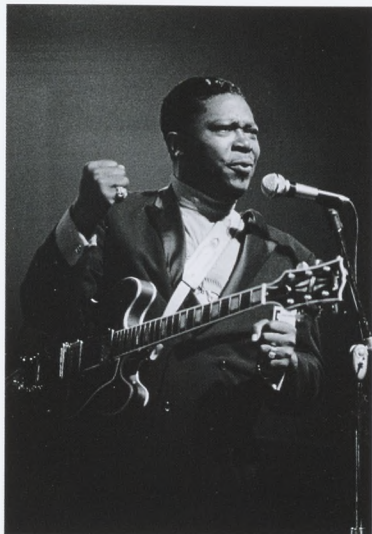
That's why Santana can thrill a rock audience with a nylon-string flamenco workout, why Jimmy Page waxes ecstatic about Django, why a jazz guitarist like John Scofield will quote a Black Sabbath melody with utter sincerity, why Les Paul and Slash are a mutual-admiration society, why Derek Trucks – the inheritor of Duane's chair in the Allman Brothers Band – can channel John Coltrane or Ravi Shankar so effectively on his Gibson SG.

Wasabi and sushi. Fog and film noir. Some things are indispensable to, and truly define, an experience: testosterone and adolescence. Guitars and rock. Whether or not we name it explicitly, it's a loud and long-standing symbiosis we celebrate every year as part of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, one that includes three inductees this year: Peter Dinklage, and Eddie Van Halen and Sammy Hagar of Van Halen.

But let's remember that it hasn't been *that* long. Back when rock was but a lad, a certain Aunt Mimi in Liverpool looked in on her teenage nephew, a young Mr. Lennon, and uttered these now immortal words:

"A guitar's all right, John, but you'll never make a living out of it." ❧





TOP ROW, FROM LEFT: B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy. MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT: Roy Buchanan, Carlos Santana, Duane Allman. BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page.



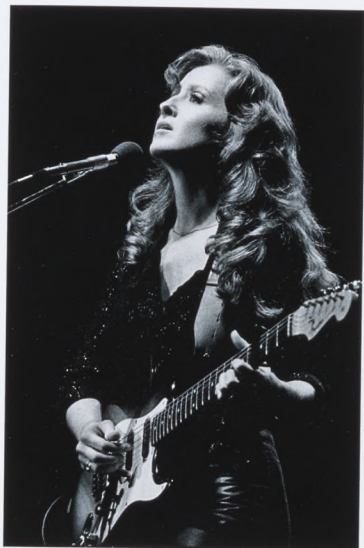


Cleveland rocks: Joe Walsh – lead axman for the James Gang and later the Eagles – in the mid-seventies.

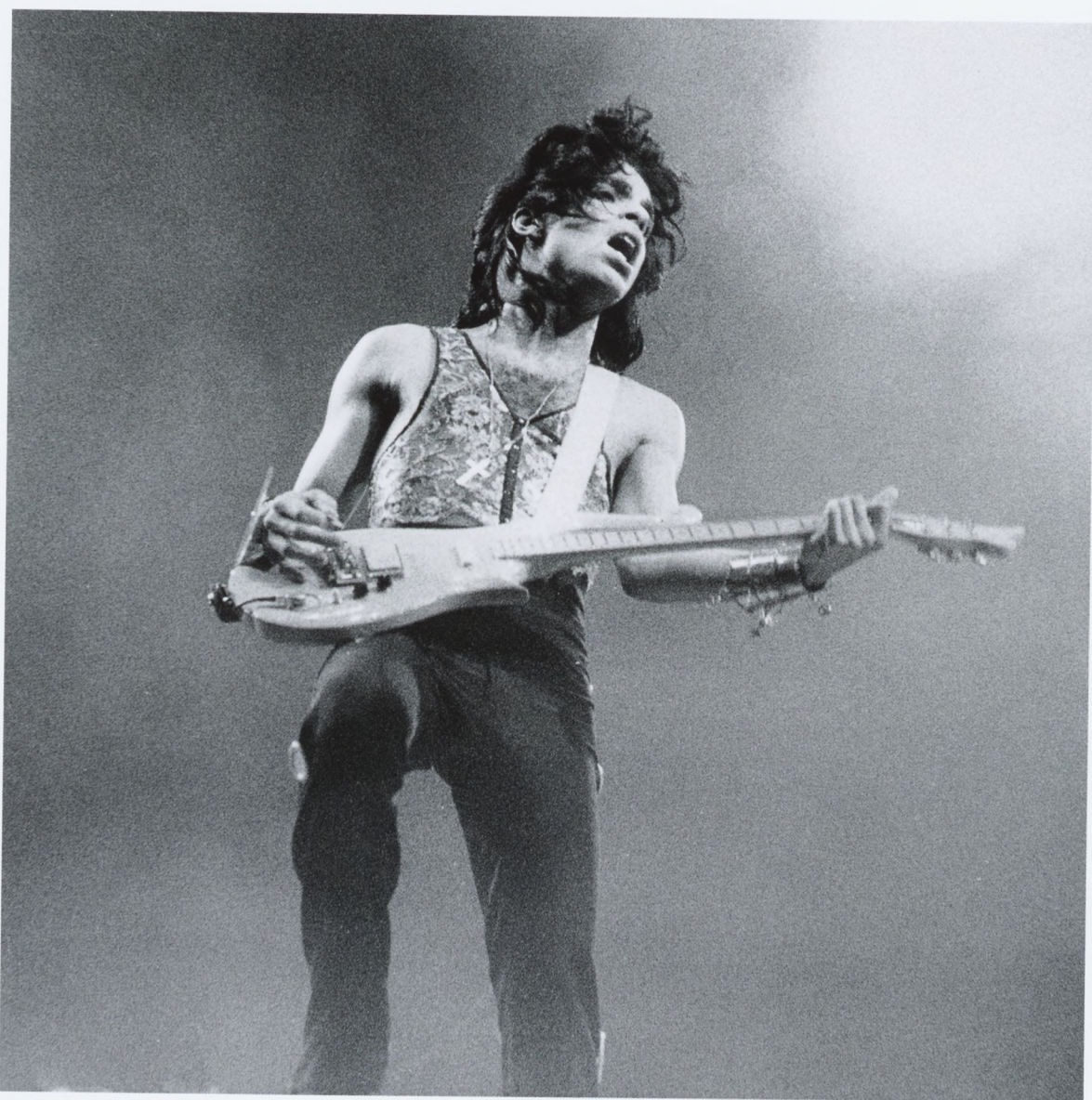


Reachin' for a riff: Guns n' Roses guitarist Slash bends over backwards in the late eighties.





FROM LEFT: Stringbenders of both genders: Bonnie Raitt, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Eddie Van Halen.



Prince in prime form