

Justin Harrison
University of Victoria, British Columbia
justinh@uvic.ca

An All-American Band: Or, How Van Halen (Double-hand) Tapped into American Mythology and Iconography for Success

"We took these two little people with us on tour, Jimmy and Danny, as my bodyguards. They're probably 3 1/2, 4 1/2 feet tall. We had 'em in 'S.W.A.T.'" uniforms. If nothing else, I can wake up in Tunafish, Wyoming, nine in the morning, hung-over; even if I'm miserable, I can look out the door to the hallway and there goes a midget in a bath towel holding the hand of a girl he was with last night--and I know I'm in rock 'n' roll!"
(<http://www.dlrrarmy.com/>) Dave's quotes, April 16, 2008

"An ounce of image is worth a pound of performance"
(<http://www.dlrrarmy.com/>) Dave's quotes, April 16, 2008

I love Van Halen. They were the ULTIMATE party band, and you can't say 'L.A. rock 'n' roll' without including their name. They've always been the heart and sound of Hollywood party rock, and then on top of that they had the ace gunslinger and rhythm section; add in court jester nonpareil, Diamond Dave. There is no mystery to why they were successful.

—Alice Cooper

We celebrate all the sex and violence of the television, all the rockin' on the radio, the movies, the cars and everything about being young or semi-young or young at heart. That's Van Halen.

—David Lee Roth

When it was announced in February of 2007 that the original lead singer of the rock band Van Halen was reuniting with the band for a major US summer tour, the news was greeted by a mix of doubt and glee (mostly glee). The band's history had by then long been a troubled one (one which saw a revolving door of lead singers after 1985, as well as much bitter and very public exchanging of put-downs in the media, accompanied with a steady downgrading of musical output both in quality and quantity). However, Van Halen's sound and image during the band's wildly successful prime years of 1978 into 1985 consist of cultural artifacts that can inform our understanding of American mythology and sense of self in general, and during this era in particular, which straddled the Disco age and Reagan's America. While not generally appreciated by the establishment, Van Halen's success during these years (the focus of this paper) can be

looked upon now as a window into themes, values, and imagery that rock ‘n’ roll audiences enthusiastically responded to then. As Rolling Stone once put it, “[n]ever the critics' darlings, Van Halen were clearly the people's choice” (Wild 42).

Like all great rock bands, Van Halen has always understood the value of image. During these years of 1978 to April 1985, at which point David Lee Roth exited the band, Van Halen held an unrivalled place of dominance in the North American rock scene. This success was built around many factors, not the least of which was the innovative sound, style, and musicianship of the music itself. Built overtop all of this, though, was the band’s image as rock band *extraordinaire*, one that projected the picture of top-of-the-heap status, living and embodying generally held notions of runaway successful rock bands, living the life of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll to the hilt. In order to project this image, the band, through a variety of media and tools at their disposal (interviews, promotional photos, posters, lyrics, and songs), created the image of an All-American band, invoking myths and iconography that resonated with the American historical and cultural consciousness. Indeed, it is the object of entertainers to project as many aspects or themes within their images as possible so as to appeal to the widest audience possible. However, I would argue that Van Halen was savvy in this regard well beyond the level of its contemporaries and most of who followed. Van Halen was successful in tapping into notions of what constituted “all-American” and consciously projected ties to them, whether it be American football, triumphant WWII-era American soldiers, or American-specific musical traditions like Blues and Jazz. Indeed, in a conscious linking of the band to Hollywood mythology and its version of the American dream, band members often referred to their original “discovery” and record deal signing as “right out of the movies.”¹

Perhaps the real secret to the success of the band’s overall image, though, is that some of it was based on reality and thus converged naturally with the one being actively created and projected. Together, these band-created and audience-created contributions to the band’s overall image ensured popular connection with Americans. Among the American themes and myths projected by and onto the band include, among others, those of and within the rags-to-riches narrative of America as the land of opportunity; immigrants making it big in accordance with the American Dream; the blues; the circus as spectacle; the cowboy archetype; the sports celebrity; American nostalgia; and the frontier innovator.

In terms of audience reception and interaction with the themes and imagery cited above, I would suggest that not all of them are consciously conceived by fans or knowingly applied to the band. Rather, these themes and imagery are simply familiar ones to American audiences by virtue of media representations they have had exposure to in the everyday world of American life and popular culture, such as Hollywood film and television, advertising, radio, and sports, not to mention personal or family memory. These themes, myths, and imagery—Americana, in short—are familiar to American audiences, embedded in their national psyches and experiences. Thus, locating national iconography and mythology within Van Halen’s image of these years can inform us

¹ See for instance, Eddie Van Halen in a 1978 interview for *Guitar Player* magazine and reproduced on many fan sites, including <http://www.vanhalen.com/interviews.aspx>, accessed online June 15, 2007. He has used this specific language on more than one occasion to describe the band’s major label signing, an event which turned them from struggling West Hollywood nightclub act to rock stars.

about American entertainment traditions as well as historical, social, and aesthetic developments that existed and emerged during this complex era and shared cultural moment.

Van Halen's Rise to Fame

Brothers Alex and Edward Van Halen immigrated to America in the early 1960s from the Netherlands while young children (Christe 4). The Van Halen brothers had a professional musician father who played reed instruments in jazz bands. He encouraged his two sons to study classical music in lessons, typically piano, starting at a very early age (Walser 67), and they were often gigging with their father in performances while young teenagers. Singer David Lee Roth and bassist Michael Anthony joined them and formed the band in college. They built up a strong following in the San Gabriel Valley during the mid-1970s, based out of Pasadena, developing a repertoire of hundreds of cover songs: ZZ Top, Deep Purple, Queen, Black Sabbath, Grand Funk Railroad, and through singer Roth's insistence to appeal to a more dance oriented crowd, James Brown, KC and the Sunshine Band, and Stevie Wonder (Christe, 24). They also worked hard at their craft, dropping out of Pasadena city college, gigging wherever and whenever they could. Eventually, they moved on to west Hollywood clubs, showcasing their own music at the Starwood and the Whiskey a go go, eventually drawing up to 3000 in the audience back home at the Pasadena civic auditorium by 1977 (Christe 32,35, 36). Hence, they were not an overnight sensation, despite their later suggestions of being so. Van Halen were definitely a product of their time and place, California in the 1970s, a land of roller rinks and suburban backyard parties. At this time in 1977, the US record labels were not particularly interested in hard rock, focusing instead on punk rock and singer-songwriters (Christe 39). Van Halen had to be good to overcome this obstacle, and be more than just a formulaic rock band. A producer from Warner Brothers who had made his name producing the Doobie Brothers caught there act in a club and offered them a contract the following night.

The band recorded and released a series of multiplatinum albums in the late seventies and early eighties, releasing on average one a year for six years running, supported by relentless touring. In the process, they revolutionized the sound of hard rock guitar bands, with their party sound and image, propelled mostly by the superior showmanship of lead singer/frontman Roth and the distortion-loving, guitar-playing virtuoso Edward Van Halen. It was to prove an explosive combination, an embarrassment of riches of self-promotional savvy and musical talent, that resulted, on the way up, in Van Halen's becoming the most influential American band of the period, spawning countless imitators in both sound and look, and, on the way down, a clash of egos that broke up the original line-up just as they had reached a new pinnacle of popularity among contemporary American rock bands. The centerpiece of Van Halen's impact on the resurgence of rock music was guitarist Edward Van Halen's unrivalled virtuosity in his playing, resulting in a renewed fascination and worship of guitar playing that had been long in decline since the days of Eric Clapton's heyday and Jimi Hendrix's death. This led the way for Van Halen to redefine the popular rock music scene in America. Consequently, in the 1980s, heavy metal became the dominant genre of American rock music (Walser, 11).

Van Halen As Two Distinct Iterations

For all intents and purposes, Van Halen's history can be dissected into two periods: the first, addressed here, from the early 1970s to 1985, with David Lee Roth as lead singer and lyricist; and the second, from 1985 to 2007, which mainly saw solo act Sammy Hagar take over the role of singer/lyricist. It was the first period in which Van Halen broke out of the gates in 1978 with their first album, followed quickly by five more multi-platinum selling albums, culminating in *1984*'s release in January of that year. During this time, Van Halen was a staple of American FM radio, leading the way for a rock 'n' roll resurgence. With these albums, the band established for itself an untouchable place in the pantheon of classic rock music. So, this was an era when Van Halen mattered. The Hagar-led period that followed did not reach similar heights.

Also, the issues discussed here were for the most part a direct result of singer Roth's prominent and leading role in the band and, in particular, as group spokesman. Roth was the driving force behind most of the band's identity and image, thus making a discussion of the period without him another discussion altogether. The history of the band after 1985 has been markedly less successful in terms of its reputation and stature within the industry, despite producing four number one albums with Hagar. During this latter phase of the band's history, I would argue that Van Halen's self-promotional efforts dropped off considerably, basically relying on the prior goodwill and previously established aura left over from the Roth era. Thus, it will be this earlier period in Van Halen's existence covered here, when they were industry leaders and trendsetters in technique, look, lifestyle, and sound, and not the shell thereof as represented by the output of the Hagar iteration of the band. Roth's Van Halen was instrumentally influential to the hard rock music of the 1980s and beyond, and thus is instructive to our understanding of rock music's ongoing legacy.

Always On Stage

As spokesman for the band, likely self-appointed, David Lee Roth assumed the persona of ringmaster and vaudevillian as part of his role of lead singer and band mouthpiece. Roth showcased his outrageous and extroverted style and personality (as well as outsized ego) to the hilt. They were always on show. In an enlightening study on Glam Rock, performance scholar Philip Auslander defines the concept of *persona* as "a performed presence that is neither a fictional character nor equivalent to the performer's 'real' identity" (4). Added to this persona, though, is an additional layer, articulated by Simon Frith: rock performers are "involved in a process of *double enactment*: they enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires, and the pop star's art is to keep both acts in play at once" (quoted in Auslander 4). Thus the language and themes expressed in song are interwoven into the fabric of the star's overall performance: both on stage (whether in concert or in front of a camera) and on the recording. So for Roth to sing about being "dressed in rags," he has to project at least the possibility of being envisioned by the audience as having at some point dressed in rags—and in Roth's case, again, in keeping with his stage-projected persona, looking good in them. And off the concert stage, the *persona* continues, since, in Auslander's words, "it is quite likely that interviews and even casual public appearances are manifestations of the performer's persona rather than the real person" (6). Thus the image is always on display, every situation a chance to build upon it. Things said in interviews,

props in officially released photos, lyrics in songs all contribute to the overall representation of the band's brand and image, and thus must be assumed to be part of a self-promotional creation.

The Van Halen Circus Comes to Town

One of the areas where frontman Roth most visibly led the band in appropriating familiar elements of American historical and social narrative is the one relating to the circus tradition. In many ways, this circus environment is where Roth thrived best: never the strongest of musicians, he saw Al Jolson as his model. He once said: "Al Jolson is the classic showbiz model. The white gloves—drop to one knee—the Knickerbocker break—the flatspin—smile! No dead space. I can't stand dead space onstage. I've got a surgically implanted disco beat. My show has to be 130 beats a minute or better" (qtd in Christie 114). Thus it is as ringmaster that Roth could best bring his persona to the world. Scholar Susan Fast, in writing about Led Zeppelin, may as well have been doing so about Van Halen when she writes of them representing "the world of carnivalesque exuberance" with its "ceaseless overrunning and excess" (6). Van Halen consciously promoted themselves as being in a direct line with Led Zeppelin in terms of rock 'n' roll excess. As such, Van Halen played on the tradition of spectacle in circuses and carnivals in two ways: 1) on stage and in photos incorporating signifiers of the spectacle in circus life, and 2) in the general image surrounding the band as one living the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll carnival life of excess to the hilt.

It is generally held by circus historians that the first American circus was produced in Philadelphia in 1793 (Eckley 1). With P.T. Barnum's circuses the following century followed soon after by the Ringling Brothers' circus, the American circus tradition really took off. Through a concerted effort towards advertising, self-promotion, and self-generated publicity, Barnum, for one, successfully became a popular attraction in America (Eckley 15). In the decades since, of course, the circus has become a firmament in the American imagination. The circus drew its popularity from many attractions, notably acrobats, feats of derring-do, and elements of society deemed unfit or strange to mainstream audiences of the day (an aspect that today has unseemly overtones, and an aspect that Van Halen were not sensitive to as we shall see). Early circus promotional posters give us an idea of what the producers thought would stimulate the imagination and arouse the curiosity of the audiences. These promotion posters of the 19th century display all manner of acrobats jumping in the air, doing summersaults, and jumping off moving horses.

Drawing directly on notions of agility of acrobats and death-defying displays of derring-do, the band incorporated specific performance "highlights" into their stage show as well as in their posed photographs, linking them to this American historical and cultural tradition. For instance, we see Roth displaying what became a trademark "move" for him on stage, performing as the acrobat with his leaping leg-splits in the air, launching himself typically off an amplifier or drum riser. This was always a crowd favorite. In addition, during the *1984* tour, Roth incorporated a "sword dance," making it the centerpiece of his solo performance of the set. (Each band member typically had a five to ten minute solo performance within the overall concert, culminating in Edward Van Halen's extended guitar fireworks solo towards the end of the show.) Roth's sword performance was intended to show off his own feat of physical prowess, taking his life

into his hands as he danced and dazzled with his sword expertise. In addition to putting his life on the line, by the very use of swords Roth was also incorporating a touch of the exotic, another strong element of the American circus tradition.

As for the more carnivalesque side of the spectacle tradition that Van Halen drew on for their appeal, we can see further evidence of their locating themselves within this tradition in photography. Van Halen often had little people posing in promotional photos, invoking associations with the carnival's history of what it called sideshow freaks. The inclusion of these people in the imagery of the band was meant to accentuate the carnivalesque atmosphere surrounding the band.

Whenever possible, the band was sure to promote themselves as consummate partiers, code for living the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll life full on. In addition to establishing their carnivalesque credentials for decadence, this reputation for rock 'n' roll living firmly rooted them in popular imagination as the heirs of giants of the life like the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. Again, in pictures, Van Halen was careful to craft an image as outlaws, living the decadent life. In officially released photos, we can see the band members playing poker on a yacht with alcoholic beverages strewn across the table, with little people card dealers and scantily clad women serving them and hanging on. Alcohol was always a prevalent prop in the portrayal of this life (not to suggest alcohol was *merely* a prop in the band's lives; Roth was always boastful about how he finished a 40 ounce bottle of Jack Daniel's on stage every night. As he once said, "I'm proud to say that after all these years of loud music, bright lights, and loud noise, I still don't need glasses—I drink right out of the bottle" (Christe 88)). They proudly promoted the image of outlaws, of rock 'n' roll wildmen. Roth once congratulated a festival crowd by saying "More people were arrested here today than the whole last year." The local sheriff told the media afterwards the band would "never come back" to his county, bolstering the band's status as outlaws (Christe 90).

Van Halen Sings the Blues

One of Van Halen's very first hit songs was "Runnin' with the Devil," the opening track on their inaugural album. One could be forgiven for assuming the song, judging by its title and overall distortion-laden guitar sound, was somehow related to the worship of the devil or of a satanic cult, coming as it did on an album that clearly sounded like it was located within the heavy metal genre, which often traded in satanic iconography and mythology. However, I would suggest that in fact the song bears ties directly to the blues tradition, which though blues and heavy metal connections can definitely be made, is not the same as the heavy metal tradition of, say Black Sabbath, with its openly-stated satanic lyrical intentions and traditions². The devil here in Van Halen's opening salvo to the world is the devil so deep-rooted and familiar in American blues lyrical tradition and mythology, such as long-held associations of blues progenitor Robert Johnson making a deal with the devil at the Crossroads in exchange for his superior guitar virtuosity, or of living a life of sin or destitution being likened to living with the devil in lyrics. It is in this tradition that Roth's lyrics should be situated. In addition, in the words of the Grove Music Online, in blues "themes of crime, prostitution,

² See for instance comments by Black Sabbath lead guitarist and founding member Toni Iommi in the entertaining film *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey*, which follows an anthropologist seeking to trace the roots and evolution of Heavy Metal music.

gambling, alcohol and imprisonment are prominent in early examples and have persisted ever since” (Paul). It is in subject matter along these lines that we find some of the strongest Van Halen ties to blues tradition.

One of the most astute scholars writing about heavy metal music has made the argument that Van Halen’s devil represents a life of freedom from responsibility (Walser 51-52), invoking as the song does images of living “life like there’s no tomorrow/And all I’ve got, I had to steal” (Van Halen 1978). While I would not disagree with a sense of freedom being relevant here, such as in Bob Dylan’s line “Once you’ve got nothing, you’ve got nothing to lose.” However, I would ascribe an additional meaning, a more clearly-associated connection with the blues specifically, as the lyrics suggest the narrator is a poor man, or at least one who is down on his luck, and often traveling, familiar themes in blues lyrical tradition. In addition to having nothing of one’s own, the sense of the blues is continued in the song:

I’ve got no love, no love you’d call real
Ain’t got nobody waiting at home
Runnin’ with the Devil

The devil here clearly acts as a metaphor for the life of a troubled, down-on-his-luck narrator, living from moment to moment. Thus, Van Halen was able to capitalize on a very longstanding lyrical tradition and mythology embedded into the American consciousness through an overt association with the blues.

Nor was “Runnin’ with the Devil” a one-off riff on blues lyrical tradition. In other songs, as well, Roth articulates imagery of the poor, unfortunate soul so common in the genre. Another example, echoing many of the same lyrical themes and imagery (such as freedom on the road juxtaposed against having nothing of one’s own) is found in the song “D.O.A.,” from their second album (1979).

We was broke and hungry on a summer day
They send the sheriff down to try to drive us away
We was sitting ducks for the policeman
They found a dirty faced kid in the garbage can

Broken down and dirty, dressed in rags
From the day my mama told me "Boy, you pack your bags."
Send the mayor down in his pickup truck
The jury look at me, say "Outta luck." Oo-ooh, yeah!

And I'm alone, I'm on the highway
Wanted, dead or alive
Dead or alive, uh-aah!

Again, we see the blues narrative of being an outlaw, down on one’s luck, born unlucky. Roth clearly invokes images of being a “dirty faced kid,” “dressed in rags” being kicked out of home by his (presumably) single mother at a young age leading straight into the life on the road with the devil. These kinds of descriptions are firmly aligned within the

blues narrative. Adam Gussow argues that the blues textual tradition involves a great deal of violence (echoed above by Roth's lyrics), stating that "blues musicians did indeed view [violence] as an unpleasant workplace hazard," and that "symbolic mayhem threatened and celebrated in song... was an essential, if sometimes destructive, way in which black southern blues people articulated their somebodiness, insisted on their indelible individuality" (4-5). In this way, lyrics such as those discussed above place them within a large American tradition and experience, the blues, from which audiences can draw upon their immense wealth of familiarity.

In addition to lyrically, Van Halen tied itself to the blues tradition musically. Edward Van Halen's playing, for instance, is very blues-based. His playing was significantly shaped in his formative teen years by listening to and copying the style of Eric Clapton, which strongly echoed what Walser calls the question-and-answer dialogic of the blues (67). Hence American audiences' association with the blues was strengthened by the additional exposure to it via the wave of blues-based rock 'n' roll music of the British invasion, which in addition to Clapton was found at the core of music by the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. Edward Van Halen has described his style thusly: "I started out playing the blues. I can play real good blues—that's the feeling I was after. But actually I've turned it into a much more aggressive thing. Blues is a real tasty, feel type of thing; so I copped that in the beginning. But then when I started to use a wang bar, I still used that feeling, but rowdier, more aggressive, more attack. But still, I end a lot of phrasing with a bluesy feeling" (qtd. in Walser 67-68). With the blues being central to the playing style of the band's musical songwriter, audiences were exposed to approaches, styles, and riffs that would have been familiar to them a few times over by the time they heard Van Halen.

American Nostalgic

Van Halen tied themselves to other entertainment traditions within Americana, as well. Both through images and choice of music, the band appropriated cultural artifacts of bygone eras, particularly from the America of the 1950s, for which the America of the 1970s was so fond.³ One thing to keep in mind concerning the band is that, musically, they were genuinely versatile well beyond the majority of their competitors and imitators. A case in point was their recording of an old jazz song by the Casa Loma Orchestra from 1940, on Van Halen's fifth album, *Diver Down*. Entitled "Big Bad Bill (Is Sweet William Now)," the song featured Edward and Alex's father Jan on clarinet, with Alex playing with brushes on drums. The song was a throwback to a bygone era in which audiences would recognize from Hollywood films produced or set in the 1940s. In addition to invoking an American period in history through the choice of instrumentation, Roth's vocals recalled his role model, Jolson.

It was certainly a break for the band from their usual routine, but not that big a break. Fans had already become accustomed to other songs in the band's repertoire that signaled bygone eras in Americana. An early cover and gig favorite that made its way onto Van Halen's first album, "Ice Cream Man," originally written and performed by John Brim in the early 1950s, sung by Roth in a blues *raconteur*-styled voice over an acoustic guitar blues melody, reminded Van Halen audiences of the band's connection to the blues tradition, but also enabled the band to invoke that good ol' American institution,

³ For two excellent and illuminating discussions on this point, see Auslander and Killen.

the traveling ice cream vendor, conjuring up images of feel-good summertime moments of yore.

Similarly, the band invoked other national cultural artifacts from the 1950s, a particularly fertile ground of source material for the omnivorous influences of Roth. For example, they had a very big hit in 1982 with a cover of Roy Orbison's "(Oh) Pretty Woman." This song made it possible for the band to draw a direct line from themselves to a popular decade that had since been nostalgically re-imagined. Also importantly, it permitted Roth the opportunity to do his own take on Orbison's famous growl in the song. They also featured doo-wop singing in a number of songs⁴, which again tied them to the mythical 1950s America, allowing the band to distinguish themselves in the process, showing off their range of influences and talents as well as widening their audience by promoting themselves as facilitators of popular Americana.

Tied to the 1950s musical tradition in America is, of course, Motown. Emerging out of that decade, the Motown sound became prominent in the 60s, adding an urban rhythm to the rock 'n' roll sound and legacy. Van Halen tapped into Motown associations with a cover of the Marvin Gaye-penned "Dancing in the Street," invoking associations with revelries of summertimes past. Roth, always keen to ensure that a "dance-able" element was present in Van Halen's music and appeal, was able, through this song's lyrics, to associate the band with dancing (not necessarily a frequent association made to hard rock music), as well as (in true showman style) name-drop cities in order to connect with fans living in them.

Visually, as well, they often brought in band images that called upon nostalgia for Americana. Roller skating for one, which admittedly was undergoing a revitalized popularity in the late 70s and early 80s due to the waning but still existent influence of Disco (spawning a sub-genre of films I'll call the roller boogie genre⁵), was a popular photographic theme for Roth that drew on a shared cultural experience of American society through a pastime that had existed in this country since 1819 (Nation Museum). So they were not distortion spandex big hair hard rock all the time. They were careful to let in artifacts of Americana from bygone eras of collective imagination to bolster their appeal.

Sports Stars Rock!

Another American cultural tradition Van Halen drew upon to place themselves alongside or within a popular narrative is that of sports star. To illustrate this point, I will use Joe Namath as a place of departure. Football quarterback Namath, whose Hall-of-Fame career spanned the 1960s and 1970s, was a wildly popular sports star in his day, captivating fans through winning the Super Bowl, arguably America's biggest dream (at least as regards sports). An additional aspect to his fame and celebrity was his signing of a rookie contract for the then staggering sum of \$420,000 (Davies 242). Both during and after his playing career, he appeared in TV advertisements, as well as starring in several film and television roles. He became something of an icon in American entertainment, at a level previously unseen in a sports star. He was now a celebrity beyond just football. He

⁴ Notably in "I'm the One" and "Feel Your Love Tonight" from *Van Halen*, and "Bottoms Up!" from *Van Halen II*.

⁵ See for example *Roller Boogie* from 1979 and *Xanadu* from 1980.

had cross-over appeal, and had just set a new model for fame. Now to be a true star, one had to also be a sports star.

With sports *chic* becoming all the rage on television and magazines, Van Halen drew on a contemporary popular icon, the sports star, by bringing in sports-jock fashion to their look. The band made sure to pose for photos that would associate them with the sporting life to appeal to that segment of America that were drawn to sports celebrity. In good promotional fashion, the band did not restrict themselves to just one target audience within the larger sports fan base, but tried to appeal to several by posing in photos connecting them to a variety of sports, including football, hockey, skateboarding, martial arts, motocross, and scuba diving. Hence, Van Halen was able to appeal to the great American tradition of sports, thus widening their audience and even more firmly rooted them as representing American values.

Hang ‘Em High

Another major icon in the American tradition is of course the cowboy. It is one that has been implanted in American imagination through history, books, television, and, especially, film. By 1908, the western genre was firmly established as a Hollywood product (Slotkin 231). The cowboy myth promotes many images, including the idealization of the masculine hero (McGee 18), an ideal bandmembers would be happy to see applied to them. It dovetailed nicely with notions of the guitar god and rock star as sex symbol. Van Halen made sure to link themselves to this popular and familiar genre and narrative. There are photos of them posing in various degrees of cowboy fashion and costume, as well as songs connecting them to this icon.

In song, they draw a direct association with the cowboy. They tied themselves to Clint Eastwood and one of his westerns by appropriating the title with their song “Hang ‘Em High” (1982). The lyrics amount to a retelling of the story, or, more to the point, a description of the iconic cowboy hero who was left to hang for dead and looking for revenge:

Somewhere, lost it in a turn
Trouble seems to fit him like a glove.
First come, first served, he’s serving it back,
Travels light, without a pack, without love.
He comes from nowhere, returns on his own,
Late for the hanging, yes he’s heading for the moon
Hang `em high.

Notions of “trouble” and revenge implied in the song are ideals that fit nicely into the band’s image they were trying to create as living the dangerous life of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. And in another direct cowboy association, the band recorded their own version of “Happy Trails” (1982) the old sign off from cowboy actors Roy Rogers and Dale Evans from their popular TV show from the 1950s. The band often used this song as their final encore in concert.

Pioneer and Innovator on the American Frontier

Related to the cowboy in American mythology is that of the frontier. Richard Slotkin argues that the frontier in American mythology is “a complexly resonant symbol, a vivid and memorable set of hero-tales” (*Gunfighter 3*). The band’s guitarist Edward Van Halen came to represent the image of frontier pioneer and innovator within this resonating symbol. When the first Van Halen album erupted onto American consciousness in 1978, a listener could not help but be spellbound by the sound coming from the guitar. After a romp through the blues-infused rock of “Runnin’ with the Devil,” there came a sound unlike anything rock music had heard before. Edward Van Halen’s one-and-a-half minute solo performance, “Eruption,” ushered in a new level of rock guitar playing virtuosity.⁶ The icon of the guitar god had existed before, and Edward Van Halen certainly benefited from playing to that image as well as having it relentlessly foisted upon him by others, notably in the rock guitar press. But the sound coming from this song was uncanny. At first, the listener is not even sure it is all guitar—was there a synthesizer playing alongside? It was more than simply fast, though it certainly was that. Edward Van Halen was showing off to the world his instantly-famous double-handed tapping technique whereby he used both hands to tap notes on the instrument’s fretboard to create dazzling cosmic-sounding sonic feasts. He eventually took to creating a supporting mount on which he placed his guitar on its side in order to better double-hand tap, playing it in the manner of a keyboard. Almost lost in all this mind-numbing double-hand tapping were many other touches as well, including “his skillful use of string bending...and his deft touch on the vibrato (or “whammy”) bar” (Walser 68).

Inevitably, though, it was the two-handed tapping technique caught on with every hard rock guitarist of the day, each trying to imitate this heretofore unknown who had just introduced an innovation that was revolutionizing guitar playing. For about a decade following, the double-hand tapped guitar solo was obligatory in every hard rock/heavy metal song. Edward Van Halen’s techniques were resulting in his being branded as innovator, something more than just a guitar playing god—he was actually contributing to entirely new modes of playing. Guitar legend Les Paul, for one, was impressed, stating: “Eddie’s finger tapping and vibrato work were innovative. It’s something he developed that made him different than all other guitar players...Eddie proves he can do his own thing, something that’s recognizable” (Zlozower 43). Edward Van Halen clearly recognized himself as an innovator. In an interview in 1980, he complained about his imitators: “I guess they always say that imitation is the highest form of flattery. I think this is a crock of shit...Like I learned a lot from Clapton, Page, Hendrix, Beck—but I don’t play like them. I innovated; I learned from them and did my own thing out of it” (qtd. in Waksman 688).

In addition to the double-hand tapping sound and technique, Edward Van Halen was influential in reshaping the overall landscape of rock music. His heavily distorted, fast guitar licks became default staples in Hollywood soundtracks and TV advertising that remain unabated today. This development is the direct result of his playing, and resulted in the establishment choosing his sound as the one that would connect them to the youth market.

Now, innovation has long been seen as American as apple pie. With longstanding ties in the American imagination with frontier ingenuity, determination, and technological progress, the notion of innovating in order to survive the wilderness of the

⁶ For a lengthy study of “Eruption” and its ties to classical music, see Walser.

frontier is a deeply embedded national myth. Richard Slotkin describes this myth in all its development, depth, and nuance, most of which need not concern us here. But he does describe how images were promoted and passed on of the figurative log cabin in the wilderness standing alone against the time when the technology of the railway would settle the land.⁷ Edward Van Halen can lay claim to genuinely embodying much of this archetype, of lone resistor while using technology to bring innovation and progress. However, much of this aspect of his reputation was projected onto him by fans and media alike, who tended towards the easy stereotype (because of its instinctive familiarity) of clichéd genius. Thus was he endlessly portrayed in magazine features.⁸ So, I would argue the myth of Edward Van Halen as unrivalled innovator/genius was to some extent overdone. But it certainly added to the aura of the band, drawing in audiences who were interested in the music simply for its guitar playing technique.

However, underlying this overdone image of innovator laid the basis of truth. In addition to introducing double-hand tapping to the world in a big way (it had actually already been done before, though not heard by many), Edward Van Halen was revealed to be an incurable tinkerer (to use Steve Waksman's word) of guitars and amps, all in the search for the elusive perfect sound he was looking for. Edward Van Halen would buy the cheapest, off-the-rack model he could find, and mix and match components from other guitars to get the set up and sound just right (Waksman 686). For years the body of what he called his "frankenstrat" was based on a body by a small guitar company, Charvel. In Edward Van Halen's hands, it became a completely reconfigured entry-level guitar. He similarly tinkered with amplifiers, purposely sending too much voltage through them in order to get the right sound, though often destroying them in the process. So he definitely did have innovative techniques and approaches well beyond the average guitar god, applying his practical ingenuity to his needs, much in the vein of the frontier innovator of American myth.

Rags to Riches

A central myth of America, perhaps a foundational one, involves this country as being a land of opportunity, one in which one could literally or figuratively go from "rags-to-riches." R. W. B. Lewis has written about the history of ideas in America in an attempt to outline a home-grown American mythology. He discusses imagery that for him crystallizes the whole cluster of ideas: in his words, the image "was that of the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1). He called this figure the American Adam. This figure of the "authentic American" can be insightfully used to describe aspects of the band's history and image, with particular regards to the Van Halen brothers.

Van Halen the band was named after the two brothers who were always the backbone of the band, making sure the music was there on which Roth could build his confection of spectacle. As child immigrants coming to America, they certainly could be assumed to embody Lewis' "innocence," "vast potentialities," and "poised at the start of a new history" in a new country. All fans of the band were familiar with the immigrant

⁷ See *The Fatal Environment*, chapters one through three.

⁸ Notably so in the following magazines: *Guitar*, *Guitar World*, and *Guitar Player*. Virtually any article on Edward Van Halen would serve as an effective example of the industry mythologizing him as unrivalled innovator. For specific honors bestowed on him by magazines, see Waksman, 681.

narrative of the Van Halen brothers. It played into what fans wanted to believe, as examples of a persevering myth of this country as the land of opportunity for well-intentioned immigrants who through innovation and hard work succeeded, with only the sky as their limit. And here they were, the backbone of the country's most popular rock band, an "all-American band" replete with a rags-to-riches, land of opportunity immigrant narrative familiar to American imagination. The immigrant part of the myth was real, and the rags-to-riches not far off, as the Van Halen family arrived in America with but 75 Dutch guilders to their name (Christe 8). This part of the band image and story was generally attached to them by others, converging nicely with all the other band-led efforts at aggrandizing their reputation.

Van Halen As History

In the early 1950s, the largest bronze sculpture in the world was erected, the sixty-four foot high Marine Corps War Memorial. It was directly inspired by a famous photograph of six American service men who raised an American flag during the battle of Iwo Jima towards the end of the Second World War. The photograph "quickly became one of the most pervasive images in American history, reproduced in thousands of magazines, on millions of posters, and on the first U.S. stamp to depict living persons," and politicians and advertisers, realizing the power and attraction of the image, made it a significant part of the war bond drive (Baudy 19). As a symbol of victory, it was hard to beat. It became (and remains) one of the clearest expressions of American determination succeeding, raising the flag as if in a "happy-ever-after" moment of American glory. (The only image I can think of that would rival it would be of the Stars and Stripes planted on the Moon with a, we must assume behind his visor, proudly beaming Apollo 11 astronaut standing beside it.) Hence, this Iwo Jima image becomes indelibly linked to American success in a foreign land, of bringing American values to others, as conquering (or at least, victorious) heroes.

Even before the end of the war's decade, the image was being incorporated into Hollywood blockbusters. In the 1949 film, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, actor John Wayne plays a hard-as-nails Marine sergeant who leads raw recruits into this famous battle. Towards the end of the film, they recreate the iconic flag-raising moment, reminding American audiences of their great victory in the war. Thus this image encapsulated so much of what Americans wanted to see in themselves, as articulated in the national mythology (not necessarily incorrectly) as a decent country forced into war by an unprovoked attack on American soil, a country that rose through determination and sacrifice to beat back an aggressor who did not value the American way. Thus this image was firmly embedded in the American consciousness.

For their part, Van Halen capitalized on all the associated mythology of this revered icon. In September of 1982 and May of 1983, Apple Computer co-founder Steve Wozniak sponsored two US Festivals. These were two massive, multi-daylong rock musical festivals in San Bernardino produced in the hopes of drawing attention to new and evolving technologies, and integrating them into a cultural celebration of music, computers, television, and people. In the second of the two festivals, to headline one of the three daylong series of sets, Van Halen was chosen. This selection to headline, as well

as the general hoopla surrounding the appearance by the band at the festival⁹, cemented their reputation as the continent's biggest rock band. As a further official stamp on this status, it was announced that the band had in the process just received the world's record for largest paycheck for a single gig, a cool \$1.5 million for a two hour performance (Christe 87), placing them in the *Guinness Book of World Records*.

The official band poster and program of the concert sought to situate Van Halen as a band clearly in tune with American values, as well as aligned to a glorified moment and image in the American historical narrative. The poster recreates this famous instance, with the four band members substituting for the six soldiers in the original. As well as the in-person audience of the festival, this image reached many, many more via repeated television exposure of this appearance, as well as mass produced versions of the poster sold across the country. This modified version of the image invokes notions such as the spread of American values to foreign lands, in the process emphasizing the perception that the band was a world conqueror (though the reality was in fact much more limited: outside of North America and, ironically, Japan, the band's reputation was not that celebrated. But it was the perception of American audiences that counted.). It also tied the band into deeply-rooted and long-held American notions like those concerned with the expansionist Manifest Destiny, whereby American values are to be spread for the benefit of all, opening up doors of opportunity for the innovators of the nation.

Thus a rags-to-riches story is complete. They had settled the frontier through innovation and determination, and had successfully grasped for imperial power (Lawrence and Jewett 19). In perhaps the most visible and notable way, the band, formed around two poor Dutch boy immigrant outsiders, had achieved the pinnacle of stardom and financial success in America. In some ways this image ties together both aspects of Van Halen's rise, the manufactured self-promotion and the genuine perseverance, dedication, and innovation of the band over almost ten years.¹⁰

Epilogue

In February of 2007, it was announced that original Van Halen lead singer Roth would reunite and tour with the band. The news sent shockwaves over the infotainment media world and the blogosphere. What seemed to many as inconceivable was seemingly about to happen: after a wait of more than twenty years, and after massive amounts of mutual back-and-forth bickering between bandmembers, they were getting back together. Not since 1984 had Roth been on stage with the Van Halen brothers. This time, though, original bassist Michael Anthony was not to be present; he was to be replaced with Edward's 16 year old son, Wolfgang. The replacement on bass notwithstanding, fans, with visions of the 1980s dancing in our heads, could not help but become nostalgic for the era of L.A.-based spandex and hair party rock bands which Van Halen virtually single-handedly spawned. Perhaps lost in all the nostalgic haze provoked by the reunion announcement and tour is the fact that, as every American hard rock band in the 1980s

⁹ For a detailed description of the band's promotional activities and general experience at the festival, see Christe, 86-91.

¹⁰ Lost in all of the hoopla and celebratory engagement with this iconic image (both the original one by the Associated Press photographer as well as Van Halen's poster) was the fact that only three of the original six soldiers survived the war, and only one of the survivors was able to create a viable life for himself back in America after the war. For more, see Braudy, 21.

flocked to L.A. hoping to capture some of the stardust left in Van Halen's wake, dressing and playing (as best they could) like the band, that era died a swift death shortly afterwards, longevity not being a noteworthy aspect to the cultural moment the band created. Yes, a reunion tour was exciting, but would it be worth it, could they live up to the glory and their place of prominence in the past?

Well, no sooner was the reunion announced than it was postponed, with Edward Van Halen checking himself into rehab for yet another in a long line of attempts at treatment for a decades-long struggle with alcoholism. In addition to dealing with this health issue, he has in recent years had hip replacement surgery as well as suffered from a form of mouth cancer, treatment for which cost him a part of his tongue. It seems the carnival lifestyle of excess had caught up with him. However, by checking into rehab, he signaled that he was determined to start fresh anew with his life as well as with the reunion with Roth. Sure enough, he reëmerged in May looking like a new man, happy, rejuvenated, and ready to roll on a brand new tour.

It kicked off to much hoopla and celebration in October, routinely playing to sold out arenas across the United States and Canada to unanimously great reviews. The playlist did not deviate from their classic hits, a delight for the die-hardest Van Halen fans who had stuck with the band over the years when Sammy Hagar was the singer, who had always refused to sing all but the most minimal number of Roth-era songs. During the reunion tour, Roth has been trying to recreate his role of ringmaster, replete with supersize props and non-stop showbiz energy. However, the band have toned down their costumes (somewhat), and certainly look different as individuals (and not merely older). Roth's old trademark acrobatic in-the-air splits was no where to be seen, though he does unleash a solid 90 degree drop kick. Concert performances and pictures show the band in more subdued clothing, and, by 1984 standards, looking quite shorn, thus, no longer quite embodying the wild cowboys and outlaws of past decades. Still, the fans have been eating it up. The shows have followed the well paved roads, no longer frontier land, laid by the biggest of rock shows, drawing the audiences and energies of latter day tours by rock giants like the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd. However, by claiming the big rock show space as it currently exists in this century, in addition to selling as many shirts and hats as they can, the band is striving to live up to their legacy as spectacular showmen, replete with massive stage props, a state-of-the-art light show, and an arena full of confetti, exploding orgasmically over the audience during the concert's encore, their biggest hit, "Jump."

Unfortunately, as I speak, the tour has been postponed midway through. After nearly four months of touring, Edward Van Halen is now currently being treated by "doctors," according to the band's official website (*van-halen.com*), though for what illness it has not been revealed. Tabloid reports suggest alcoholism is again at issue (*PR-Inside.com*), causing a rift with his son offstage. However, this is pure conjecture at this point. The tour is scheduled to resume in April, proceeding for another few months of booked shows. After that, who knows? In their press conference announcing the reunion, Roth claimed they were expecting to record afterwards. This remains to be seen, particularly in light of Edward Van Halen's health issues. If they do record, will we still recognize blues-based melodies and riffs, accompanied by down-and-out lyrical themes? They are probably too old at this point to start displaying the athletic prowess of yore, though their choice of costume for promotional photos might tell a different story. So,

having already completed the rags-to-riches, land of opportunity narrative so enshrined in American imagination, what embedded All-American national myth is left to the band and their image at this juncture? Comeback kid, anyone?

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