

Eddie Van Halen

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It was summertime in the late 70's and I was standing over the massive console stereo cabinet in the family room of our house. The ornately carved, coffin-like wooden box was the center piece of furniture in the large space. It provided storage specially crafted for vinyl records, and it was full of them. Usually there were stacks of records on top as well, newer, or prime selections that we played so often it wasn't worth the trouble to put them away. The components within consisted of a turntable and radio, with numerous built in speakers of all sizes slotted in to maximize sound, and a long chrome column of knobs to endlessly modify your listening experience. Every other piece of furniture in the room; each chair and table were positioned around it accordingly – so no matter where one sat, they could gaze upon this magnificent creation that was the vehicle for delivering the magic of music. Our television was off in the corner – and though it too held its place, it did not have the grand distinction of the stereo cabinet.

I was fortunate enough to have 3 older sisters who each spent much of their allowances on vinyl records. This provided me an ample gateway into libraries of musical artists that I may not have otherwise ever heard at my age.

On this day, like many others, I carefully placed the needle on the newest addition to the stack that had caught my eye. The album cover lured me in and fired my curiosity: a quadrant of photographs, each displayed a sweat glistened persona on a stage of black, spot lit with a variety of colors. The pants were tight, and their shirts were unbuttoned, and all of them were clearly caught up in the throes of what could only be the final moments of a very exhausting and vigorous live performance. The logo in the center stood out like a hood ornament; a sharp-edged, silvery blue emblem of shining, metallic wings in the shape of the letters VH. 'Van Halen' was etched in black on the banner across the mirrored letters. Saying the name out loud felt powerful, like I was wielding a hammer rather than a record. I tilted the vinyl out of its sleeve into my sweaty palms and carefully placed it on the turntable, making certain my fingers did not smudge the grooves of the black disc.

What came next was a bit of a blur. I heard what I imagined was an air-raid siren. A long, droning chorus of car horns, the volume steadily rising. The horns were not honking, not staccato bursts echoing in city streets – these horns were being held down, laid on, stuck and wailing in atonal unison. Something was wrong. And they were getting louder. This was

a grave warning, an alarm. But it was already too late, and I felt the hair stand up at the base of my skull where the skin was damp and cool from both the thrill and the fear of this moment that was merely seconds but felt like minutes. The horns peaked like a broken scream and then wound down slow and deliberate, morphing into a warped, sludging halt like hot blood or candle wax solidifying in a pool. All at once the fading horns cut out abruptly, replaced on the downbeat by the pulse of a single string, deep and thick and lighting the way down through the dark path ahead one step at a time. One...two...three...four...five...six...seven...and on the eighth, the sound of a guitar slashed out like a demon's claws raking my virgin flesh; roused from the black void of thumping bass, called forth by the dry, tribal beat of toms like muffled cannons while a madman howled into the abyss over it all.

I stood in place, propping myself up on the console, hypnotized by the spinning record and the drunkenness with which the music instilled. The guitar notes were razor sharp, and the tone was completely unique to anything I had ever heard before. It seemed as though there was vast space in the room – the ear could discern every instrument in its singularity, but the guitar leapt out with an alien cry every now and again, in a series of savage salvos before retreating into a dusk of subtle chords. Throughout, the singer bellowed his downtrodden tale of a broken home which consisted mostly of guttural wails and howls of anguish than of literary substance. There was, however, mention of the Devil, and that gave the overall message some heft.

It was a blistering opener, and when it was over there would be no sitting down to review liner notes. I was held in sonic rapture –right there, hovering over the stereo; captivated, entranced, still studying the photos on the album cover.

What came next defies prose. It was a solo guitar instrumental – outside of bass and drums interjected at select moments to add accents of exclamation to what is the virtual high-wire act of a sonic circus. One minute and 42 seconds. A pure, uncut, adrenaline thrill ride of virtuosity the likes of which superseded everything that came before it. A clinic of unrivaled tone and technique bled through a singular sieve of spit-fire and distilled down to a vaporous clarity. Notes were dropping like molten liquid steel on a canvas of cold glass. The guitar used as a visceral blade was nothing new, but no one had ever experienced the cut of a rapier quite like this. The sound that came forth was so fast and unexpected it felt like an ambush; multi-faceted and like most well executed, successful assaults, seem to come from every direction all at once. Sound rained down like razor sharp icicles overhead, knifing through the electric fog, a blistering tempest of fury unfurling mercilessly, and in its wake, a

savage maelstrom of audible shrapnel, red hot and eviscerating everything in earshot. The layered attack had a velvety softness to it as well – as though a blinding flurry of individual notes were being called forth with a whisper, summoned solely from fleeting fingertips rather than struck into life with the honed edge of a pick.

The volume of the stereo was ample, but not out of ordinary parameters. Still, the sound was visceral, churning my insides, catching me up in it like tangled barbed wire. My face was hot, I felt exposed, somehow invaded and uncertain if I should even be there. What I heard seemed to be intensely personal, a veritable glimpse inside the soul of the performer, a bloodletting. The blur of notes then abruptly shifted, seemed to soar skyward, and fell into a spiraling, droning descent before flaming out above the horizon like a comet, a trail of greenish smoke still reverberating in the air.

That moment seemed to end as fast as it began – and for the first time I realized that I was not alone in the room. I turned to see one of the older neighborhood boys who hung out with my sister. He must have noticed the dazed look on my face – as his visage seemed to mirror mine. We both shared an astounded disbelief at what we had just heard. I quickly turned back to the stereo, picked up the phonograph needle and put it back a groove, to cue up the song again. And when it began, I looked at the boy's face again – searching for answers. He was older than me. He looked as though he had heard the song before – perhaps multiple times. Maybe he knew something. What was happening here? Was this sound truly coming from a guitar? How? He instinctively read my disposition and offered what I can only assume was his own attempt to grasp the uncertainty of the situation. He said, "I think he has a special switch on the back of his guitar."

And with that single sentence – the young man summed up the whole consciousness of a generation who were experiencing the magic of Van Halen for the very first time. The sounds we heard could not be attributed to a human. There had to be some technical wizardry going on – a switch of some kind. Hidden, on the back of the guitar.

It was, at the time, the best, most plausible explanation there was. Because we couldn't see with our own eyes what was happening. And what we were hearing, needed a disclaimer. It simply wasn't possible to imagine a human being was generating this staggering arcade of sounds from mere fingertips.

We would of course, learn later that it was just a man – albeit an incredibly talented wonder of a human being. There was no special switch on the guitar, and in fact there were less functional switches than on a normal model. The sound, the magic, the distinct tone and the

speed with which it was deftly delivered came from Eddie Van Halen.

I don't for one second imagine the account above is in any way that greatly different from pretty much every music lover alive around the time Van Halen's debut record was released. I truly believe there a global, collective sigh of astonishment, wonder and amazement. I didn't play guitar at the time I first heard Eddie play. And afterwards, I had no desire to whatsoever. What was the point? The bar was sky high before Van Halen – now it was in outer space. But the inspiration and the dreams of playing music were most certainly fueled and could not be stifled. And that was because of moments like these, hovering over the console stereo.

I experienced the thrill of seeing Van Halen live only once, a story for another day – but it pales in comparison to hearing 'Runnin' with the Devil' and 'Eruption' the very first time.

This was a difficult story to write because I didn't know how on earth, I would ever distill into words the description of the sounds – and to do it well enough to give it the justice it deserves. It seemed to me, at first, to make a comparison by way of metaphor – perhaps to an author whom I admired in literature, would be a much easier task. So I paired Eddie Van Halen with William Faulkner.

Eddie Van Halen is to guitar what William Faulkner is to literature: Incredibly long, stream of consciousness sentences, full of intensely detailed, intricate descriptions that puzzle and challenge the jagged lines of a stormy, restless imagination; at times effusive and bright, always melodic and colored with characters evoking a rich, nearly unspoken archaic language, unleashing ash embers of words/notes whirled about in a dust devil wind, blackened with the aged smoke of experience and filtered through cauterized scars of hardship while often lifted up with a feathery brush of whimsical, impish wit and walled in with the structure of mahogany frame built on a dirt foundation of dense vocabulary, sparse punctuation and deep meaning.