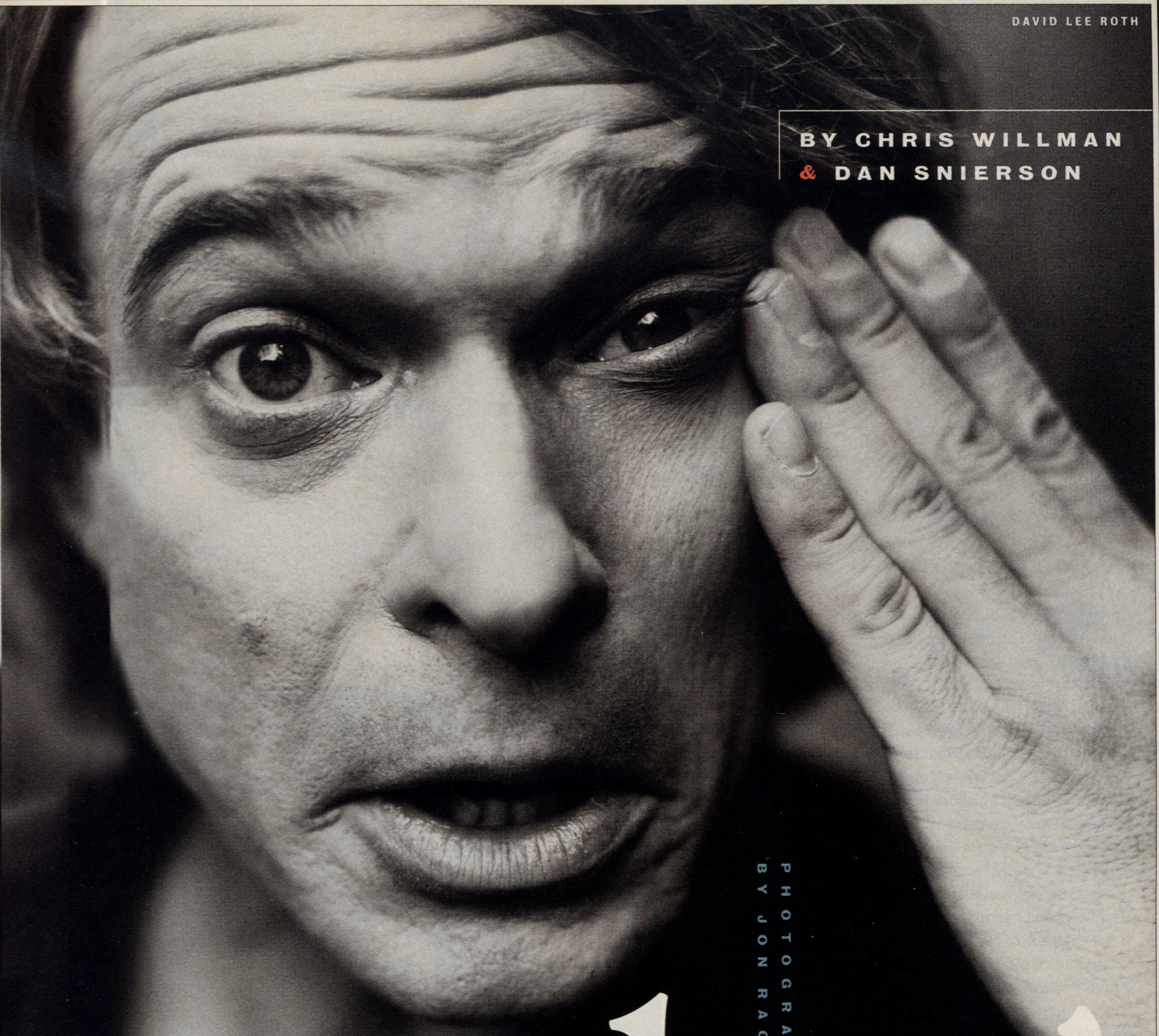




EDDIE VAN HALEN

PHOTOGRAPH BY
CHRIS CUFFARO



DAVID LEE ROTH

BY CHRIS WILLMAN
& DAN SNIERSON

PHOTOGRAPH
BY JON RAGEL

VAN wailin'

The vaunted VAN HALEN reunion had the media and rock fans raving—until it UNRAVELED dramatically. Here's the inside story.

It's

the calm before the storm at 5150, the lavishly cozy studio Eddie Van Halen maintains just up a winding canyon driveway from his San Fernando Valley home. He's lying low here, trying to avoid the media radar, wondering just how big a juggernaut he's set in motion. "When people hear this," he sighs, carefully fingering the un-

marked compact disc that's about to come blasting through his twin

theater-size speakers, "they're gonna think I'm nuts." Indeed, they shortly will. Three weeks after the original lineup of Van Halen earned a thunderous standing ovation just by showing up for a cameo appearance at the MTV Video Music Awards, Eddie—speaking on the record about his band's much-hyped reunion for the first time since the Sept. 4 broadcast—has in hand a test copy of what so many fans have waited so many years to hear: two new songs, recorded for a greatest-hits package, with long-estranged frontman David Lee Roth. Along with what's in hand, though, Eddie has in mind what most Van Halen fans assuredly *don't* want to hear: the revelation that for him, this reunion with Roth was never designed to be much more than a celebratory lark.

He likens it to going back to your first wife for an old-times'-sake fling after the second marriage dissolves but before consigning yourself to the search for a really mature partner the third time out. Of course, if your not-exactly-demure first wife *and* most of your rabid friends have spent a decade dreaming of just such a reconciliation, well, that could be a problem.

Oops.

Time to fire up the new tracks from *Van Halen: Best of, Volume 1*: "Can't Get This Stuff No More" and the just-released single "Me Wise Magic," which, we're assured, are "smokin'." Eddie fast-forwards to make sure we're getting the long versions, not the radio edits, then proudly corrals his visitors toward a spot dead center at the mixing board for full-frontal absorption. A familiar guitar fades in. Van Halen bassist Michael Anthony leans over the console, smiles, and offers some words of warning: "Don't be thinking 1984, now."

Of course not. But as soon as Diamond Dave's whiskey-stained voice infiltrates the "Me Wise Magic" mix—a sort of underworld growl at first, building up to the patented Roth yelps as the song barrels through a series of roller-coaster harmonic twists—it *does* seem like a certain year all over again, notwithstanding a dozen years' worth of technical and personal growth. As superstar reunions go, it's got what it takes, so, *Why...can't...this...be love?*

Well, if you must know, partially because the very night—at the MTV Awards—that set off all this hoopla was the same night a previously unreported blowup backstage made the historic reconciliation history.

"I know people are gonna think, 'Dave can sing his ass off!'" Eddie prophesies after the music winds down. "And he did do a good job. But live would be a whole 'nother story.... They're gonna think, again, 'Eddie's difficult.' It's all gonna come down to me. But that's not what this is about."

A WEEK LATER, a jilted Diamond Dave has gone public, and all hell has broken loose.

"It's sucking the life out of me!" says Eddie over the phone. "I mean, I'm just worn out. I want to make music. I want to be in the studio writing—not haggling and trying to please everybody all the time."

There *is* some leavening in his exasperation. The good news for Van Halen is, it's "99.999 percent" certain their choice for the vacant singer spot—Gary Cherone, formerly of the pop-metal band Extreme—can be freed of his contractual obligations and join the band. The core power trio—for the first time ever, they believe—have a "team player" in that slot. It'd be time to break out the bubbly, if only the famously bleary-eyed Eddie hadn't jumped on the wagon two years back.

And if it weren't for the bad news, which is Roth's enormously peeved public statement of Oct. 2 (punchline: "Eddie did it"), claiming he was promised, and cheated out of, a full-scale reunion—charges Van Halen vehemently denies.



THE GANG'S ALL HAIR The band blasted onto the charts in 1978 (top, l. to r.: Eddie Van Halen, Roth, Anthony, Alex Van Halen), but it was tempers that flared at the 1996 MTV Awards (above)

"I was an unwitting participant in this deception," wrote Roth, who declined to be interviewed for this story. "It sickens me that the reunion as seen on MTV was nothing more than a publicity stunt.... Those who know me know trickery was never my style."

Ain't talkin' 'bout love, indeed.

Anyway, with public comments by Van Halen's second lead singer, Sammy Hagar—who either was fired or quit in June, depending on who's doing the telling—having already inspired a certain amount of Eddie bashing, Van Halen could probably find a new singer who's a combina-



four and aft

'IT'S SUCKING THE LIFE OUT OF ME; I'M JUST WORN OUT,' SAYS EDDIE OF THE FALLOUT FROM THE REUNION FIASCO

tion of Elvis, Caruso, and Robert Plant and *still* be denounced as the Antichrist in some fan quarters.

A check of the thousands of weekly posts in the Van Halen Net newsgroups and online folders reveals that the pro-Cherone constituency is clearly in the minority. "I officially announce my resignation [as] president of the Van Halen fan club of Illinois," begins one declamatory post, which goes on to describe Eddie as a "Communist." Reads another rather proprietary communiqué: "We made Van Halen, and if he picks that sissy Cherone, we can break Van Halen, too!" Still another popular thread—picking on Eddie's celebrity missus—perpetuates the absurd notion that "Valerie [Bertinelli] is Yoko!"

Back at 5150, all they are saying is give peace a chance.

Producer Glen Ballard—already working on new Van Halen tracks between Aerosmith and Alanis Morissette projects—hopes the Netizens can just chill. "I realize there are expectations out there and people have opinions, but these guys are artists," he says. "And I don't think it would serve their audi-

ence to take a poll as to who should be the lead singer."

For mainstream rock fans of a certain age, this is all serious business; besides Aerosmith, few, if any, other credible links to a great American pre-"alternative" age still exist. Rumbling onto the Sunset Strip in the mid-'70s, Van Halen crammed a fresh shtick of big-top hard rock down the throats of the disco-fatigued masses. The band proceeded to chew up the charts with its two-pronged attack: Eddie shredded volcanic riffs and wrung otherworldly noises out of his guitar, while Roth worked the mike with slick bravado, barefoot-on-coals screams, and comically diarrhetic lyrics. Between the revolutionary virtuosity and the hipster hucksterism, Van Halen provided a sideshow for just about everyone.

When Roth split in '85, Hagar stepped in and, against all odds, pushed the group to even greater commercial heights. Whether or not this *new* graft takes, some sort of history is being made: Van Halen were already the only major rock & roll band—ever—to thrive equally behind two successive frontmen. Now, as a bizarre footnote, the pride of Pasadena can lay claim to being the first major band on record to boast *three* lead singers...and all in a mere four months.

For Eddie Van Halen, picking Cherone fulfills a desire to make his band a "class act"—to let his group grow up on stage, maybe, as much as he has off. Whether the fans prefer Van Halen to remain frozen in crotch-rock time has yet to be determined.

(PAGE 34) VAN HALEN'S GROOMING: KATHY JEUNG/VSAGES; (THIS PAGE) LARRY BUSACCA/RETNA; LYNN GOLDSMITH/IGI

ONE OF THE STRANGEST revolving-door sagas in pop history began just four months ago, when, on Father's Day, the band parted company with Hagar—Roth's replacement of 11 years. It's a regular rock & roll *Rashomon*.

Hagar: "I did not quit this band. I was forced out of this band. And I would be back in this band tomorrow if they got a new manager and they wanted me."

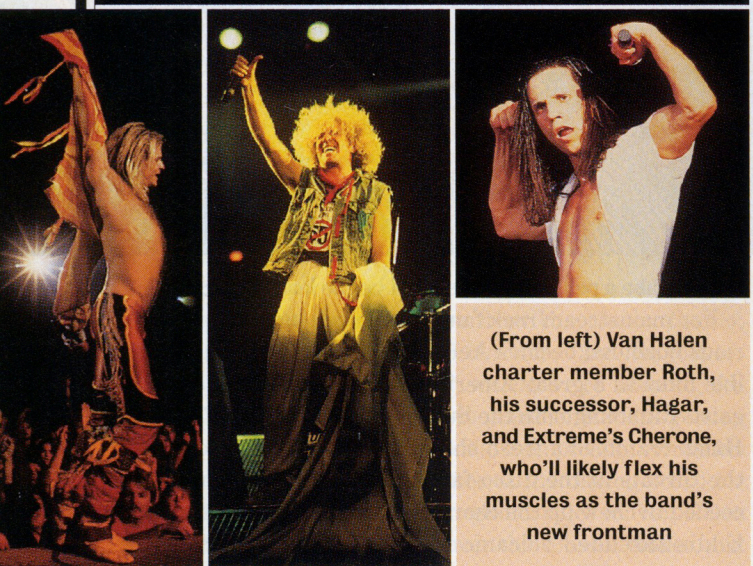
Eddie Van Halen: "He *did* quit. People still think, because of what he has said, that I fired him. Well, I didn't. Put it this way: If he wanted to be in the band, he would be here, right now?"

Huh?

For his part, Hagar traces the dissent back to the death, in 1993, of their longtime manager, Ed Leffler; he never meshed with the replacement, Ray Danniels, who also managed Rush and (not coincidentally) Extreme and is drummer Alex Van Halen's brother-in-law as well.

"I never got along with this guy," Hagar says. "Ray said, 'I don't think you should dress like that, I don't think you

VAN ON THE RUN



(From left) Van Halen charter member Roth, his successor, Hagar, and Extreme's Cherone, who'll likely flex his muscles as the band's new frontman

should talk like that to the audience, and I don't think you should dance like that on stage.' And I just said: 'Hey, man, honestly, straight up, f--- you. I do what I want to do. I'm not the new guy in this band, Mr. Manager—you are.'"

"I'm guilty of that," Danniels admits. "I thought Sam was doing certain things that were embarrassing. He was still trying to do old Sammy Hagar B-band routines in front of what was gonna be one of the last surviving American rock & roll bands that meant anything. And frankly, I didn't think having somebody in the audience throwing bras on the stage and hanging 'em off the mike stand was particularly flattering on a 48-year-old guy."

Eddie, for his part, traces the difficulties back to his jumping on the wagon in 1994.

"I know that when I got sober, Sammy tripped," he says. "It's easy to manipulate someone when they're drinking, or make them feel insecure. Well, I've been in therapy for two

years and sober almost two years, and I'm a different person. I'm aware of things now that I never used to be aware of. Sammy says, 'Hey, I'm the same guy as I always was.' Well, maybe that's the problem. *I've* definitely changed."

It all came to a head when sessions began for two songs for the *Twister* soundtrack, a gig that Hagar—newly remarried, with a baby due soon—agreed to only reluctantly. Later, when Eddie informed him that one of the numbers was going to be used for a greatest-hits album instead, Hagar, who'd always protested the idea of a best-of, became livid.

Despite feeling "tricked," Hagar continued to work on the disputed ballad, "Closer to You." But after much back and forth, a row arose over a line of Hagar's: *I want to touch the distant light from your star*. Says the singer: "I was talking about a relationship.... There's a certain stage where you feel like even though you're holding each other, there's distance. I thought it was beautiful poetry. [Eddie] didn't. And I'm going 'Well, *you* don't have to sing it.'... So when I left, I said, 'That's it. If you don't dig it, don't release it. I'm done with it.'" And he caught the next flight out to San Francisco.

Five days later, Eddie called Hagar. As Van Halen remembers it, "I gave him a choice: 'Do you want to be in the band, or do you want to go solo?' And he wanted to go solo."

Hagar recalls Van Halen's words as a declaration, not a question: "You've always been a solo artist, you might as well go back to being a solo artist." And he vividly remembers Eddie matter-of-factly mentioning that he and Roth had talked that week about working together again. "And I said, 'Eddie, if what you do with Roth is better than what you and I have been doing, I'll blow both of you.'"

Minus a few hugs at a funeral in late September for their attorney's wife, Hagar and the remaining members of Van Halen have not spoken since.

WHEN VALERIE BERTINELLI posted online the day before the MTV Awards that her husband and Roth were "actually becoming friends—something they never were 20 years ago," die-hard fans were shocked. No one was more taken aback by the turn of events than Eddie himself, who admits: "We had never really connected on an emotional level before."

Roth got up the gumption to phone the Van Halen household after a courtesy call from Warner Bros. alerted him to the impending hits package. He and Eddie had had but two perfunctory conversations in their 11 years apart. A few nights later they spent three hours hanging out in the backyard of Roth's Pasadena home, an evening described by Van Halen as the first real bonding they'd done. Ever.

"I sensed a different guy than the guy I used to work with," says Eddie. "Not necessarily humbled, but just normal. Like the LSD—that's what I call Lead Singer Disease—was gone. We apologized to each other about the childish mudslinging over the years, and then we sat around and bulls---ed. Nothing to do with music—just life, telling jokes, having fun."

Soon Roth made his first trip up to 5150 since the mid-'80s, when break dancing and Wham! competed with "Panama" in the culture. Somehow, the guitarist neglected to properly

warn his band mates. When Alex walked in the studio door and realized it wasn't Dave the computer techie they were meeting with but *that* Dave, he cut to the chase: "I told him, 'If you ever say one more thing about my family, then I'll kick your f---in' ass.' And he said, 'I'm sorry, it'll never happen again.' I found that quite gentlemanly."

The reunited parties went through a number of previously demoed instrumental tracks before finding one suitable for David-ization. The result: "Me Wise Magic." Later, "Can't Get This Stuff..." came together spontaneously in the studio, where, for inspiration, Roth brought in a few palm trees.

"It took a while to get the vocal out of him, because he hadn't sung in seven months. But he was a hell of a trouper—did a great job," Eddie allows. "Dave's great at what he does. But I just want to move on. Going back to Dave would be going *back*."

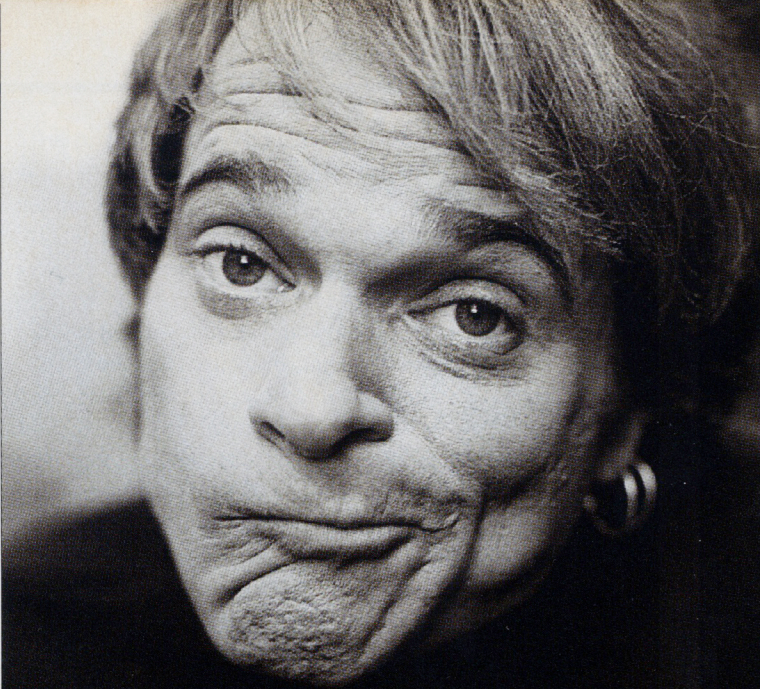
"**DAVE KIND OF** time-warped," says Anthony.

Gigolos, it would seem, are no-nos in the new age of Van Halen. Alex suggests there was some struggle in coaxing Roth to write lyrics involving something deeper than Dave's trademark bodaciousness. "The songs that were written in the '80s, with all the sexual innuendo and the double entendres, that's...irrelevant," says the senior Van Halen brother.

But everyone agreed Roth ultimately rose to the occasion with these two tracks, at least. Then came the fateful standing ovation that, ironically, ruined any remaining goodwill.

When the foursome emerged at Radio City Music Hall to present Jeff Beck an MTV award, the crowd went ape. Apparently, so did Dave. "He became drunk with adulation," says Alex. "It was like, *Dave? Hello? Hello? Where are you?*"

Some viewers found Roth's hip-wiggling, mike-hogging attempt at stealing the spotlight from Beck (and TelePrompTer time from his band mates) comical. Not so his would-be partners. "I had no idea he was gonna react like that," Eddie moans. "I was embarrassed, especially when I watched it [on tape]. I felt like a prick, because he wouldn't let Mike say his



outta love again?

'EDDIE DID IT,' ROTH CHARGED IN HIS ANGRY OPEN LETTER TO THE PRESS

lines, and I had to physically move him.... You know, people are wired different. We're definitely not from the same planet."

It got worse. "The old Dave reared its ugly head backstage," Eddie continues. "On a personal level, I found out he hadn't changed." In the TV press-conference tent, when a reporter inquired about future plans, Eddie mentioned that the hip-replacement operation he had scheduled for Dec. 16 was the only definite item on the agenda.

"A hip replacement is no big deal in terms of how people think of you," says Alex, but after the band left the podium, "f---in' Dave just went ballistic. He tells Ed, 'Hey, man, don't you f---in' be talkin' about that s---.' I thought,

VAN HALEN BEST OF

BRINGING BACK THE OLD 'MAGIC'

THE GUITARS SQUEAL AND SQUIGGLE, the drums flail, and the singer brays waggishly about champagne and supermodels—theoretically, at least, the original Van Halen are back on the two reunion tracks that wrap up **VAN HALEN: BEST OF, VOLUME 1** (in stores Oct. 22). Acting as if they don't want to be remembered for ebullient pop like "Dance the Night Away" or the grin Eddie Van Halen flashed in their old videos, the band riffs and glowers like grizzled bluesmen; David Lee Roth's voice is so guttural that his jaw sounds as if it were scraping against the studio floor. >> The songs—the herky-jerky bump-and-grind "Me Wise Magic" and the meatier walking-blues strut "Can't Get This Stuff No More"—are incidental, the Eddie solos overly familiar. (Imagine "Hot for Teacher" with 50 extra pounds and a girdle.) But producer Glen Ballard sprays the tracks with a fresh coat of rust remover, making for at least one magic moment per song: Roth's distorted voice intertwining with Eddie's guitar in "Me Wise Magic," and the surging chorus and harmonies in "Stuff." >> Even as this edition of Van Halen gets it up one last time, what's missing in action is their *joie de rock vivre*. Coming after 15 vintage odes to whammy bars and women (minus hits like "Hot for Teacher" and "Finish What Ya Started") divided between the Roth and Hagar years, the new songs feel like a requiem for an era that doesn't exist anymore. ("That's the thing about self-improvement/Don't get me wrong, I plan to get some soon," cracks Roth in "Stuff.") And in light of their botched reunion, Roth's references in both songs to "truth" and "lies" feel ironic, almost sad. The one-shot Van Halen revival brings something new to the party, but it's the last thing anyone would have expected: poignancy. "Me Wise Magic": B- "Can't Get This Stuff No More": B+ —David Browne

ROTH: MARK WEISS/ANGLES; HAGAR: RALPH FITZGERALD/IGI; CHERONE: COLIN MASON/LONDON FEATURES

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait—who's in the band and who isn't? And who's gonna talk about who's gonna say what to who? What eventually happened was, we all got a sense of humor about it, because what I really wanted to do was grab him by the f--in' throat and go 'Hey, wake up, motherf--er.'

That was the last straw?

"Yeah," Eddie says. "If he would've just walked up and said, 'Please don't mention that, let's just focus on this....' But for him to say 'Tonight's about *me*, not your f--ing hip,' and then me saying 'Okay, I won't mention my hip,' and then him sticking his finger in my face and saying 'You f--ing better not'—uh, yeah, that *was* the last straw. Not a last straw of considering him as permanent replacement, because he never was. That was the last straw of any possibility of doing anything with him in the future. I'm talking 3, 5, 10, however many years down the road."

Two days after the MTV Awards, Roth and Van Halen spoke on the telephone—the last direct communication they've had, according to Eddie.

"Mutual respect is all I ask," Van Halen says. "I guess he didn't realize that I'm not the same easy-to-manipulate, controllable kid that I used to be. On the phone, Dave kept using the word *closure*—that was his term for a tour. I told him: 'Uh-uh. I can't do it anymore, Dave. I'm sober; you're not. I just can't go back there.... On a personal level we have closure, because you basically spit in my face at the MTV Awards. And professionally we have closure if you're up for doing the videos that Warner Bros. wants.' And that was it."

Even after that, Roth appeared upbeat and hopeful when he made a typically freewheeling guest shot on Howard Stern's radio show on Sept. 17—though, when asked about Van Halen's plans, he admitted he didn't know much more than what everyone else had read in the papers.

Eddie swears he couldn't have been more clear from the beginning: "The two songs are all we ever intended to do. Actually, it started off with just one, and we said, 'Hey, you wanna do another?' But *never* did we discuss touring with him, or him being back in the band."

By telephone on Sept. 26, an ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY editor informed Roth's publicist—while his client waited on another line—that Van Halen's representatives had indicated the band did not wish to be photographed with Roth for this story. That added insult to the injury done by a New York *Daily News* item that same day, which stated that Cherone had a lock on the VH singer slot. This sequence of events led to the Oct. 2 release of Roth's "Open Letter" to the press.

In his statement, Roth makes many assertions—some corroborating Eddie's claims about the nature of the gig, others painting the guitarist as a mercenary liar. Most damning, Roth writes that he'd just learned the band "had already hired another lead singer, possibly as long as three months ago. I wonder how he felt the night of the MTV Awards. It certainly explains why on that night Edward looked as uncomfortable as a man who just signed a deal with the devil."

This charge leaves Eddie Van Halen flabbergasted nearly to the point of hyperventilation. "That's insane. If we'd hired

somebody three months ago, we would've got *that* person to sing on the best-of! Why would we get Dave?" Though he acknowledges he probably talked to Cherone on the phone in August, while other singers were being auditioned, he never even met the ex-Extremist until after the MTV fiasco.

Despite the falling-out with Dave, the band still wanted to make a "Me Wise Magic" video. Roth, after hedging, finally declined, despite pleading calls from the top brass at Warner Bros. John Beug, a Warner senior VP, believes Roth wouldn't have made a video under any scenario at that point: "He was pretty angry, and in the mode of 'I'm gonna take my football and go home'—which was unfortunate."

But another source close to the situation says Roth might have been game had he not specifically objected to a section of the video treatment that read: "Lots of great composition of Eddie, Michael, and Alex grooving together. I'd like to try band performance with David projected onto the box on the pole. It's as if he's some strange electronic apparition singing with the band." This, to Roth, was proof positive of his creeping marginalization. Diamond Dave may have done Vegas already, but he wasn't about to go out as a ghost.



WAS HE? Roth has been shockingly quiet in the past week. He is said to be preparing his autobiography and is expected to spill all to Stern before long. Hagar, the other former VH figurehead, re-

mains ensconced in San Francisco with his family and has begun working with musicians as disparate as Bootsy Collins and the Dead's Mickey Hart in preparation for the renewed solo career he either (a) demanded or (b) was banished to.

The new Van Halen, meanwhile, march toward the new millennium with more to prove than ever. There'll be no lollygagging along the way; Cherone and the threesome have demoed seven songs in just three weeks of initial exploratory work, with expectations for an album in March or April.

Spoiled by two decades of swagger, the wimp police remain particularly suspicious of Cherone, thanks in large measure to Extreme's biggest American hit, 1991's misty ballad "More Than Words." But, insists Ballard of Van Halen's freshly minted tracks with Cherone, "It's not mellow stuff, believe me, man. Lyrically it is deeper, and maybe a little more reflective, but it's still very much full-tilt boogie."

Eddie Van Halen says his new charge has "f--ing elephant balls from hell, or heaven" and describes the new tunes as "heavier than anything we've ever done *and* deeper on an emotional level; the kind of stuff that gives you goose bumps."

And like the guy or not, Netizens, you'd better not wish for Cherone to shuffle off soon—not, that is, if you value the world's most revered rock guitar player doing what he's supposed to. "If Gary's in, he's in for life—that's it," Eddie says. "And if anything ever does happen, then I'll score movies or whatever, but that would be the end of Van Halen." He *swears* it. "I'll take up tuba." ♦