

A Reader's Guide to: Best Band in the Land

"Best Band in the Land" by Bill Tuomala – published in *Exiled on Main Street #27*. Footnotes by Paula Belmont.

prologue

You may not be familiar with them because they were a band that couldn't catch a break. They never sold many albums and they never played anything bigger than a small theater, but damn do they sound better and better over time. They came out in the late seventies with this sound that was catchy and smart and playful; problem was that was the era when the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and the Clash were dominating the charts. It was tough for any metal band to get airplay, as punk had dominated hard rock charts all decade long¹. If you were lucky and knew someone in the know or if you hung out in the right record store, you might have gotten turned on to some metal during the seventies. Like there was underground favorites Led Zeppelin, a band that threw so many varied sounds into their mix – funk, folk, blues, reggae – that they were bound to be a bust commercially; they also had this song, "Communication Breakdown," from which the Sex Pistols acquired their sound². And there was Aerosmith, who combined James Brown with the Yardbirds. And of course there was Black Sabbath, who were creators of a gloom-n-doom lude-rock that was as brilliant as it was bleak. But punk had been The Thing since the Stooges' *Fun House* and the MC5's *Back in the USA* albums had taken huge top-selling steps towards molding the hard rock landscape back in 1970³. Or as Jon Landau said: "I've produced the future of rock 'n' roll and its name is the MC5⁴."

In the early seventies, this dude named Lenny Kaye released an album of near-forgotten garage-rock singles from the sixties that was called *Nuggets*. Aspiring garage bands nationwide lapped this up, what with all the proto-metal tunes like "Dirty Water," "Psychotic Reaction," and "Pushin' Too Hard" on it⁵. Soon every town had some weirdo band playing amplified blues riffs and singing horny songs about chicks, pills, and booze. Everyone who saw a metal band and loved it went on to form their own band. A grass roots movement was born, though for most of America through the seventies, metal was this heard-of-but-not-really-heard-much thing⁶.

¹ This inverts the seventies hard rock scene – heavy metal was the music of the (mostly working-class male) masses, while punk was underground.

² Led Zeppelin was perhaps the biggest band of the seventies. Oddly enough – the Sex Pistols' chords *did* sound like "Communication Breakdown," but the Pistols played them slower.

³ These albums – both sophomore efforts by Detroit bands – were commercial busts. The Stooges and the MC5 are considered "punk," but could also be considered metal to the unbiased ear. This may be Tuomala's attempt at saying that the genres ultimately aren't that different.

⁴ Jon Landau produced the MC5's *Back in the USA* album. He was also a rock critic and actually said: "I've seen the future of rock 'n' roll and its name is Bruce Springsteen," after seeing a Springsteen show in the early seventies.

⁵ The *Nuggets* album is real and is pointed to as an inspiration for the seventies punk bands. Again, this seems to be pointing to the Ishmael/Isaac relationship of metal and punk.

⁶ See footnote #1.

1978-1979

“Rock critics love Van Halen and hate me because rock critics look like me but want to party with David Lee Roth.”

– Elvis Costello, 1979⁷

Punk ruled the charts and when Van Halen (Eddie Van Halen on guitar, Alex Van Halen on drums, Michael Anthony on bass, David Lee Roth on vocals) debuted in 1978, the mainstream ignored ‘em. Van Halen flirted with the punk sound, their first album had a doozy of a song called “Atomic Punk⁸” and their second album had this song called “DOA,” which sounded uncannily like the Stooges. Unlike many other metal bands, Van Halen’s songs were three-point-five minutes long; filled with humor and hooks. But their blues base, aggressive sound, and haircuts got their albums filed in the metal section at the record store. If you were seen with their albums or teeshirts, you’d probably get picked on and called names. In the late seventies to be sporting long hair was an invitation to disaster at school. The prevailing fashion was spiked hair, ripped tee-shirts, and black leather jackets. The popular kids would form gangs where they pretended they had the same last name, and they’d make fun of metalheads, calling ‘em names like “stoner” or “burnout.” Plus they insulted the music, calling it crap and noise and laughing at the nowhere status of metal bands. Much of the same behavior was repeated by mainstream rock bands when the grassroots metal scene momentarily bubbled to the surface in the late seventies⁹.

Van Halen’s first two albums stiffed on the charts and their best hope for a hit song, “Dance The Night Away,” also bombed. America’s kids just wanted the fast chords and throaty vocals of punk; not the everything-but-the-kitchen-sink eclecticism of Van Halen. It was too messy – youngsters didn’t want to deal with all the blues, vaudeville, and covers of Linda Ronstadt hits that they were serving up. The kids dug the Ramones because they were easier to dig; their jokes were simpler, as was their music – you knew what you were getting each and every time. Van Halen was the cool name to drop in certain circles and they got glowing reviews in the rock press, but their sales were lousy.

1980

“The Seventies are over.”

– Lester Bangs, writing in 1980 on how *Women and Children First*’s “Romeo Delight” and “Take Your Whiskey Home” were insightful indications of a society that had increasingly learned how not to love¹⁰.

⁷ David Lee Roth had actually said that rock critics hate Van Halen and love Costello because rock critics look like Costello.

⁸ This is true. Tuomala doesn’t appear to change any song titles, album titles, or sounds of Van Halen’s music throughout this essay/fantasy.

⁹ See footnote #1.

¹⁰ Bangs did write about alienation during this era, but not in a VH context. Greil Marcus had used the phrase “The Sixties are over” when commenting upon Sly & the Family Stone’s *There’s A Riot Goin’ On* album.

1980's *Women and Children First* showed the strain of commercial failure. It was a bummer from the start, signified by the distorted electric piano that begins "And the Cradle Will Rock..." There were no attempts at even trying to win over the public, mostly the album was a dark exploration of eventual dead-ends. Some of the songs went over the four minute barrier, and most of those tended to not have much form – the band created magnificent noise while Roth improvised over it. It was a noisy, arty album that dared you to like it. As Dave Marsh wrote: "...finally: white rock's answer album to *There's A Riot Goin' On*¹¹."

1981

It was followed up the next year by the even darker *Fair Warning*. The fall of 1980 had brought the re-election of Jimmy Carter. The previous April, the president had freed the hostages in Iran with a military rescue¹². It pumped him up in the polls and he easily beat Republican candidate Ronald Reagan in November's election. Being a Democratic president, he continued to make promises out of the left side of his mouth while barking orders out of the right side. Carter started his second term by paying lip service to social causes while increasing military spending and escalating the Cold War by funding covert operations in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. America was standing tall – yet it was a weird, uncomfortable time if you were paying attention.

With this as a backdrop, into the studio stepped Van Halen. They'd alienated their record company, they'd abandoned their good times sound, and they had something to say. Say it they did. You could tell by the first two tracks that something unique was under way. The album kicks off with "Mean Street," a moody funk-metal look through urban decay. It was followed by "Dirty Movies," where your Prom Queen turns to porn. The sound of the music tended to be liquid bass, spacey drums and Eddie hammering out squawking riffs and powerchords like a possessed Pete Townshend. The lyrics were about Relationships On The Rocks or America In Decline. In a country where the haves were rapidly separating themselves from the have-nots, Van Halen looked at it all from the street.

"Hear About It Later" caught the desperation of the average joe perfectly. It starts with a thoughtful instrumental intro, then Roth sings:

*Ain't got no money
got no house on the hill
tell me honey
will your lovin' pay my bills?*

later, the chorus:

¹¹ Tuomala appears to be trying to link this to the Bangs comment in some sort of way-inside rockcrit joke.

¹² The military-rescue scenario is "borrowed" from Steve Erickson's *American Nomad*. Erickson, in turn, was influenced by Philip K. Dick's novel *The Man in the High Castle*. Tuomala is also known to have watched a lot of classic *Star Trek*, where alternate universes and timelines abounded.

*See I've been tried and convicted
it's winner take all
I wanna run for my money
that's all
I don't wanna hear about it later*

In "Unchained," Roth stops to yell: *Hey man – that suit is you!* Seemingly, he's knocking a Mr. Jones-like square, the yuppiefied type that took over America in the coming years. Or maybe it was a shot at the tie-wearing new wave bands who personified the distanced irony that contrasted Van Halen's go-for-broke passion. Even the optimism of the catchy "So This Is Love?" came with a question mark tacked on. The album ends with Roth scrambling to get out of a jealous husband's bedroom, the band was a half-step ahead of him.

Fair Warning was the album where Van Halen, appearing to have given up hopes of stardom, settled for mere greatness. The critical response was overwhelming. Greil Marcus wrote that *Fair Warning* was "where Van Halen stared down these bleak eighties and barely won. Brutally vicious hard rock mixed with funk and fervor¹³." Legend has it that the Clash themselves (who had made a ploy for metal credibility by having Blue Oyster Cult producer Sandy Pearlman produce their second album¹⁴,) stepped down from their multiplatinum thrones, took one listen to *Fair Warning*, and scrapped the work that had been done to date on their next album. Mick Jones himself confessed: "We knew we had to turn it up a couple of notches¹⁵."

1982

After *Fair Warning*, retreat seemed inevitable. Van Halen became scared of their own shadows. A "fun" record followed, and while *Diver Down* was fun and had some nifty covers, the tapping of Motown and especially the Kinks seemed like a desperate reach towards a mythical, better past.

1984

"Our albums are all thirty minutes long, we play half of our shows drunk off our asses and everyone says we take our fans for granted. Van Halen's albums are all thirty minutes long, they play half their shows drunk off their asses and they get hailed as some sort of charming throwback to the very essence of real rock 'n' roll."

– Paul Westerberg, 1984, while trying to disavow the similarities between the Replacements' "Take Me to the Hospital" and Van Halen's "Somebody Get Me a Doctor."¹⁶

Van Halen's 1984 album contained one last gamble for stardom. But "Jump," a Who-influenced synth-pop gem went nowhere on the charts, though it did find its way into dance clubs across the country. It was a giant hit in another universe, I guarantee you¹⁷.

¹³ Tuomala looks to be trying to write in Marcus's style. See footnote #11.

¹⁴ Pearlman did produce the album, though punk purists decried his influence.

¹⁵ "The only people who put iced tea in Jack Daniel's bottles is the Clash, baby!" – David Lee Roth at the US Festival, 1983. Roth and VH tended to poke fun at punk rockers.

¹⁶ Another inverse – the Replacements were loved for some of the same reasons that VH was despised.

¹⁷ Tuomala's winking to anyone who has made it this far. "Jump" was a dance hit and also a Top 40 smash, spending five weeks at Number One.

The rest of the album swings mightily, with the rhythm section throwing out a dry-hump groove that Eddie plays over. This is Eddie's album through and through – half the songs seem to exist solely for him to shimmer and shake over, tossing out powerchords, fills, and sheer melodic virtuosity. There was a certain type of genius at work here that blew the likes of Eric Clapton away; the songs avoided jam-dom completely and Eddie's playing never ever sacrificed any rhythm, making it all that much stronger – a style unparalleled by most guitar gods.

1984 was the same year that Vice President Walter Mondale was running for president against John Anderson¹⁸. The Republicans presented Anderson as a moderate alternative to the likes of Ronald Reagan, whose right-wing, trigger-happy, Goldwater-redux image scared most Americans. Anderson starting co-opting traditional Democratic issues like being nice to poor people and minorities. Mondale, because he was a boring putz who made even Anderson look charismatic, was struggling in the polls and was looking for an issue. He had learned red-baiting from a master, Hubert Humphrey¹⁹. A big part of red-baiting is lying and distorting the truth about the person(s) you want to crush or maybe just merely scapegoat. The version of red-baiting that Mondale came up with was nastiness in rock 'n' roll lyrics. He didn't accuse Van Halen and other bands of being communists, he just took their jauntier sex-and-booze lyrics and ran with 'em. Soon, Democratic senators and their wives starting howling about "dirty" lyrics, with the wives forming an anti-free-expression association that managed to snag Congressional hearings²⁰. One of their fave targets was "Hot for Teacher" by Van Halen, which they claimed glorified pedophilia. (It's always been okay for grown men to sing about teenage girls, but once a song is written about an adult female and a teen boy – look out.) Van Halen was targeted by censors and the pressure on stores to not sell their albums was immense.

Mondale had his issue and forced Anderson to stick up for artistic expression and he paid in the polls. The Washington Wives proceeded to badmouth Van Halen so much that eventually David Lee Roth's apartment was invaded by the police. Roth had been the photo subject of a bondage poster that was included in the *Women and Children First* album²¹, and he was jailed on obscenity charges. The band broke up soon after, in part due to the legal hassles that accompanied their harassment.

epilogue

Eddie Van Halen went on to work with soundtracks²². Alex Van Halen and Michael Anthony went to work for producer Lee "Scratch" Perry²³. A couple of years later, David Lee Roth (free at last) released a version of his first solo album, *Eat 'Em and Smile*, that had the vocals in Spanish. It sold tons in the Hispanic communities of the American

¹⁸ Anderson had run as a third-party candidate in 1980.

¹⁹ Lost in the mists of history is the fact that Humphrey was a red-baiter who drove the socialist elements out of Minnesota's Democratic-DFL party in the 1940's.

²⁰ The hearings actually came a year later in 1985. Neither Van Halen nor their music was a major target. Democratic senators and their wives were the main anti-free-expression advocates.

²¹ A reference to Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys. Tipper Gore's PMRC's onslaughts against the Dead Kennedys and a poster that was included in one of their albums lead to police harassment of the DK's.

²² Eddie did some of the music for the minor teen flick *The Wild Life*.

²³ Another Clash joke – reggae/dub legend Perry had produced the Clash's awesome "Complete Control" single in 1977.

Southwest, where metal has a huge following. For his effort in multi-culturalism, he was honored by the NAACP. At the banquet, he dedicated the award to Def Leppard's Joe Elliot²⁴.

A shadow of early fun-lovin' Van Halen lived on in the mid-eighties glam-metal trend that passed through on tiny indie labels such as SST and Twin/Tone²⁵. Bands like Poison, Ratt, and Cinderella upped the flash quotient of Van Halen by slapping on mascara and squeezing into spandex pants. Though they had their moments, they lacked the diversity, humor, or verve of Van Halen.

Metal remained underground (though through the eighties it was sampled or accessed by four out of five rappers worth their salt²⁶) until Nirvana broke big in 1991 (i.e. "The Year Metal Broke.") One listen to the first three songs on *Nevermind* and you knew those guys had done their headbanging homework. In a classy move during their *MTV Unplugged* gig, they brought out Eddie and Dave to run through "Take Your Whiskey Home" and "Could This Be Magic?"²⁷

Last year, Van Halen played a comeback show here in town at First Avenue. With "Feel Your Love Tonight" being the theme song of *That Seventies Show*²⁸ and indie rock bands everywhere namechecking Van Halen, they now have quite the (still not huge, but dedicated) following. Their eyes have crow-wings and Diamond Dave can't quite jump like he used to; but the music is timeless. The kids (grown or not) that filled that room were ecstatic. From the opening of "And the Cradle Will Rock..." to the finale of "Panama," it was one great song after another. The glee in the smiles that filled that room almost matched the glee of the smiles on stage. And finally, a band ignored for so long got its due. Finally.

²⁴ Roth did release a Spanish version of his album, though he didn't win any awards. Joe Elliot had disparagingly referred to the "greasy Mexicans" of San Antonio during the *Pyromania* tour.

²⁵ Another inverse – SST and Twin/Tone were known for recording early-eighties punk bands.

²⁶ This hints at the truth – perhaps Tuomala is saying that the rhythms and riffs of metal are more rap-friendly than punk no matter what the universe.

²⁷ Nirvana is considered punk, though they also sound metal. 1991 is considered the year that Nirvana and punk broke through. Nirvana actually brought out two members of SST-legends the Meat Puppets for their *Unplugged* gig.

²⁸ Cult favorites Big Star originally recorded "In the Street" in the early seventies. It's the theme song for *That Seventies Show*. Big Star reformed for a reunion tour and played First Avenue in 1999. The original line-up of Van Halen is currently rumored to be preparing for a reunion tour. The Xcel Center in St. Paul is their best bet for a Twin Cities appearance.