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Bottoms Up

Alex Van Halen's place in the pantheon of rock 'n' roll drummers is legendary. The incredible body of work that he created alongside his brother Eddie is memorialized in Van Halen's historic catalog of genre-defining music. With each new album, the group, which initially also featured bassist Michael Anthony and vocalist David Lee Roth, further developed its unique brand of music. Since Day 1, the foundation of that sound was the bottomless rumble and stratospheric crack of Alex Van Halen's drumming.

Though informed by the heaviest of classic rock's first-generation bands, from the outset Van Halen also had an ear to the future, retaining and even expanding their popularity in the midst of the new wave era, when they unabashedly incorporated keyboard hooks yet never betrayed their hard-rock base. Alex, like Eddie a self-described "tone chaser," was deeply invested in keeping the VH sound contemporary and exploratory, imbuing his drum performances not only with gargantuan beats and blazing fills, but captivating and idiosyncratic tones.

As much as any drummer in the history of rock, Alex Van Halen helped define the signature sound of his band—which is all the more startling given the fact that his guitar-playing brother is among *the* most influential players in the history of the music. Alex's energetic and unpredictable playing style and the unique bark of his sonic attack add an air of excitement to the music, and set the stage for the band's larger-than-life persona. Blending many influences, such as big band swing, blues, early rock 'n' roll, and even African drumming, Alex chooses from a wide palette.

And as his playing evolved from album to album and tour to tour, so did Alex's setup. Usually going for higher-pitched toms and ultra-deep bass drums, he would often experiment with different gear and technology to bring something new to the table. Incorporating Rototoms, timbales, cowbells, tube drums, and electronics, Alex spares no expense when it comes to finding the right equipment to achieve the sounds that are in his head.

The combination of Alex's drumming and Eddie's trailblazing guitar wizardry has always been the symbiotic backbone of Van Halen. The band's lineup certainly experienced upheavals, most dramatically in the vocalist department. In 1985 David Lee Roth was replaced by Sammy Hagar, who fronted the band during several of its most successful albums and tours. Roth made a highly publicized reappearance with the band during the 1996 MTV Music Video Awards, but was soon replaced by Gary Cherone, who himself stepped aside after the *Van Halen III* album and tour to make room for the return of Hagar. Roth was back again in 2006, the same year that Michael Anthony's role was taken over by Eddie's son, Wolfgang.

Perhaps the most significant event in the recent history of the band, however, came in late 2020, with the passing of Eddie Van Halen. The compilation of this book, including *Modern Drummer's* most recent interview with Alex Van Halen, was completed prior to the news of Eddie's passing. Given that the constant throughout all of Van Halen's achievements—and what guaranteed their stature not only on the charts but in popular culture—was the bloodline of the Van Halen brotherhood, this book can be viewed not only as a tribute to one of the greatest rock drummers of all time, but to the glorious music that Alex and Eddie created together.

by Terry Branam and Adam Budofsky



A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

I'll never forget the first time I heard Van Halen's debut album. The band's energy and musicality changed rock music forever. Driving the band with a unique and instantly identifiable sound was Alex Van Halen, who would go on to change ROCK drumming forever!

I saw Alex perform with Van Halen many times through the years, and his playing continued to evolve and inspire. His drumming is incredible, and each of his drumkits was as exciting to look at as they were to hear! Every one of them is a unique work of art that was like no other before or since.

It is an incredible honor to bring to you Alex Van Halen Legends, the only drum book that Alex has ever done and one that we are all very proud to present on behalf of his millions of fans worldwide. *Modern Drummer* celebrates the drumming magic of the incomparable Alex Van Halen.

David Frangioni
CEO/Publisher of Modern Drummer Publications, Inc.

PS: I'd like to personally thank John Douglas, Alex's longtime drum technician and drumkit creator, without whom this book would not be what it is. Thank you, JD!

“Give Me Some Emotion!”

The 2020 Interview

by Ilya Stemkovsky

“This is a life, not a career, not just a job,” says Alex Van Halen, emphatically. “This is what we do. It’s a life.”

From the outside, Van Halen has always “kicked ass.” The tales of girls and booze and drugs and infighting made the headlines, but the sound blasting out of the speakers when that needle dropped was always something very serious. It was a sound made by master craftsmen, each musician inspiring a generation of imitators who would form their own bands. But nothing ever really sounded like Van Halen, before or since.

That life Alex Van Halen references has been a long, often tumultuous roller coaster of a career spanning four decades

filled with musical riches. Not the least of which was the surprising late-era triumph that was 2012’s *A Different Kind of Truth*, the unlikely reunion studio effort with Diamond David Lee Roth back on vocal duty. In it, Roth croons and shrieks, Wolfgang Van Halen pumps the low end, Edward Van Halen does his inimitable thing, and Alex sounds like he’s out to prove that it ain’t over yet. The tours that followed confirmed what die-hards knew all along: that Van Halen was still mighty, and an older but wiser Alex Van Halen was still a force behind those tubs, out to inspire a new generation who might not have been around during the golden days. What a life it’s been.

MD: Is the songwriting process any different today than it’s been over the years?

Alex: Each song had to be a creative experience. That’s how Ed and I approach it. Each song needs to be unique and have its own energy. You put everything into it and see what happens. All the people who think they know how the band operates, maybe even including Dave, weren’t 100-percent there all the time. Ed and I are the only ones there day and night.

When they leave, Ed and I go back in and work on shit. Or Ed, Wolf, and I go back in and work on it. And “working” means sometimes just playing it, or Ed finishing another piece of it. So when we get into the studio to actually record it, and there’s some friction, it’s easy to say, “The brothers are fighting again.” [laughs] Being in a band is no different from any other territorial dispute. Everybody is trying to claim a certain piece of territory. The real solution is to play together, to play as a unit. You’re

much stronger that way. Conflict is good up to a certain point. Conflict causes friction, causes heat, but once it gets to a certain point, that’s not good.

MD: So a little conflict is good for the music, but the outside noise doesn’t really factor.

Alex: All these people are writing books about the band and they know nothing about the inner workings of this band. And Ed and I don’t say anything because we’re not in the business of bullshitting on the internet and books



and all that kind of crap. We just want to play. It's that simple.

MD: Is everyone always free to contribute?

Alex: Ed would come in with the licks and the band would put the music together, and we would make songs out of it. It was a very communal process. If you had a thought or idea, you'd just throw it in and the loudest voice wins. It was not a sterile, clinical approach. It was like a panel, very organic. That was something that was lacking as time went by. We would rehearse, and if we had it at about 80-percent right, that was the prime time to go into the studio. Leave enough room for error, leave enough room for spontaneity, leave enough room for God knows what. Because in those moments, the magic happens. There should be a percentage left undone. Maybe it's a Buddhist or Daoist thing, but never finish anything. In certain countries

asked if he ever went to school. And he said, "Hell no, if I ever went to school, I'd end up being a teacher." And teachers are wonderful and should get a halo for their job. But the point is, whoever teaches you, you're only going to learn what he did. But when Buddy Rich was asked who influenced him, he was very humble and said, "Everyone before me was my teacher." And that's exactly how music is. It's a larger, communal thing, not just isolated little things.

MD: How important was a producer in Van Halen world?

Alex: Part of it was the conflict between the band and Dave. One of the things that made everything work was that we came from opposite ends of the spectrum. Dave was vaudeville and he claimed to be James Brown. Ed and I were coming from Cream, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath. So having that strange chemistry is what made it work, oddly enough. But you do need a mediator.

MD: What do you think made the band excel onstage?

Alex: Van Halen is a live band. After we honed our skills, you learn the connection between the people and the music. Playing live, there should be no dead space. Never turn your back on the audience and never insult them. They are equal to you. That line that separates the audience from the stage, that's not a line. That's just to keep them from puking on your shit. [laughs] You're there to make the audience feel good.

MD: It has to be strange for you to see how different the consumption of recorded music is nowadays.

Alex: Modern technology sucks. There's nothing left in the music business. It's a bunch of ones and zeroes. In the old days, you'd get a dollar a record, and now you'll get fifty cents for 275,000 streams. It's insane. It's wrong. Now the only thing you have is playing live,

"The musical experience is not just

they don't finish a bottle of water; they always leave some behind. Always leave something unfinished.

MD: It sounds like the band still loves things that are unplanned.

Alex: One of the funniest things that Ed and I always laugh about is when he would do some break and it would completely fall apart, and at the end we'd all come together. We would say, "It sounds like you fell down the stairs but you landed on your feet." [laughs] The musical experience is not just the notes, not just the sound. It's the physicality, the spiritual aspect, everything rolled into one. Sometimes when you play, it all falls into place, and other times you say, "Man, what a strange night that was." Unfortunately, there's an undue burden that comes on the drummer to hold it together. When some of the other guys are not with it, you have to somehow stitch it together, if you can. Our dad used to say, "When the drums come in, the song should go to a new level." He never told me what that meant. [laughs]

MD: Maybe you just understood it instinctively.

Alex: It's not a rote repetition of what you learned in class. A classic thing I remember was when Buddy Rich was

Otherwise we would never have gotten anything done.

MD: But how loud was an outside voice? Your music and drumming seem very personal to your own thing.

Alex: It's the same thing with Ed, when he picks up a guitar. You can run it through all kinds of effects, but the essence is in the way you hit or touch the instrument. That's what makes it so personal. Ed can play my drums and he doesn't sound anything like me, and vice versa.

MD: Amazingly, you've never really played outside of Van Halen.

Alex: This is my band. I don't need to go elsewhere. Creatively, this is the place where it happens. This is the band that Ed and I started. Just like my loyalty to Ludwig, that will never change. My loyalty is to this band.

MD: Your Ludwig relationship goes way back.

Alex: In 1979, Tama wanted me to become an endorser and they wanted to give me a lot of money, and I said, "No, I play Ludwig. Thank you, goodbye." I had a relationship with Bill Ludwig III, who was a lovely guy. To me, personal relationships and inner connections are much more important than the other shit. It's the personal relations that last.

which is ironic, because that's how it all started.

MD: Did it matter who was singing? Did you feel your playing change?

Alex: Sammy has a great rhythmic sense and of course that voice. Dave was much more of a poet. Dave is creative. Ninety percent of it is garbage, but that ten percent is f**king worth it, man. What planet did you come from? And we grew up together.

MD: Would either of them suggest things to you?

Alex: If Dave came in with a song, I would respect how they heard it. And then it's the old trick, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." [laughs] And that means, "Okay, I'll listen to you, but then I'm gonna make it mine." And by the end of the process, it will sound nothing like what you hummed me. Dave would ask for me to do some "jungle" [referring to tom-heavy beats]. And I say, "Okay, Dave, you got it, whatever." [laughs] There was the African jungle, the South American jungle....

MD: One imagines that these relationships are why the music is so tight, for better or worse.

Alex: We were in the same bus, up to and including 1984. The same bus! And

that included the sound and light guys. Leonardo da Vinci said, "Large rooms distract the mind; small rooms focus the mind." When you're all tight in close quarters, it focuses your energies, and you learn how to deal with issues and problems. If you're in a large space, you never even have to say hello to the other guys. What's that all about? I'd rather have someone wake up in the morning and say, "Hey, f**k you!" as opposed to not saying anything at all. I'm serious. Give me some emotion! That's what this is about. Music is a celebration of being human. With the drums at the forefront! [laughs]

MD: You played with Michael Anthony for so long. Was there an adjustment to Wolfgang?

Alex: Wolf just happened to be in the studio when Ed and I were playing. He chimed in and I said, "That's a nice groove he's got going. Who is that?" There was a curtain and I couldn't see

but they never made it to a record, so now was the time to do it. And if we didn't all agree, we certainly would not have done it. From a performance standpoint, it's more geared to looking at the totality of the song, instead of, "Look how bitchin' I'm playing this." Ed and I are very aware of what makes a song work or not. After you play a song a thousand times, after a while you don't think anymore. Something else comes out. Ed and I used to go into the studio, and we would play literally for *days*. And something would come up, sometimes good, and sometimes not good.

MD: And the recording process was similar?

Alex: I love Les Paul, but man, he really hurt the recording process by inventing the multitrack. The concept of recording everything with nine hundred microphones in their own little area and putting it all back together as if it was one or two microphones...I've got

meantime—maybe we've gotten worse. It doesn't make a difference to us. We're going to give you the best that we got, right now. And I think the audience senses that. But there were some [older recordings] that I wasn't happy with, but what are you going to do? It's there. [laughs]

MD: Do you have any sagely advice about practicing versus playing live?

Alex: Practicing is a solitary endeavor. You have to do it alone. Nobody's seeing you and it goes unrewarded. But when you're there to share your music with people, you play it. Don't work it, just play. Don't overthink it. The overthinking happens when you're practicing. When you're there at the gig, just play. We've all gone through this. You want to be the best you can be, and the harder you try, the worse you f**k up, and it doesn't happen for you. I've read many interviews, like with Dave Weckl, and they all say the same thing.

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who it was, and it was Wolf. One thing led to another, and we all thought it was a big risk to take, but Wolf stepped up to the plate by being respectful of the parts that Mikey played. He didn't trash them, and it was a very mature choice for him to play the parts as they were on the record, but with a little bit of movement. But the second thing I told him after "Great job" was "Stay the f**k off my drums." [laughs]

MD: Talk about the songs that made up *A Different Kind of Truth*.

Alex: We didn't use entire [older] songs but the D.N.A. of what we felt propels the band. Van Halen is not just a one-dimensional band. It was very insightful of Dave to make a socio-political comment on a song like "China Town," that everything is made in China now. All of this is a tangential conversation about where we live and how we live. Music is not an isolated event. We are the same as the people we play for, and we're just making observations. And some of the songs were redone

news for you, why don't you just record it using two microphones? Drums don't make the sound an inch away from the drumhead. Drums need to uncork and breathe and [mix with] the sound of the room. It's phenomenal how Led Zeppelin did that. They were very aware of that. They were probably one of the few bands that were old-school for the way stuff was recorded. The delay of the room, all those things. It's a lost art. And the sound that you make is as personal as anything else. A vocalist has his sound and an instrumentalist has his.

MD: Do you ever feel tied into beats and fills you wrote decades ago?

Alex: The band looks at it like we're there to serve the audience. And because [the latest tour] was a deep-cut tour, we played songs we hadn't touched in thirty years. And they were kind of fresh. It was nice. And you don't want to completely demolish what you'd done by overplaying or show how good you've gotten in the meantime. Or maybe we haven't gotten good in the

Once you relax into it, it's going to be great. Just play.

MD: Sounds like that has served you well.

Alex: We spent the first thirty years of our lives trying to cloud what reality was, and you have a different interpretation of it. [laughs] But by the time you're thirty, you'd better change your ways or you ain't gonna make it any further. I believe we're very lucky to be able to do this, to make music, and make a living at it, and to share it with people. We're very lucky, so don't f**k it up. That's the message. When our dad passed away, after our long life of touring and making music, and yeah there was alcohol involved, but I looked at him, and unspoken, I said, "I'll try to make it better." So I quit. You do have an obligation and responsibility to [work] without artificial inspiration. We all look for some kind of meaning in life, but Ed and I were lucky that we found it early. So I can't complain.

