Pop Talk: Van Halen is kinda, sorta back

by George_Varga

When is a reunion not a reunion?

Just ask the members of Van Halen.

VAN HALEN IS BACK, KINDA - 'You don't even have to enjoy rock 'n' roll to have your mind roasted by what's going on on this stage,' says singer David Lee Roth, left, with Eddie Van Halen. CNS Photo by Don Kohlbauer. To be more precise, ask the members of the band currently embarked on the highly anticipated Van Halen reunion tour who are not, in fact, Van Halen.

"This is not a reunion. This is a new band," original Van Halen singer David Lee Roth declared at an Aug. 13 press conference in Los Angeles.

But the press conference wasn't held to announce a tour by a "new band." It was to announce the return of Roth and the highly anticipated tour to follow by Van Halen, the trailblazing Los Angeles quartet that redefined and then transcended hard rock and heavy metal in the 1970s and 1980s.

Such a reunion had long seemed unthinkable to many fans. Ditto to the flamboyant Roth and masterful lead guitarist Eddie Van Halen, whose relationship over the years went from musical brothers-in-arms to outright animosity, followed by lengthy estrangement, a blink-and-you-missed-it 1996 reunion, then more animosity.

Both musicians regard this tour as the start of a new chapter. Or as Roth put it: "Meet us in the future, not the pasture."

The presence of Eddie Van Halen's 16-year-old son, Wolfgang, who replaces the recently ousted Michael Anthony on bass, underscores the fresh beginning. But by any name, this new/old band's focus is entirely on its musical past.

"It was Wolf who picked the song list, and we've got close to 25 of (our) greatest hits," Roth said at the press conference ... You know every single song, you know every guitar lick, every drum kick ... We know what your expectations are."

That may be true. And early tour reports indicate that Van Halen is performing with welcome fire and intensity.

"It's better than it's ever been," Eddie Van Halen, an immensely gifted and temperamental perfectionist, said.

But what made this such a great band in its heyday with both Roth and Sammy Hagar is how it exceeded expectations, from the jaw-dropping acoustic guitar showcase on 1979's "Spanish Fly" to the synth-driven pop-rock of 1984's "Jump" and the rockabilly-tinged kick of 1988's "Finish What Ya Started."

Don't expect to hear "Finish" or any other song from Hagar's tenure in Van Halen, however, even though Hagar performed a number of Roth-era songs during his tenure in the band. All of the material on this nostalgia-fueled tour apparently dates back to 1984 or earlier. What remains to be seen is if it leads to anything new from this much beloved band, whose post-Roth history could inspire several TV soap operas.

"We're already planning and plotting," Roth said when asked about a new CD. But no specifics were offered, and he acknowledged at the press conference that the band did not learn any new songs for the tour.

MANY UPHEAVALS

In 1985, Roth either was fired (according to him) or quit (according to Eddie Van Halen).

The leering frontman then launched a solo career that took off fast but soon fizzled. By 2004, Roth's musical prospects were so dim he was training as an emergency medical technician in New York. In 2006, he did a talk-show radio stint as the replacement for Howard Stern, although Roth's radio tenure barely lasted longer than one of Alex Van Halen's charged drum solos.

Van Halen (the band) fared better, at least for a decade.

Roth's replacement, Hagar, lacked Roth's tongue-in-cheek leer and proudly exaggerated showmanship. But Hagar's powerful vocals and solid rhythm guitar and songwriting chops helped the band score some of the biggest hits of its career, including "When It's Love," "Dreams" and "Top of the World."

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His replacement, Extreme singer Gary Cherone, came on board for just one album, 1998's "Van Halen III." It fared so poorly, artistically and commercially, that Cherone - whom Eddie Van Halen said would be the band's "final" singer - was out of the lineup after just one post-album tour.

The band was inactive from 1999 to 2004, when Hagar returned for a halfhearted reunion trek.

The new reunion tour with Roth that isn't really a reunion tour was set to be announced early this year, on the eve of Van Halen's introduction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Instead, Eddie Van Halen entered rehab, the tour was postponed, and only former band members Hagar and Anthony attended the induction.

But that was then and this is now. And the return of Van Halen in any form is a welcome one that has seen the band sell out shows in many cities.

For many veteran fans, and for those too young to have seen the original band with Roth, the tour is a happy surprise. It's also a surprise for Roth himself.

"This is the press conference you probably thought you would never see," the 53-year-old singer said at the start of the August press conference.

A few minutes later, he hugged Eddie Van Halen (who in 1996 declared that Roth suffered from "LSD - Lead Singer Disease"). The guitarist responded by kissing Roth on the cheek and referring to him as "my new brother."

But the love-fest between the two may not endure beyond this revamped band's last scheduled tour date March 30 in St. Louis.

Roth took control of the press conference from the start and rarely let his bandmates get in a word. He cut

Eddie Van Halen off in mid-sentence and answered questions not directed to him. It was precisely the same behavior that got him fired in a flash after Roth reunited with Van Halen at the 1996 MTV Video Music Awards.

But let's give the next-to-last word to Roth.

"I'm shocked that any of us are still vertical after 30 years," he said at the press conference.

Now, let's hold our breaths and see what happens after the tour concludes. When a band is this talented, it would be nice to think it has a bright future to come, not just a great past.

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