

**PART I**

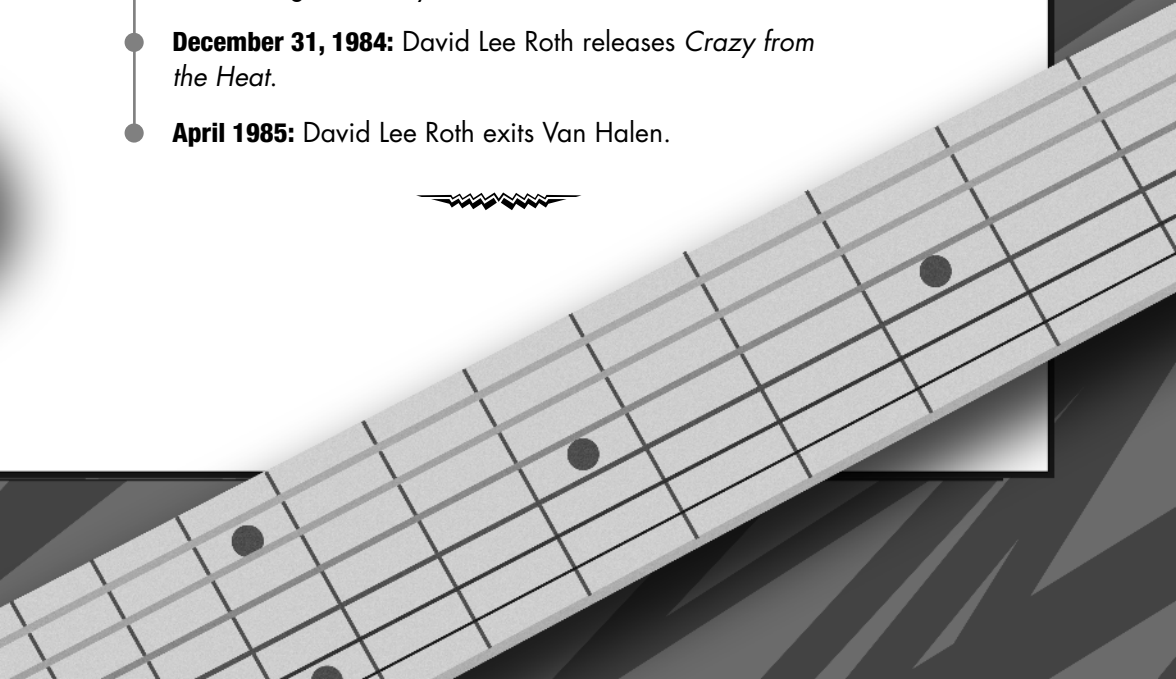
**RUNNIN' WITH  
THE DEVIL**



## THE ROTHZOIC ERA, 1950-1985

- **May 8, 1953:** Alexander Arthur van Halen born in Holland.
  - **October 10, 1953:** David Lee Roth born in Bloomington, Indiana.
  - **June 20, 1954:** Michael Anthony Sobolewski born in Chicago, Illinois.
  - **January 26, 1955:** Edward Lodwijk van Halen born in Holland.
  - **Winter 1962:** Jan van Halen emigrates with his family to California.
  - **1967:** Edward gets \$100 Teisco Del Ray guitar from Sears.
  - **1971:** Alex and Eddie Van Halen form the Trojan Rubber Company.
  - **Autumn 1973:** David Lee Roth joins the Van Halen brothers in Mammoth.
  - **Spring 1974:** Mike Sobolewski joins Van Halen, becomes Michael Anthony.
  - **May 1976:** Gene Simmons "discovers" Van Halen at the Starwood, finances unsuccessful demo tape.
  - **May 1977:** Ted Templeman rediscovers Van Halen, signs band to Warner Bros.
  - **February 10, 1978:** Release of *Van Halen*; leading to tours with Journey, then Black Sabbath.
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- **October 10, 1978:** *Van Halen* goes platinum.
- **March 23, 1979:** Release of *Van Halen II*; first headlining tour runs through October.
- **March 26, 1980:** Release of *Women and Children First*.
- **August 29, 1980:** Eddie Van Halen meets Valerie Bertinelli.
- **April 11, 1981:** Eddie marries Valerie.
- **April 29, 1981:** Release of *Fair Warning*.
- **April 14, 1982:** Release of *Diver Down*.
- **May 29, 1983:** Van Halen paid \$1.5 million to play for four hundred thousand people at US Festival '83.
- **January 4, 1984:** Release of *1984*, featuring band's first number 1 single, "Jump."
- **September 2, 1984:** Final show by classic lineup in Nuremberg, Germany.
- **December 31, 1984:** David Lee Roth releases *Crazy from the Heat*.
- **April 1985:** David Lee Roth exits Van Halen.







# THE IMMIGRANT SONG

**L**ike the stories of other great Americans from Henry Ford to Walt Disney to Fievel the Mouse, the saga of Van Halen begins in an ancient land, far from the United States and its constant supply of hot water and electricity. As a narrator would say in the old movies: Among the windmills, tulips, and wooden shoes of lovely Amsterdam, Holland, there once lived a kindly musician named Jan van Halen.

Born in 1920, van Halen played saxophone and clarinet everywhere, from political events to radio orchestras to circus tents. During World War II, he was reportedly captured while fighting the Nazis, and forced to tour Germany as a prisoner playing propaganda music for the hated Third Reich. When he was released after the war, he traveled to Indonesia, where he met and fell in love with an Indonesian beauty, Eugenia van Beers. She was older, born in 1914, but they married and returned to Amsterdam, to Michelangelostraat, where a baby boy, Alexander Arthur van Halen, was born on May 8, 1953.

Mr. van Halen worked his horns in every venue imaginable, but a musician's life was unsteady and nomadic. Shortly after the birth of second son Edward Lodwijk van Halen, on January 26, 1955, the young

family moved to Rozemarijnstraat in Nijmegen, Holland. The proud father wanted his sons to someday become famous musicians, and he set the bar high for his second son—naming Edward Lodwijk after master composer Ludwig van Beethoven.

The van Halen house was alive with music. Always working on his tone, Jan played along with classical records at home, and the family always listened to his radio broadcasts together. When Jan joined the Dutch air force band, his little boys paraded through the house banging on pans and pot lids while their daddy practiced military marches. “The earliest memories I have about music are from our father,” Alex said. “You couldn’t help but be touched by music—we were surrounded by it.”

Since Jan didn’t have the patience to teach the boys about music, he sent them to lessons to become concert pianists. At six years old, Edward was already studying piano with a strict seventy-two-year-old Russian teacher. He and Alex remained in lessons, practicing Beethoven and Tchaikovsky, for nearly ten years. On one rare occasion when Alex didn’t feel like practicing, he recalled his mother placing his hands on the kitchen table and rapping them sharply with a wooden spoon.

When they were old enough, Alex and Edward joined their father at his gigs. Reaching his finest form, Jan joined the Ton Wijkamp Quintet, which took top prize at Holland’s esteemed Loosdrecht Jazz Festival in 1960. As they traveled all around Holland and sometimes across the border to Germany, the boys saw the practical aspects of a musical career firsthand, and on some of the more rustic and ribald nights they discovered the perks—Alex reported losing his virginity at age nine after one of his dad’s gigs.

Letters from Eugenia’s relatives told of a better life in the United States, and slowly lured the van Halens to try their luck in the land of opportunity. At the end of winter 1962, Jan and Eugenia gathered their two boys and the family’s Dutch-made Rippen piano and set sail on a nine-day Atlantic passage with little more than seventy-five Dutch guilders in their pockets. Jan played with the band aboard the ship to pay for the expedition. Eddie and Alex also showed off their piano

training, passing the hat among passengers for tips. And so the musical urchins arrived in the New World, all seasoned and ready to work.

A familiar part of many immigrant stories, Jan's first fateful move on reaching New York was to Americanize his surname, upgrading the antique "van Halen" to the slick "Van Halen," symbolically starting over as a new man. After the stopover in New York, the newly minted Van Halen clan boarded a four-day train to California, in the corner of the country where the American dream was still available for no money down. They found a small bungalow in Pasadena where they would live together as a family for almost twenty years.

Bushy-headed Alex and little Dutch boy Edward arrived in California with the splinters from wooden clogs still in their feet. Speaking almost no English, they smiled and said yes to anything. The second English word they learned was "accident." Edward remained extremely shy, and his bolder brother, Alex, protected him. The pair bonded tightly—comparing notes every day after school on what they'd learned on the playground. They began to blend in, riding bikes with neighbor kids, climbing into their tree house, and beating the hell out of each other.

Mr. Van Halen continued playing in wedding bands at night but kept several day jobs. He worked as a janitor, and when necessary walked five miles each way to wash dishes at Arcadia Methodist Hospital. He reinforced the boys' enthusiasm for music, smiling as they played along with the radio on cardboard guitars, using empty ice-cream tubs for drums. California was living up to its promise of paradise—if only there were more kids in the family: "I always asked my mom where our bass player was," Eddie said.

Around the holidays, the family played music together, with Eugenia seated at a huge electric organ. Yet Mrs. Van Halen was more traditional, and very concerned with taking care of the family. Though she pushed the boys to practice their music lessons, she hated the idea that they would eventually become musicians. Sometimes she was as much a mother to playful Jan as she was to her sons. "The whole time I was growing up," Eddie told *Guitar World*, "my mom used to call me

a ‘nothing nut—just like your father.’ When you grow up that way, it’s not conducive for self-esteem.”

When they reached the fourth and fifth grades, the Van Halen brothers began imitating acts from *The Ed Sullivan Show* like the Beatles and the Dave Clark Five, whose “Glad All Over” awoke Edward to a new kind of popular music. These were the first bands to break into the pop charts because schoolkids liked them—and Eddie and Alex were schoolkids who could already play music. So at Hamilton Elementary School they formed their first band, the Broken Combs, with Alex on saxophone like his father, Edward on piano, and various schoolmates including Brian Hill on drums, Kevin Hill on an Emenee-brand plastic guitar, and Don Ferris on second sax.

Playing original songs like “Rumpus” and “Boogie Booger” at hot venues like the school lunchroom, Alex and Eddie overcame their awkwardness adapting to American ways. Forget about fitting in—now they were somebody special. “Music was my way of getting around shyness,” Eddie later told *Guitar World*.

There were other ways to steel a timid heart. When Eddie was twelve years old, he was attacked and bitten by a German shepherd while on a family trip a few miles from home. To quell his younger son’s distress and numb the pain, his father prescribed a shot of vodka and a Pall Mall cigarette on the spot—inducting the kid into two lifetime habits.

By junior high school, the Van Halen brothers had both picked up the violin, and Alex was good enough to make the all-city orchestra. But the television tempted them with a wilder kind of music. Eddie remembered sitting on the couch, plucking out the cool detective theme to *Peter Gunn* on his violin strings. Classical music didn’t stand a chance—the boys wanted to play music standing up. Hoping to keep Alex’s musical progress on the level, his parents bought him a nylon-string guitar and sent him to flamenco lessons.

Meanwhile, Eddie started a paper route. “The only honest job I ever had,” he later joked. He bought a \$125 St. George drum set and began studying songs by the Dave Clark Five.



Alex learned slowly on the guitar. He upgraded to a cheap electric and a Silvertone amp but remained frustrated by his progress. So while Eddie was out making collections for his newspapers, Alex slid behind the drums and started banging away, copying licks by Buddy Rich. Soon he mastered the primitive caveman rolls of “Wipe Out” by the Surfaris, a high mark of distinction in any school yard. Feeling somewhat frustrated at the unfair turn of events, Eddie picked up Alex’s guitar to show that turnabout was fair play. When he impressed his older brother by learning “Blues Theme” by the Arrows, the true natural order of things quickly became obvious.

By age twelve, Edward owned a \$100 four-pickup Teisco Del Ray electric guitar from Sears and was tackling instrumentals like “Walk Don’t Run” by the Ventures. His first guitar amp was a chicken-wire model handmade by a friend of his dad’s. Eddie’s early guitar instructor in absentia was Eric Clapton, the heaviest player of the day, as Eddie figured out every riff and solo that Clapton recorded with the Yardbirds and Cream. He tried painfully to mimic the records but later admitted his versions never sounded quite right—his biggest fault was being unable to avoid his own style.

As they surrendered to the growing rock and roll scene, the Van Halens became infatuated with Jimmy Page in the Yardbirds, Jeff Beck from the Jeff Beck Group, and the unpredictable Jimi Hendrix. Surprisingly, considering the comparisons that came later, Eddie was not so into the wilder, free-form playing of Hendrix. “He used a lot of effects, and I couldn’t afford the wah wah pedals and fuzzbox,” he said.

Whenever Eddie broke the rules or neglected his piano, Eugenia Van Halen would lock his guitar in the closet for a week, the ultimate punishment. Friends at school also recalled Eddie getting in trouble for touching the sacred Steinway concert piano, the pride of the music department—but the penalties were light thanks to his aptitude and his impish grin. Remaining in lessons until age sixteen with a new, typically strict Lithuanian teacher named Staf Kalvitis, Eddie took top prize at Long Beach City College’s youth piano competitions for three years running. The first year, he missed accepting the prize onstage.

Sitting in the stands when they called his name, he froze, pretending not to hear the announcement. He didn't know how to accept an accolade.

Though his fingers were dazzling, Eddie could never read sheet music as well as he should have. Alex was an excellent sight reader, but Eddie's performances were painstakingly crammed into his brain note by note, phrase by phrase, in advance. The judges at piano contests praised his unusual interpretations, but as far as he could tell he was playing it straight. "The only reason they ever wrote music down is because they didn't have tape machines," Eddie later complained. "Do you think Beethoven or Bach would ever have written things down if they had twenty-four-track tape machines?"

Since the Van Halen home was too small to host band practice, the brothers keyed into jamming with local kids whose houses had garages. They formed a band called Revolver, and progressed from the Ventures to heavier covers by Cream and Mountain—power trios centered around guitar and drums. "I approached the drums not as an instrument, *per se*," Alex remembered, "but more as an attitude—viciously attacking something" with the biggest, heaviest drumsticks available.

At thirteen, Alex began subbing for the drummer in his dad's wedding band, keeping time to jazz and salsa tunes driven by clarinet and accordion. Eddie frequently joined on bass, playing the oompah music lines. "One of Al and my first gigs together was with my dad at the La Merada Country Club," Eddie recalled. "We'd be the little freak sideshow while the band took a break. I would play piano or guitar and Al would play drums."

The first night on the floor, the boys passed a hat around to the dancing couples and collected twenty-two dollars. Their father gave each of them five dollars, and said: "Welcome to the music business, boys."



David Lee Roth was born on October 10, 1953, in Bloomington, Indiana, where his achievement-oriented father, Nathan, went to medical school. After the senior Roth graduated, he moved his family several

times, first to a small ranch in Newcastle, Indiana, where Dr. Roth became the caretaker of a menagerie of horses and swans. Next the parents took David and his two sisters, Allison and Lisa, to the East Coast, settling on East Alton Court in Brookline, Massachusetts, outside Boston.

David was an energetic kid, but he was plagued by allergies and fought with health problems that forced him to wear leg braces from almost the time he could walk until age four. Then he was shipped off to therapy for the better part of a decade. At nine years old, he began three intensive years of clinical treatment for hyperactivity. He had a few healthy outlets—Roth’s parents called his dinner-hour routines “Monkey Hour,” when he acted out cartoons and sang revved-up vaudeville songs for dinner guests.

Though his mother, Sibyl, taught high school music and language classes, Roth claimed his parents were nowhere near as tuneful as the Van Halen family. “I had no musical influences to speak of,” he told MTV. “My idols were always Genghis Khan, or Muhammad Ali, or Alexander the Great, or the guy who invented McDonald’s hamburgers.”

By his telling, he wasn’t suffering from lack of concentration. Everyone else was simply having trouble playing their part in his continuous mental picture show, a fast, animated flipbook of *Mad* magazine and *Playboy*. Dave was obsessed with Bugs Bunny, Tarzan, and blackface song-and-dance man Al Jolson, whose songs he played on old brittle clay 78s. Later, he loved Elvis Presley—but not the music, just the movies.

While Roth’s head was swimming in pop culture, his roots were knotted tightly around the Old World—his grandparents were Ukrainian Jews who traded the mountains and steppes of Eastern Europe for the sweltering cornfields of the Midwest. In fact, all four of his grandparents spoke Russian. “My great-granddaddy died dancing,” he later joked with a TV interviewer, “at the end of a rope.”

When Roth was seven, his movie-buff dad took him to see *Some Like It Hot*, the classic Billy Wilder film where Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon dress in drag to get close to Marilyn Monroe. “Life turned into

an ongoing quest to be in that movie, just somewhere in that movie,” Roth told *Rolling Stone*. On the way home that night, while his eyes were still boggled, his dad detailed the plot to *Robin Hood*—the movie Mrs. Roth thought he was taking their son to see.

The rambunctious David found a kindred spirit in his uncle Manny Roth, a bohemian hepcat whose small Café Wha? on MacDougal Street was a nexus of New York’s Greenwich Village beatnik scene in the early 1960s. Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Bruce Springsteen, Bill Cosby, and Richard Pryor all tempered their antiestablishment acts there before a highly engaged cosmopolitan audience. “New York certainly reflects the dinner table I grew up with,” Roth later told an interviewer. “Obviously it encouraged me.”

Summer trips to New York impressed on young David Roth that, guidance counselors and behavior therapists be damned, there was a big wide world that craved and coveted extravagant personalities. Uncle Manny bought him a radio for his eighth birthday, hoping to feed the kid some inspiration. “I put it on, and there was Ray Charles singing ‘Crying Time,’” David said, “and I just knew I had to be on the radio.”

The Roths left the East Coast for California in 1963, when Dave was ten, just in time to fall under the spell of the Beach Boys in their prime—America’s only real defense against the Beatles. From his new home in Altadena, young Dave shuffled off with his tousled hair and tennis shoes to fourth grade at the Altadena School. Meanwhile, Dr. Roth’s ophthalmology practice thrived—he became a successful eye doctor, and was also active in local theater productions. Throughout junior high, Roth remembered a poster hanging over his bed given to him by his father, picturing two chickens meeting a turkey above the caption “To thine own self be true.”

After three years as a Tenderfoot Scout, Roth left behind his boyhood like the Van Halen brothers abandoning their tree house when he discovered his life’s future work. He once reported losing his virginity on a beach in Tahiti at age thirteen, under a full moon and over a girl who didn’t speak English. “She kept saying she liked me, she liked me.

I know she meant she *loved* me—but ever since I’ve had a complex.” Tahiti came to be Roth’s catchall perfect setting for stories that may have only taken place in paradise. In his memoir, *Crazy from the Heat*, he reported another crucial moment in his early sex life—getting a blow job behind the bushes in the suburbs while looking through someone’s living room window and seeing Johnny Carson on the TV.

As Dr. Roth’s career bloomed, the family moved to the affluent section of Pasadena. When integrated busing arrived, Dave became a societal guinea pig, sent to predominantly black schools from sixth grade onward. He boasted of his ingrained blackness later, but at the time being a fair-haired white hippie meant lots of fights. He put gobs of Brylcreem in his hair, he liked to do headstands, and school became an all-day talent show. Teachers didn’t know what was wrong with him.

Despite his effusive personality, Dave was something of a loner, an overly intelligent rich kid with delusions of grandeur. He felt persecuted, and yet above it all. He had vulgar candy-sprinkled ideas of sexuality, a by-product of learning about the world through the twisted twin lenses of *Mad* and *Playboy*. Despite his father’s money, he was always a worker: at the end of his junior year at John Muir High School, Roth bought himself a stereo with the dollars he earned shoveling dung alongside Mexican gang members at a stable.

A bench-clearing brawl during a gym-class football game led to a brief stint at boarding school. More rules only brought more resistance, so after one semester in uniform David rejoined the teen scene at public school, his wild streak intact. “I never went to class, but I went to school,” he said. “I used to sit under a tree in the parking lot playing guitar.” He attracted girls and cultivated a rep for his unusual old-time repertoire and generally gleeful demeanor. While fighting a constant cultural war at home with his attentive parents, he carefully pushed his public image to the brink—his short-lived trademark was a bleached skunklike strip down the center of his hair.



A native midwesterner like Roth, Michael Anthony Sobolewski was born on June 20, 1954, at St. Joseph's Hospital in Chicago. His family lived in a working-class section of what was then the breadbasket of blue-collar America. Michael was the second of five children, and the oldest boy. His dad, Walter, played in polka combos, gigging often at the Aragon Ballroom with musical prankster Kay Kyser, the popular band-leader who wrote "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition." Walter encouraged Michael to play the trumpet too.

The Sobolewski family heeded the same clarion call that lured the Van Halens and the Roths westward, first testing the waters during a short move in 1963. In 1966, they left Chicago for good, settling in Arcadia, California, a town five miles east of Pasadena, where Jan Van Halen worked as a hospital dishwasher. Walt Sobolewski continued playing at dances, performing standards for other midwestern transplants and old-timers.

Michael became a long jumper at Dana Junior High. He played trumpet in the marching band, and stayed active in sports, going out for baseball. After his older sister, Nancy, brought home psychedelic acid-rock bands like Electric Flag, Cream, and Blue Cheer, Michael's attention wandered to the loud, animal side of music. He learned the walking bass line to Electric Flag's "Groovin' Is Easy" and admired the band's bassist, Harvey Brooks. Straying from the conformity of the high school band, he idolized bassist Dickie Peterson of Blue Cheer—an iconoclastic hippie whose tough attitude was basically one giant middle finger to the world.

At fifteen, with younger brother Steve on drums and friend Mike Hershey on guitar, Mike formed Poverty's Children, later known as Balls. His bass was a cheap Japanese Teisco guitar belonging to Hershey—they removed the two highest strings to create a "bass" guitar. Though he played catcher on local baseball teams as a left-hander, he considered himself ambidextrous—in fact, he started playing bass as a lefty, and switched sides because a right-handed instrument was easier to find.

Since Michael wasn't sure how to tune a bass, he tuned the four

strings to an open E chord for the first year. He soon acquired a Fender P-bass copy at a local flea market. Like Alex Van Halen, Michael also played with his father's band, a polka combo, tooting a trumpet for pocket money up until college.



By their midteens, Alex and Eddie were regularly performing live sets of covers by Black Sabbath and ZZ Top, while joining their dad for his regular gig at the North Continental Club in North Hollywood, acting as designated drivers when needed. They were several inches, many dollars, and quite a few decibels short of where they wanted to be, but they were resourceful and shameless enough to beg or borrow any equipment they needed for their gigs.

In 1971, the Van Halen boys formed the Trojan Rubber Company, a power trio with neighbor Dennis Travis on bass. Already the boys were little-league outlaws. They smoked cigarettes like European street kids—their mom, Eugenia, even bought them packs to smoke. They had to call themselves the Space Brothers to get permission to play a Catholic high school—the priests and sisters found cosmic drug references more acceptable than a band named after condoms.

By any billing, the Van Halen brothers became known for their spot-on impersonations of cool hard rock bands like Cream and Cactus. Eddie had been playing through a 100-watt Marshall guitar amp from the time he was fourteen. Competing in a local battle of the bands against kids eight to ten years older, Alex was already stealing shows with a bombastic set piece—Ginger Baker's entire fifteen-minute-plus drum solo from "Toad."

While other kids were dating, experiencing heartbreak, getting into fights, and enduring the endless social humiliation of high school, Eddie sat most of those years out. Sequestered in his bedroom, he entered into a long-term relationship with his guitar. "Everybody goes through their teens getting fucked around by a chick or not fitting in with the jocks at school. I just basically locked my room for four years," he said.

His mind may have been with his guitar, but his skill as a guitarist made him popular. He experienced sex at an early age, and girls were always interested in this sweet, shy boy. In the eleventh grade, his steady girlfriend became pregnant. “It was very confusing,” he told writer David Rensin in *TeenAge*. “We didn’t even have enough money to go to a doctor to see if she was pregnant. And getting out of school to take care of it was a feat in itself. Luckily I had a friend in the school office who gave me blank admit slips.”

The potentially life-changing event was over quickly, before gravity really kicked in for the young couple. “She wanted an abortion,” Eddie said. “We went to Planned Parenthood and talked it over. We were worried about her parents and my parents finding out, about getting busted for cutting school. Eventually her parents did find out, and their reaction surprised me. It was ‘why didn’t you come to us and let us help?’ I thought they’d call us scum.”

Stashing the experience in the back of his mind, Eddie stayed focused on his guitar and his band with his brother. Though their schoolmates were already wild about them, at one show they completely changed the life of a kid from a nearby school, Dave Roth. He was a sponge for all forms of culture, high and low, mass and micro, and followed every dance craze from the Twist to the Freddie—yet he was somewhat sheltered. His parents forbade him to go to big rock concerts—until he was nineteen and snuck off to see Humble Pie. So when teenage Roth first saw Eddie Van Halen playing guitar, he saw the light.

“Eddie was kind of a mentor,” Roth later told a TV interviewer. “I saw what he did with his fingers, and I knew that’s what I wanted to do with my feet, and with my voice.” Praise be and hallelujah.