

Renoff, Greg. *Van Halen Rising: How a Southern California Backyard Party Band Saved Heavy Metal*. Toronto: ECW Press, 2015. 272 Pp.

Greg Renoff makes significant contributions to several historical subfields with his second book, *Van Halen Rising*. This well-written and well-researched book focuses on the band's rarely discussed journey during the 1970s from the keg party and dive bar circuits of suburban Los Angeles to the top of the popular music charts. Renoff constructs a narrative that is exciting and accessible, yet also scholarly. He builds it on a foundation of oral history interviews he conducted with dozens of people familiar with the band's early years: friends, fans, members of rival bands, concert promoters, and music industry insiders. The result is a unique work of scholarship that converges with not only the popular memoirs of David Lee Roth and Gene Simmons, but also the historiographies of suburbanization, working class culture, and the Sunbelt. For scholars of business history, Renoff provides invaluable insight into the microeconomics of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century music industry through the prism of Van Halen.

When Warner Brothers released Van Halen's self-titled debut album in February 1978, Renoff asserts, heavy metal's appeal had been fading for several years. Its best-known acts from earlier in the decade, such as Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, and Kiss, were either breaking up or facing declining record sales, and music industry insiders in Los Angeles had deemed the genre passé. The major Hollywood clubs, which served as gateways to record deals, shut out groups such as Van Halen in favor of others with the popular country rock or soft rock sounds, or those who played punk rock, which industry insiders believed would soon be as popular in the United States as it was in Great Britain.

Eddie and Alex Van Halen were the sons of a Dutch immigrant who moved to Southern California in search of success as a clarinetist. They received intensive training in classical piano as children, but turned to rock music during their early adolescence. Initially performing as Genesis and Mammoth before adopting the name Van Halen for their band, they built a following of thousands in Pasadena and its environs during the early

1970s. Renoff presents Van Halen as agents of their own success. Possessing a strong work ethic and an entrepreneurial spirit, the band, particularly lead singer David Lee Roth, created a demand for the product they had crafted. They built an impassioned regional following through tireless self-promotion, posting thousands of often risqué fliers for shows at backyard barbeques, dive bars, and city parks, and even invested some of their meager capital in radio advertisements. Using a connection he made through his ophthalmologist father, Roth managed to get their music played on Los Angeles' radio giant KROQ. He parlayed the resulting "buzz" into bookings at higher-profile clubs on the Sunset Strip.

Van Halen developed an edgy reputation. Numerous youth centers and schools in the San Gabriel Valley stopped booking them because their performances attracted adolescents engaging in drunken rowdiness. Police broke up many raucous "\$1 Beer and Van Halen" keg parties staged in the cramped backyards of Pasadena High School students; some parties devolved into riots. By 1975, the band was playing dive bars in working class enclaves like Van Nuys and Pomona; rowdy wet t-shirt contests, fights between rival biker gangs, and raids by the local Vice Squad were *de rigueur*. Whatever the venue, drug and alcohol abuse were rampant.

Yet the years of exhaustive effort and challenging venues prepared Van Halen to excel, playing both original music and cover songs. The band fashioned a distinct sound and look that served as the aesthetic blueprint for the pop metal sound that won over millions of listeners during the 1980s. It retained the howling vocals, masculine bravado, and dexterous guitar work of early heavy metal while turning out songs with memorable hooks and danceable rhythms. Eddie Van Halen became the quintessential hard rock guitarist, displaying an unprecedented virtuosity. Yet Renoff emphasizes Roth's centrality to the band's popular appeal. Despite his limitations as a vocalist, he sang with panache and displayed a chest-bearing self-confidence and showmanship on stage. He transformed the band's image as a whole with choreographed stage moves, glam rock inspired outfits, and catchy songs. While this upset many of the Van Halen brothers' earliest fans, who were predominately male, this transformation brought an unprecedentedly large female audience into the heavy metal orbit.

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In the fall of 1976, Kiss frontman Gene Simmons saw the group and became enamored. He signed the band to a management contract and helped them record a “demo,” but Kiss manager Bill Aucoin and bassist Paul Stanley vetoed a recording contract with Kiss’ label, Casablanca Records. Aucoin and Stanley suspected that Simmons wanted to form a new band with the Van Halen brothers, a suspicion shared by Roth. Still, this dalliance with Simmons led industry insiders to take notice of the band. Several major labels contemplated signing Van Halen but decided that their sound was not suitable for radio. Finally, Warner Brothers executive Ted Templeman convinced the label to add the band to its lineup, which included metal heavyweights Deep Purple and Black Sabbath.

Templeman produced Van Halen’s debut album, showcasing the group’s most luminous pop songs and Eddie’s guitar virtuosity. Van Halen already had dozens of polished songs, leading Templeman to describe them as the most prepared band he ever recorded. The album took a little more than two weeks to record and cost two-thirds less to produce than comparable releases. Soon, Van Halen was stealing the show as the opening act for platinum selling artists like Journey and Black Sabbath. The band, Renoff justifiably concludes, had been as ready as any in rock history to record a debut classic, thanks to years spent crafting a sound and an aesthetic that transferred remarkably well to the studio and the national stage.

*Van Halen Rising* is an impressive work of scholarship in its own right, but also serves as an excellent companion piece to Steve Knopper’s comprehensive account of the music business in the late twentieth century, *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age* (2009). Considering the mass appeal of its subjects, the actors in Renoff’s book bear a surprisingly strong resemblance to the 1980s underground acts like Black Flag and Minor Threat featured in Michael Azerrad’s *Our Band Could Be Your Life* (2001). The Van Halen brothers’ desire in the 1970s to make a life for themselves playing music beyond the pale of mainstream respectability was not dissimilar to the impulses that inspired Black Flag’s Henry Rollins or Minor Threat’s Ian MacKaye a decade later. However one chooses to frame the contribution that Renoff has made with *Van Halen Rising*, this

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book merits recognition as one of the most inventive and accessible works of historical scholarship in recent memory.

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