

Guitarist Eddie Van Halen dead at age 65

Kevin Reed
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Eddie Van Halen, the electric guitarist who achieved rock music superstardom, died on Oct. 6 at the age of 65. Van Halen's death was confirmed by his son Wolfgang who posted on Instagram that Eddie had "lost his long and arduous battle with cancer."

Van Halen was co-founder of the rock band of the same name along with his brother Alex on drums, Michael Anthony on bass and David Lee Roth on vocals. The group became one of the most successful recording acts of all time, selling more than 56 million albums in the US.

With genuine guitar skills, Eddie Van Halen helped invigorate hard rock in the late 1970s at the height of the popularity of disco and punk rock music. With his rapid-fire, two-handed tapping technique, groaning riffs and other unusual guitar sounds and effects, Van Halen emerged as the most recognizable rock guitarist of his generation.

Van Halen's guitar performance methods—the abuse of high-speed picking, hammer-ons, fret tapping and whammy bar vibrato that are synonymous with the shallow and commercial affectations of hard rock, glam rock and heavy metal—became known as shredding. They resonated with a mass audience, as well as certain guitar aficionados.

Numerous tributes to Eddie Van Halen have been posted on social media by other guitarists. Queen's Brian May wrote on Instagram, "This wonderful man was way too young to be taken. What a talent—what a legacy—probably the most original and dazzling rock guitarist in history."

Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page also posted on Instagram, "He was the real deal: he pioneered a dazzling technique on guitar with taste and panache that I felt always placed him above his imitators."

Blues rock guitarist and singer-songwriter Joe Bonamassa posted on Twitter, "Words cannot describe how monumental the loss of Edward Van Halen is to

the music community. He inspired generations of guitar players of all genres. His playing was unrivalled in its ingenuity and its ferocity. Rest In Peace to the greatest Rock Guitarist of all time."

Edward Lodewijk Van Halen was born in Amsterdam, Netherlands on Jan. 26, 1955. His father was a Dutch jazz pianist, clarinetist and saxophonist, and his mother was Indonesian. The family moved to Pasadena, California, in 1962 and Eddie and his older brother Alex began taking piano lessons as part of what their parents expected would be a training in classical music.

According to an interview Van Halen gave in 2017 for the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, the family faced discrimination due to their mixed ethnicity. After his mother was treated as a "second-class citizen" in Holland, the family packed up and traveled to the US via a nine-day boat trip.

Van Halen said the of his first day of school in California, "Now, you're in a whole other country where you can't speak the language, and you know absolutely nothing about anything and it was beyond frightening," He added, "I don't even know how to explain but I think it made us stronger because you had to be."

Influenced by the popular music of the 1960s—Van Halen has said his favorite group was England's The Dave Clark Five—the boys formed their first band while Eddie was still in elementary school.

Although he never learned to read music, Van Halen demonstrated his musical gifts at an early age by listening, watching and mimicking his piano teacher. From 1964 through 1967, he won the annual piano competition at Long Beach City College. Once he picked up an electric guitar, he almost never put it down, practicing while he walked around the house and sitting in his room for hours behind a locked door.

The band that eventually took the name Van Halen

was founded in 1972 and established itself in the club music scene in Pasadena and Hollywood. Recognizing their talents, producer Ted Templeton convinced Mo Ostin of Warner Brothers Records to sign Van Halen to a recording contract in February 1977.

On their debut album *Van Halen*, recorded in three weeks and released in early 1978, the 22-year-old Eddie showcased his dexterity and virtuosity. With his custom-built electric guitar called “Frankenstrat”—a Fender Stratocaster body and neck combined with modified electronics from a Gibson ES-335—that had a sound quality he later termed “brown sound,” Van Halen’s rhythms, chords and solos dominate the group’s recordings.

While the popularity of the band Van Halen was to some extent due to the strutting antics of front-man and singer Roth, the group rode the wave of enthusiasm for hard rock among young people that emerged in late 1970s, carried through the 1980s and beyond—including numerous personnel changes—on the back of Eddie Van Halen’s guitar work.

Van Halen played a 20-second guitar solo in a cameo performance on Michael Jackson’s hit song “Beat It” in 1982. He appeared at the request of producer Quincy Jones and recorded the performance in 30 minutes, while the rest of his band was out of town.

An international mass audience for the records and live shows of hard rock bands like AC/DC (Australia), Aerosmith (US), Bad Company (UK) and Kiss (US)—all founded in the 1970s—grew dramatically in the era of MTV (1981) and the Compact Disc audio format (1982). Along with Van Halen, these groups attracted a loyal fan base and sold out arenas in cities across North America, Europe and Asia.

The music of these second-generation rock bands was notably different from that of the groups founded in the 1960s. While their hard-driving and catchy “arena rock” songs were technically proficient—if polished and embellished with newly introduced digital audio tools—these groups had, for the most part, departed from the socially conscious lyrics and messages associated with the earlier generation of rock music artists, or even anything particularly challenging or complex.

For example, without overstating the point, the themes and influences that found their way into the songs and albums of The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Crosby, Stills and

Nash—all extremely popular rock groups founded in California in the 1960s—were absent from the music of Van Halen and the other hard rock bands of the late 1970s.

With the civil rights and the anti-Vietnam War student protest movements a memory and the era of Ronald Reagan and right-wing reaction on the ascendancy by 1980, hard rock music was tending to the adolescent and libido-centric themes and double-entendre track titles that Van Halen specialized in, such as “Bottoms Up,” “Ice Cream Man,” “Hot for Teacher” and many more. A somewhat mindless hedonism came to the fore, not that this was Van Halen’s or any other individual’s fault. The fault lay with the social and political situation and the moods it engendered.

Although Eddie Van Halen had an appreciation for the rock guitarists who came before him—he frequently acknowledged those who he was influenced by such as Eric Clapton, Jimmie Page and lesser-known innovators like Allan Holdsworth—by the late 1970s, the popular music culture that he exemplified, along with the young people who supported it, had moved on from the influences that stirred the works of the older generation.

Some critics have said that this brought rock music back to its fundamentals and helped it to shed its pretentious side. They have argued that “happy” and “party” rock music was just plain enjoyable for its beats and hooks and never tried to be anything more than that. Others take a harsher view.

In any event, the electric guitar work of Eddie Van Halen was anything but basic; with aggressive arpeggios and harmonics, he was musically sophisticated more often than not. In fact, the contradiction embodied by Van Halen—between extremely refined technical brilliance and limited, if not downright backward, artistic conceptions—is a dilemma that persists in much of popular music today.



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