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## Party like it's 1988

Tequila! Kung fu! Spandex wedgies! Catching an end-of-summer buzz with ex-Van Halen frontmen Sammy Hagar and David Lee Roth's nonreunion tour.

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**By Porter Fox**



Sept. 5, 2002 | Sammy Hagar is beating a 20-foot-tall blue tequila bottle with a guitar. Video clips of busty girls frolicking on spring break play on a 30-by-60-foot video screen over his head. A man behind me with a rebellious look in his eye thrusts his right fist into the air. He could be a middle-aged version of the boy in "The Power of One," except for the David Cassidy part in his hair, the thick gold chain around his neck and his

black T-shirt embossed with the enigmatic slogan "It's not just football!"

Hagar hauls back his red Stratocaster and takes a swing. His yellow "Got Tequila?" T-shirt is drenched in sweat and cinches around his arm, restricting his windup. His blue-and-yellow Jams -- not shorts that look like Jams, but Jams, from 1984 -- threaten to wedge. He makes contact, the tequila bottle cracks and streamers and confetti shoot at the crowd. The ex-Van Halen frontman sticks out his chest and subsequently his middle-aged belly, and the crowd chants, "Sammy! Sammy!" He is a demigod on stage. He is Bono on agave.

I stand in the 20th row of the Champlain Valley Fair stadium, just outside Burlington, Vt., among 7,000 Van Halen fans. Beyond the fairgrounds, green fields studded with white-and-black Holsteins stretch toward Canada and Lake Champlain. I am not at the concert entirely of my own volition. My friend bought me a \$42 ticket and asked me to accompany him. Still, I have torn the sleeves off my T-shirt. I am pumping my fists to the music. I can't help it, the scene is surreal. It's outrageous, fantastic. Sammy Hagar has re-created 1988.

But not for long. This is the first volley in a bizarre rock 'n' roll battle that kicked off May 29 at Cleveland's Blossom Center and will wrap up Saturday, Sept. 7, in Las Vegas. Hagar's world is about to crash down around him. A man is sitting backstage, ready to tear it apart. The man is anxious, thrumming his fingers, listening to the hum of the bus generator as he applies layer upon layer of makeup.

He is the last person a Van Halen fan would expect to see at a Sammy Hagar show, and he is plotting to blow Sammy away. He's said it to the press. He's said it to Sammy. He is Diamond David Lee Roth, and as far as he is concerned, when Van Halen replaced him with Sammy Hagar in 1986, the flagship band of '80s hard rock ceased to exist.

Hagar spins around and around through the confetti, under the lights, his arms out to the side like Jesus, or Job. He is 53 and exhausted at the end of a 90-minute set, not to mention a 30-year career. He is also wasted. He downs three margaritas by the time he sings "Why Can't This Be Love" -- Van Halen's first hit single with the new singer in 1986 -- halfway through the set. The alcohol loosens him up, and at the end of the song Hagar grabs the mike and exclaims in his rough, signature howl, "It doesn't get any better than this! 'Cause Sammy's starting to cop a little buzz!" Then he rears back and kicks his leg, but his knee is bent and he looks like he is trying to step over a low fence.

It is incredible and sad at once, the last gasp of an international rock 'n' roll star. Images of George Foreman and Elvis in their comeback bids come to mind. Hagar tries to drink two Coronas at the same time later in the song and creates a foamy mess, not to mention the ensuing awkward silence reminiscent of church supper performances when the performer looks like he might actually be having a better time than the audience.

Hagar's stage is set up like a cantina, and he treats it like one as he shamelessly promotes his personal brand of Cabo Wabo tequila with banners and gimmicks. His show is obscene. It is the '80s to a T. A vintage video of Hagar driving a black Ferrari flickers on the screen behind him when he sings "I Can't Drive 55," the smash single on his 1984 solo album, "VOA." On "Mas Tequila," he grabs a trumpet and, with a little help from the synthesizer, lays down a solo that ends with fireworks shooting out of the instrument.

While Roth preens his platinum hair and prepares to take the stage, Hagar kicks his show into high gear, bringing 40 fans seated on either side of the drums to the mike for his closing tune, "Dreams." It's a sentimental classic from "5150," and Hagar's band, the Waboritas, nail it. Near the end of the song, Hagar is manhandled by a fan in a collarless white button-down shirt. Hagar fends him off and yells, "You guys are fucking awesome!" Then he launches into a series of oddly timed jumping jacks.

"If Sammy Hagar and David Lee Roth can do a tour together, there could be hope for the Middle East. We could straighten the fools out," Hagar said in an Aug. 14 interview with USA Today. "Bono told me I had to do it for world peace," Roth quipped.

Hagar and Roth's "Heavyweight Champs of Rock 'n' Roll" tour began as the brainchild of a Las Vegas promoter who was trying to create a Van Halen reunion. When Alex and Eddie Van Halen wouldn't have anything to do with the two ex-frontmen, Roth approached Hagar about touring together. Hagar agreed and the two held a press conference to announce the most unlikely touring duo in rock history. The absurdity of it soon became its main appeal: The two singers openly hated each other.

"This is why I truthfully do not like [Roth]," Hagar said in an Aug. 9 interview with TimesLeader.com. "He acts like he's the fucking guy and I'm just a piece of shit. He's demanding to close shows and all this stuff. I want to slap this guy back down. Before, I was like, 'Dave's a good guy, and he deserves to be in the light,' but we got out there, and he's acting like he's a god and I'm the fucking opening act."

The conflict smacks of the late comedian Andy Kaufman's fabled rivalry with wrestler Jerry Lawler, enough that some question whether it's real. If not, the two are playing their roles perfectly. The first point of contention revolved around who would open and close the concerts. Roth MC'd Van Halen from 1978 to 1985, and his purist fans always considered him the only voice of the band. In Diamond Dave's mind, he was the clear choice for a closer. But Hagar, who led the group from 1986 to 1996, points out that he sold 42 million records with the Van Halen brothers. The two reached a political resolution. They flipped a coin on the Howard Stern show and have been rotating ever since.

"I think [Hagar will] be remembered for throwing a great party," Roth, who now refuses interviews, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "I'll be remembered for *being* a great party ... I'm competing with the guy in Limp Bizkit, with Bono. It's precision and fury. Nine moves that rule the world, and it would take you 20 years to learn them, dear."

With what looked like a nuclear situation brewing, Hagar and Roth shocked crowds this summer by keeping their cool and delivering as close to a Van Halen show as their fans could hope for. While Hagar plays more songs from his successful solo run, Roth, whose career fizzled after Van Halen, sticks strictly to old favorites. The tour has been such a hit that Roth and Hagar added 27 gigs in August and September to the original schedule. Last week the pair presented the "Best Rock Video" at the MTV Music Awards.

Regardless of the good intentions, though, there is no doubt that Roth has something to prove.

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We are standing in the beer tent drinking Budweiser from 16-ounce cups. The smell of Al's Famous Frys and air-rifle reports from "Shoot Out the Star" drift through the tent doors. We hear the drum intro for "Hot for Teacher" and run to our seats. What awaits us is nothing short of shocking.

Roth is wearing metallic, skin-tight silver and blue pants. His hair is bleached white. His skin looks plastic and is stretched across his face. His eyes bulge like he's got the bends. Diamond Dave is wearing a blue bandanna around his neck and I can't help but think that it hides a tracheotomy. But the strangest thing about him is not unfamiliar. It's been Roth's calling card for 30 years. It's the smile. The smile, an almost guilty gesture, gives the impression that Roth is not exactly sure what is going on around him. It's wide, cartoonish and, quite simply, scary.

But the man is in shape and he is singing -- and singing much better than you would imagine a 46-year-old could. His pseudo-James Brown dance moves, which scored him points in MTV's early days with "Dancing in the Street" and "Panama," seem the same. They start off fast and then jumble into a confusing series of clogging kicks and slides -- ultimately ending in Roth stopping himself before he falls over and screaming, "Yoooww!" His trademark martial-arts moves follow a similar rhythm. (Roth studies kendo twice a week in a hall he built in his house.) They are fast, seemingly random, and they end in some type of drastic punch or swing.

He's got the crowd in his hand, though. And it is nice to see. Roth's latest single, "Look at All the People Here Tonight!" earned the distinction in 2000 of being the first single released to radio exclusively through the Internet. Roth still has some of the moves, too. In the middle of "Panama," he yells at a woman in the front row, "That's not a smile -- that's assault with a deadly weapon!" The crowd nearly loses control. Then he shakes a beer and spurts it from between his legs. The stagehands brace for riot.

The music is about partying. No, it *is* a party. In an article on the release of "5150," Rolling Stone tagged Van Halen's era the "power-party rock arena." Disco had suffocated the social consciousness of the '60s, and by the '80s pop musicians like Van Halen just wanted to have a good time. In a decade when the Gipper was all that stood between humanity and nuclear holocaust, rock 'n' roll became a release valve -- not to create change, but to dust reality in a haze of neon and frizzy hair. Pot was out, cocaine was in. Thinking out, pleasure in. The '80s was the decade of the yuppie, the preppie, "Dynasty" and [Pac-Man](#). It was an age of hedonistic irresponsibility, when introspection and intellectualism were *beat*.

Roth is doing his best to re-create the landscape. On "Dance the Night Away," lead guitar Brian Young, from the Hollywood-based Van Halen tribute band the Atomic Punks, proves himself with a light-speed, Eddie-esque solo. His long, curly brown hair shakes and bobs as he plays. James LoMenzo, from White Lion, backs him on bass.

During "Runnin' With the Devil," the man with the David Cassidy hair bobs his head to the bass drum, but he has forgotten the words to the song. He mumbles them and raises his fist above his head again. Roth switches to a red bandanna in ["You Really Got Me."](#) and I remember a particular Christmas morning in grade school listening to the song on a Radio Shack clock radio, waiting for my parents to wake up.

After a tight arrangement of "Beautiful Girl," Dave breaks out of his frontman shell and addresses the crowd directly. "This is America," he says. "This carnival, this is my childhood. My family used to drive through Vermont when I was little. This is Americana -- like eating fried chicken and drinking iced tea."

He is connecting with the audience, and we love him for it. Then a girl in the front row distracts his attention: "Am I gonna have to make a booty call during work?" Pause. "Yoooww!"

By the time Roth dives into "Pretty Woman," the entire stadium is dancing. Diamond Dave is carrying the microphone stand around like a metal detector and my friend and I are hopping up and down. Roth is winning the war, and he knows it.

In the break before "Ice Cream Man," Roth seems to be losing his mind. He is electric. He yells things into the mike like: "The power of the universe and this shit is wild!" Young strums in the background. The bass kicks in. A girl screams. Roth yells, "One nation under cable television!"

Roth opens "Ice Cream Man" playing an acoustic guitar with a white panel on the front. His smile is about to blow. He busts out a minute of 12-bar blues, then the band backs him. Roth sets the guitar vertically on the stage and lets it fall. A roadie grabs it before it hits the ground. Roth pirouettes in a surprisingly deft motion and grabs the mike. A roundhouse kick. Then the smile.

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It's the final encore. Everyone knows what Dave is going to play. High school gyms crave the rhythm, old football uniforms and scratchy rayon prom dresses listen anxiously for the melody. Then it starts. The synthesizer first, then the drums, bass and guitar. Finally, Roth grabs the mike and lights into Van Halen's only No. 1 single in the band's 25-year run.

*Can't you see me standing here/ I got my back against the record machine/ I ain't the worst that you've seen/  
Oh can't you see what I mean?/ Might as well jump!*

And we do. Roth is going wild. You know Hagar is backstage tapping his foot. The band is grooving and if only Hagar would come out, right now, the rift would be bridged. Just tonight, under the glow of the orange stockyard lights. But he doesn't and Roth finishes on the stage alone, very much alone amid the lights and speakers and mega-stage of the heavy metal '80s that in 2002 have become a scratchy memory in the high 100s of the FM dial.

As the synth winds down and Roth climbs the drum pedestal to perform his final signature move -- and perhaps sign off for good from an era when frosting went in your hair, accessorizing required electricity and hip-hop was cutting edge -- it doesn't matter that Sammy, Eddie, Michael and Alex aren't there with him. Because times have changed, and you can't expect the band to change with them. Elvis never played punk. Morrison never sang Duke. When rock 'n' roll insists on marching ahead like a Midwestern flash flood, all its fans can hope for is a glimpse of what was once great.

Roth drops his head and the lights of the fair seem to brighten. The Gravitron whips in circles; the Zipper bobs up and down. Children's screams rise from the midway. That synth is barely hanging on now. The pope has been shot. Reagan's been shot. John Lennon has been shot. Roth squats in front of the drums, readying for his stunt. Michael Jackson's hair catches fire; Run-D.M.C. goes platinum; doctors discover the AIDS virus.

Roth leaps off the stage and reaches for his toes. One leg is almost straight, the other is bent at an odd angle. It's like looking back in time through a beer bottle. But the music is the same, or at least close enough. Roth has transported us through the concave glass, and at that moment every person in the audience is a skinny, awkward, high school freshman, hopeful, terrified, young.

Roth lands. I think for a second that his knee has buckled, but he's still standing. Triumphant. A warbling, electric hum resonates from the guitars, the synth fades. We raise our fists. Roth has won, but it doesn't matter. We are thankful. We don't want him or Hagar to leave. We don't want to go home to our laptops and multidisc changers. You can't find this on an MP3. Roth bows. It is over. His shape disintegrates as the lights fade. Then he is gone, and all that is left are the multicolored bulbs of the Ferris wheel, spinning around and around and around.

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### About the writer

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