

BLIND TO THE WORLD

A dissection of Chickenfoot's 2023 appearance on *The Howard Stern Show*

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Abstract

On November 15th, 2023 the band Chickenfoot¹ appeared on The Howard Stern Show [Ste23], promoting an upcoming tour. We note that this segment is both an overt and subtle source of rich psychodrama. As it repeatedly transgresses the bounds of sanity and any standard of clear thinking, it provides us with unique insights into the inner workings of Van Halen over the years, Sammy Hagar’s mentality specifically, and the human condition in general.

1 Reasoning on Motivations

Why is this in my timeline now? is an interesting question, even for those who are used to encountering obscure Van Halen-adjacent material on social feeds.

The tour is described in this appearance as a tribute to the late Eddie Van Halen, (together with his brother Alex) the mastermind behind the eponymous hard rock group that existed in various forms between 1973

¹The author is making the decision to describe the band as “Chickenfoot.” Strictly speaking, the canonical drummer of Chickenfoot is Chad Smith, the Will Ferrell lookalike [New14] best known as the drummer for The Red Hot Chili Peppers [Wik23a]. There is no discernable alternative name for this band, being described in official materials as the ludicrously verbose “SAMMY HAGAR / MICHAEL ANTHONY / JOE SATRIANI / JASON BONHAM” [Hag23]. When asked directly for a band name by Stern, Hagar describes the *tour* as “The Best of All Worlds.”

Chad Smith is arguably the member of Chickenfoot with the most significant current level of fame, and he is also the only member touring with his original group. It is this researcher’s contention that these factors combined with the mentality expounded upon elsewhere in this paper point directly at a forthcoming Smith/Chickenfoot schism. This will lead to Bonham’s tentative status in the (here only implied) new incarnation of Chickenfoot ultimately becoming official.

and 2020 [Wik23e]. It is also described as a chance for Anthony (a founding member of Van Halen) and Hagar (at times the lead singer of the group) to “finish what [they] started².”

Previous Chickenfoot tours have consisted of original works such as *Soap on a Rope*, *Down the Drain* (as well as other bathroom-themed fan favorites) and a few Montrose and Led Zeppelin covers³. But the upcoming tour earns a feature promotional appearance on a major subscription satellite radio show by finally relenting on such concerns of artistic integrity.

The problem of Hagar and Anthony revisiting their most popular material is obvious: for this to work, someone would need to do a plausible impression of Edward Van

²A reference to *Finish What Ya Started* on 1988’s *OU812*. The song’s music video is notable for describing Hagar as contributing both “lead vocals & guitar” [Hag21]. We can perhaps gain some insight into Hagar’s psychology by noting that early in his vocal career with Van Halen, Hagar insisted on carrying an inert guitar around next to the world’s most well-known virtuoso.

³Chickenfoot is also notable for the incisive social commentary in their setlist construction — for example, the choice of closing a show in an Indigenous American casino with *The Star-Spangled Banner* [Att10].

Halen. Sammy Hagar explains repeatedly in the *Stern* appearance that doing this with Chickenfoot wasn't possible in the past, given their old guitarist, Joe Satriani. However he is emphatic that it is now finally possible with their current guitarist, Joe Satriani. As far as explanations go, this is a thin one, even for Hagar.



Figure (1): Promotional graphic for the tour featuring a curious “SH” ligature with flame embellishment [Hag23]

The idea that Hagar would let concerns like talent and execution stand in the way of the obvious payday of playing Van Halen material when left to his own devices strains credulity. Hagar is notoriously a businessman first and an artist second. In addition to more well-known ventures like the Cabo Wabo chain and its associated tequila, he has attempted to sell a line of mountain bikes [Wik23d] and has dabbled in steakhouses. Hagar would sing about national energy policy if he thought it would earn out⁴.

⁴Not editorial: of course he did, and it did. We are referring to *I Can't Drive 55*, Hagar's best

One theory that strikes the author as quite realistic is that Satriani represented the veto to Van Halen material on past tours. The tribute framing is key: Satriani is paying homage to a hero, and not crudely cashing in on another (still living) artist's genius and hard work⁵.

The tribute framing's value as a diversion is clear. For Hagar it diverts attention from the obvious financial incentives. For Satriani, it grants permission to access and perform the material. Success in the public eye, however, ultimately rests on execution as well as that goodwill.

2 Satriani's Performance

Hagar goes to great lengths in the *Stern* appearance to emphasize that although Edward Van Halen's material is widely covered note-for-note on YouTube, a live band setting is another matter. Should nothing else of worth come from this incarnation of Chickenfoot, at the very least Hagar will have proven this to the world definitively. It is notable how much a guitarist of Satriani's caliber struggles with these songs. It's ironic to contemplate that Sammy's failure may ultimately be the immortal lasting form of this tribute.

We will survey Satriani's struggle to execute in more detail shortly, but it is worth mentioning that one of his bigger issues over-

known solo release which was offensive enough to inspire an album-length response from The Minutemen [Wik23b].

⁵Evidence in favor of this is Satriani's believably genuine generosity about the success of his student, Kirk Hammett, in the same interview. Satriani comes across as a guitarist's guitarist who approaches the craft with respect, and has humility about his own accomplishments.

all comes down to tone. Joe’s guitars sound washed out, with significantly less bite on the lower end than EVH achieved with his trademark “brown sound.” Replicating the brown sound requires voltage shenanigans [Bea20], so it may not have been practical in this ad hoc setting.

On to the specifics:

- Satriani falls significantly out of time switching between the first and second positions in the *Mean Streets* intro.
- He fudges the arpeggios in the intro to *5150*, largely replacing the nuance in the picking with simple downward chord strokes.
- Another Van Hagar original, *Good Enough*, sounds quite a bit better overall. Detail-oriented fans will hear differences in fingertapped sections of solos and fills arising from Satch’s different approaches to the trick.

Eddie famously gripped his pick between his middle finger and thumb, freeing his index finger for right-handed taps on the fretboard. Satch uses a more conventional index finger and thumb pick grip, and as a result needs to tap with the edge of his pick. This results in a different attack and overall sound. In other sections, Joe doesn’t tap at all, but rather resorts to left-handed bar harmonics.

- Joe’s different approaches to harmonics manage to shine for a moment in *5150*, where he adds a flourish of his own to the pre-chorus

(after “still we try / win or lose”) that was not present in the original piece. For a second, he succeeds in channeling the spirit of EVH. Unfortunately at the final part of this section (after “take the highs / with the blues”) he drops quite a few notes, doubling up his picking to fill space in what should be a more complex arpeggio.

- Satch’s palm muting on *Best of Both Worlds* sounds authentic, in what is probably the best executed song of the appearance.

Quite a bit of the credit in the best performances should probably go to Michael Anthony, whose high harmony vocals and falsetto screaming are central elements of songs like *Best of Both Worlds* and *Good Enough*.



Figure (2): Michael Anthony: *best of both worlds, indeed* [Ste23]

The case of *Summer Nights* deserves a deeper examination.

3 Summer Nights

Summer Nights is a fan favorite from 5150, the first Van Halen album featuring Hagar as the lead singer. A very memorable guitar performance on the song helps it “[overcome] soft-core misogyny” [Hol86] by “[air-lifting the astoundingly dumb lyrics] by the vibe and [taking them] to a hospital in Malibu” [Klo18].

For the first 15 seconds, Eddie (performing alone) sounds like a precocious adolescent trying to figure out an unfamiliar song for the very first time, maybe even reading the sheet music and glancing at his finger placement. He’s then rudely interrupted by Hagar, who grunts the word “Uh.” By magic, Eddie can now rip all the riffs into ribbons, which he proceeds to do [Klo18].

While many of Eddie Van Halen’s compositions are the result of specialized equipment⁶, this is particularly true of *Summer Nights*. The song is the only⁷ one in Van Halen’s catalogue performed on a Steinberger L-series [Bab16]. The Steinberger is a carbon fiber electric with an unusually small body and completely lacking a headstock.

The Steinberger’s core feature is a

⁶To wit, most early Van Halen recordings were performed on the “Frankenstrat,” a Fender Stratocaster body heavily modified to accommodate a Gibson humbucking pickup near the bridge [Wik23c]. Another example is Diver Down’s *Little Guitars*, appropriately played on a mini Les Paul [Res21].

⁷Some have claimed that *Me Wise Magic* from the aborted 1996 David Lee Roth reunion was also performed on a Steinberger. In fact (as Eddie explained in interviews), this song was performed on a Peavey EVH Wolfgang guitar modified to accept a Steinberger TransTrem [Ros96].

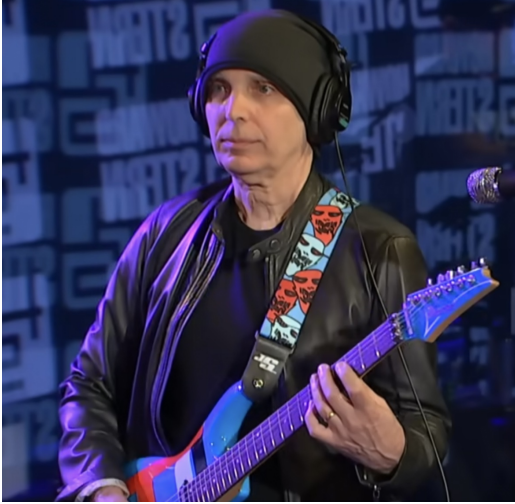


Figure (3): EVH playing a Steinberger on the 5150 tour. It is unknown whether the nut on this model was modified to accommodate a lit cigarette.

TransTrem, a transposing vibrato assembly. The TransTrem allows the player to modify pitch fluidly like a whammy bar *and also* in steps, locked in place like a capo. It is through the TransTrem that Eddie achieved the key changes and dive bombs that occur throughout *Summer Nights*.

It is important to notice that Joe Satriani is *not* playing a Steinberger as Sammy suggests off the cuff that the band attempt *Summer Nights*. As he does this, Sammy admits that they have only rehearsed the song once, for a few minutes.

Hagar vehemently insists that Satriani’s staggering talent means that he has no problem playing the song. This assertion is contradicted by the naked fear in Satch’s eyes, which momentarily attain the size of ping pong balls. What transpires next is a trainwreck: lacking the TransTrem, Joe attempts to replicate the intro by playing the G major and D major open chord forms transposed up the neck at the fourth position.



(a) Satch realizes Sammy wants to attempt the song live on the air.



(b) Satch gesticulates in frustration following the intro.



(c) Satch performs the solo with his teeth.

Figure (4): Satch during the performance of Summer Nights

The bars that follow make clear the difference between feigning a struggle⁸ and struggling. The passage is subtly as difficult as anything EVH wrote. In pulling off the deception and presenting as unrehearsed, Eddie achieved something every bit as challenging as acting the part of a bad actor.

As the song kicks in to third gear, Satriani's ego is clearly bruised⁹. When he follows this up with a solo picked *with his teeth*, we are left with several possibilities, each more troubling than the last.

- **The teeth solo was improvised in a huff.** In this scenario Satriani is enough of a virtuoso to pull off a glorious tantrum right in front of his antagonist. But if we believe this, we must also adjust our assessment of the difficulty of EVH's introduction accordingly.
- **The teeth solo was rehearsed with the band.** The contention that they had only rehearsed for less than ten minutes is likely a lie in this scenario.
- **The teeth solo was rehearsed without the band.** Joe augmented the ten minutes of rehearsal with desperate hotel room practice, and yet, was unable to pull off the introduction to *Summer Nights* with any level of professionalism.

Of course the fact of the teeth solo is not an issue. Although it clashes with EVH's stylistic sensibilities in the particular, Eddie was a generally improvisational player live. He would often elaborate on the leitmotifs of

his studio solos, taking them far beyond the line of recognizability [Bum12].

Returning to the architect of this farce: it should be noted that although the lyrics could be considered redeemed by EVH in 1986 (and are *nearly* redeemed by Anthony's magical harmony work on the chorus this time), a 76 year old man choosing to sing these lyrics in 2023 should be considered a felony.

4 Sammy Hagar, Unreliable Narrator

Before, during, and after *Summer Nights* Hagar is observed insisting against all evidence that Satriani is acing the test. This is part of his very long and sordid history of optimistic fabulism. Examples abound in anecdotes that are all too real:

Sammy Hagar insisted that his 1977 onstage meltdown in which he exposed his genitals to a sold-out crowd of Kiss fans and destroyed an expensive guitar was ultimately a good thing [Wil23].

and as well in scenarios that are clearly imaginary retcons:

I once heard an interview with Hagar (I think it was with Eddie Trunk) where he described the first time he went walking on the beach in Cabo San Lucas, only to be drenched by an unanticipated Pacific wave. When the wave receded back into the ocean, Sammy noticed a huge fish had been marooned on the sand, so he picked up the still-flopping fish and carried it to a nearby restaurant, where the chef immediately chopped it into tacos.

⁸per *Klosterman's* evocative description.

⁹cf. *Fig (4b)*

This incident, for whatever reason, prompted Hagar to buy real estate in Mexico [Klo18].

The device of an unreliable narrator in literature can have a layering effect, increasing the depth of a work of fiction. Hagar is unfortunately more frustrating than interesting. His habit is to produce contradictions at a rate that is so impressive that he cannot avoid stepping on his own narrative rakes.

Sammy famously told Dan Rather that he was just as big as Van Halen when he decided to join the group [Des16]. In this interview, he undercuts this unsupported assertion by claiming that he manifested the call from Ed by wishing for it a la *The Secret*¹⁰.

Sammy attempted to make a display of grace to David Lee Roth in the Stern interview, insisting that if Dave would like to join the tribute he would be welcome. Then in the span of less than ten seconds, he managed to pack in claims that he 1) was always happy to play Dave-era Van Halen songs as frontman¹¹, 2) Dave is incapable of performing Sammy’s material¹² and most incredibly that 3) he would frequently bring a random yokel from the audience up on stage to perform Dave’s material because the challenge just wasn’t there for him.

¹⁰Claims of special access to the cosmos are not new for Hagar, who believes that he was telepathically contacted by aliens in 1968. This is the subject of the song *Love Walks In* on 5150 [Owe20].

¹¹On the 1995 tour, Sammy Hagar solo songs played by the band outnumbered Dave-era Van Halen songs 7 to 3 [Set23].

¹²This is incorrect: Dave’s inability to perform his own material has never stopped him from performing it. Roth may be “somehow the third-best singer in a four-man band, but his attitude is unbeatable” [Klo18].

Hagar pivots to a similar invitation for Alex Van Halen to join the tour, managing for most of a full sentence to travel the high road before suggesting that Alex is really only able to play with his brother. This fleeting train of thought derails and explodes on impact as he suddenly commits several notches too far to the bit, and lets it slip that he has been spamming Alex’s voicemail inbox for years without a reply.

The existence of this *kind of guy* would be baffling enough as a singleton. But what elevates it to something that demands explanation is the fact that in his all-too-brief lifetime, Ed managed to find two of them.

5 A Brief Digression on the Dementia of David Lee Roth

It is well known that David Lee Roth left Van Halen at its peak to write and star in an incoherent (and never-released) movie, *Crazy From the Heat*¹³. Ten years later, he managed to botch a two minute appearance on the Video Music Awards so badly that it ended the possibility of reconciliation for an additional fifteen years [Gre16].

A full investigation into David Lee Roth’s myriad crimes and intricate webs of lies would be another paper. However, a brief vignette from the initial breakup is illuminating.

- At a press conference he called himself,
- wearing a comically oversized beret¹⁴,

¹³Plot summary: human muppet David Lee Roth “travels to the mysterious Dongo Island where he gets into all kinds of kooky capers” [Rot85].

¹⁴*cf. Fig (5)*

- while taking a number of cheap shots at Valerie Bertinelli,
- and comparing the¹⁵ Van Halen brothers to Nazis,

Dave insisted that there was never any drama while he was still in the band [Hun12].



Figure (5)

6 Conclusion: Code 5150

The *Stern* appearance was a momentary view into a parallel dimension where the lead singer of Van Halen could actually call some shots. It is notable mostly for its density of crazy and unflattering moments. Perhaps worst of all, we can see new fissures in Joe Satriani's sanity opening and venting steam in real time.

Pulling off an impersonation of EVH was implausible when he was alive, and it still is. The Chickenfoot appearance on *Stern* reveals the degree of delusion required to ask a candle to stand next to a supernova and try to outshine it, and gives us a glimpse of the Lovecraftian horrors that await the smaller flame.

¹⁵n.b. ethnically Indonesian

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