



HISTORY

VAN HALEN, *BALANCE*

Heavy metal and hard rock got a dose of sunny California with one of rock 'n' roll's most popular, chart-topping and revenue earning bands, Van Halen. Eddie Van Halen's mastery with the guitar kept fans and critics pleased, while longtime on-again, off-again front man David Lee Roth's larger than life persona, one-liners and stage antics made him an instant favorite with the media. With behind-the-scenes tensions leading to numerous highly publicized lineup changes—including the introduction of Sammy Hagar, who fronted the band for a sizable eleven years—it would be easy for some to overlook the band's staggering, enduring success and loyal fan base.

By Glen Wexler
Words by Charlie Fish

In 1995, following a string of well-received, Hagar-fronted albums, the band released *Balance*, which was decidedly less upbeat and more introspective, and was the last album to feature all-new material by Hagar. Its somber tones reflected the death of the band's longtime manager, Ed Leffler, and Eddie's health concerns (he was in need of a hip replacement). Photographer Glen Wexler, known for his outstanding work with photocompositions and for creating "improbable realities," has worked on album covers for acts like Black Sabbath, ZZ Top, Rush, and Kiss. Having already created Van Halen's *F.U.C.K. (For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge)* album cover, Glen was an obvious choice for crafting the band's new release.

Resource interviewed the very busy Glen, who discussed the controversial album cover art, why another version was created for the Japanese market, the band's introspective turn, and the popular misconceptions surrounding the image.

GETTING THE ASSIGNMENT

Jeri Heiden, the creative director at Warner Bros. Records, commissioned the project. Alex Van Halen, Eddie's older brother and the band's drummer, was "the art guy" from the band and he was involved in selecting me, as well. I had created the cover of their previous album, *F.U.C.K.*, which was a photographic logo treatment. I was doing a lot of those, but Jeri and Alex were both very aware of my more fantastical "improbable reality" conceptual images, the work I am most passionate about.

THE CONCEPT

The original title of the album was *The Seventh Seal*. I worked on concepts to illustrate that title, one of which involved a composition with a young child. During the casting session, I found this very androgynous four-year-old boy, but the band came to the conclusion that *The Seventh Seal* was not the right title and we switched directions for the cover art.

When I asked what the new title, *Balance*, meant to the band, Alex discussed the turmoil and changes surrounding Van Halen. A lot was going on for them, including coming to terms with the recent death of their long-time manager, Ed Leffler. Alex had this notion of exploring the duality of the human psyche. It was very unexpected when he made the suggestion. Van Halen was

perceived as being a fun-loving party band, and here was a very smart, introspective, and challenging concept to visualize. That said, in terms of Van Halen's growth and maturity, seventeen years after the huge success of their first album, it would make perfect sense that the band would want to reveal a more complex side of their personality, including reflecting on some of the deeper issues they were experiencing.

I produced several rough sketches to illustrate the concept, including the conjoined twins on the seesaw, which would be created by combining photographs of the androgynous child. Other than the obvious expression of inseparable male and female characteristics, the realization of the idea began to focus on a number of ironies: the impossibility of the conjoined twins actually playing on the seesaw; the "calm" twin actually being the aggressive one, pulling the hair of his sibling to create the appearance of an aggressive child; and having no one else to play with in a desolate post-apocalyptic setting, in which unusable playground equipment is the only object in sight. I also had the opportunity to "design" the twins to mimic the shape of the "VH" logo.

ON THE SET, LIGHTING, SET UP AND SHOOT

Since the talent was cast, all I needed to do was to build the seesaw prop on a

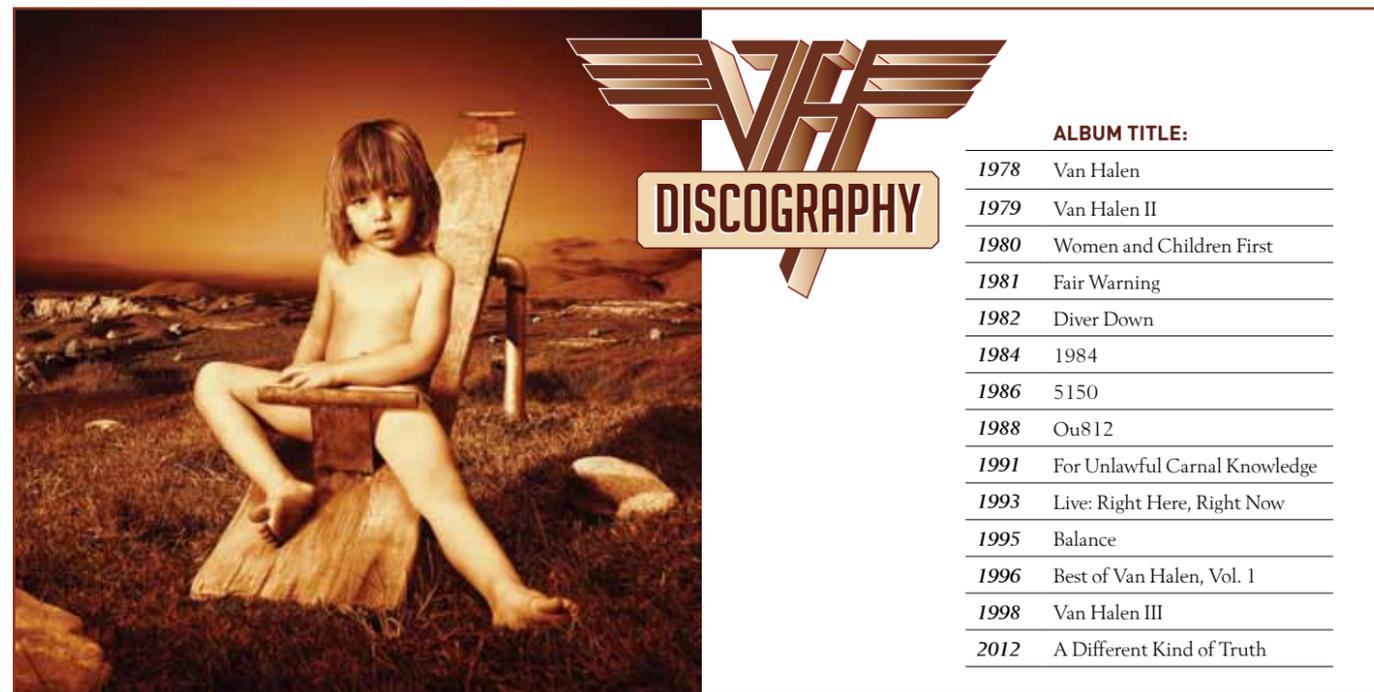
foreground set and create a miniature set for the landscape. I also selected the sky from my archives. The shoot was at my studio in Hollywood.

I shot the images of the boy on the seesaw first. We created a foreground set with sod, rocks, and weeds. I locked down the camera, a Hasselblad, and shot the boy in the two main positions. I shot about 10 rolls of 120mm film over two hours.

The following day we set up and shot the miniature landscape for the mid and background terrain and mountains. It was a wedge-shaped tabletop built in forced perspective. It was only about 6-feet deep and 8-feet across in the back. I shot a bracket of 4x5 film, about six sheets with a Sinar P2.

The lighting was simple. I used a Mola dish for the key light on the boy, with ambient "sky light" from strobes bouncing off the white ceiling. The key for the miniature set was replaced with a 2K Arri.

I had brought all the postproduction imaging of my work in-house by 1992; the film elements were drum-scanned and combined using Painter. At the time, it was a better image-editing program for photocomposition than Photoshop, which didn't have layers yet. Painter had layers, which were called "floaters."



	ALBUM TITLE:
1978	Van Halen
1979	Van Halen II
1980	Women and Children First
1981	Fair Warning
1982	Diver Down
1984	1984
1986	5150
1988	Ou812
1991	For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge
1993	Live: Right Here, Right Now
1995	Balance
1996	Best of Van Halen, Vol. 1
1998	Van Halen III
2012	A Different Kind of Truth

WORKING WITH THE CHILD MODEL

Once I got him in place, it was a matter of getting the right expressions. The yelling shot was easy: I asked him to "roar like Simba from *The Lion King*," which he loved doing. My daughter was five at the time and she was the hand model pulling the hair.

The "calm" shot was a challenge, as it was the boy's first shoot and he was anything but calm and cooperative. My daughter was very helpful in getting him to settle down and focus on the shot. Those moments were fleeting and few and far between.

MEETING EDDIE VAN HALEN

Alex and Eddie came by the studio following the shoot to look at the work in progress. It was the first time I'd met Ed, whom I got to know better years later as our sons became close friends during grade school. Ed gave my son his first electric guitar.

YOU'VE GOT IT ALL WRONG

There are a couple popular misconceptions about the project. Warner Bros. gave us a heads up to the Japanese cultural stigma of portraying human deformities in advance of the release. Any information I've received on this topic has always been directly from my clients. For example, when shooting Japanese advertising projects, I've been told that's it important to see all the fingers on a person's hand. Knowing that conjoined twins would not be well received in the Japanese media, we created the second version for that market depicting a single child. MTV and other press made a big deal about the album cover being "censored in Japan." That was simply a distortion to fabricate a "news" story.

Many Van Halen "aficionados" have mistakenly blogged and reported that the boy in the photography is Wolfie Van Halen, Ed's son. It's not. Wolfie was younger at the time, only three, and has dark brown hair.

PUBLIC REACTIONS TO THE SHOT

When first released, there was a conservative religious group that asserted the image was "pornographic" and tried to get Walmart and other retailers to ban the album.

The cover was included in publications about children represented in art, in a "best album covers" book, and in a number of lists of the top all-time album covers. In addition, *Communication Arts* selected the image for one of their Photography Annuals. I have limited-edition prints available that are in several art collections.

Out of my 300-plus album cover projects, this one is probably the best known. Now that my print work has shifted primarily to advertising assignments, it's interesting how many art directors seem to respond favorably to this as a legacy image and have requested prints.

Of my commercial works, album covers are often the best opportunities to fully flex my creative muscles. For me, these projects have played an important role in demonstrating what I bring to the party in the more collaborative advertising arena.

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