

Requiem For a Man With Two First Names by Jesse Raub

Mark Antony was loyal to Julius Caesar until the end. His dedication to the tyrant led him to band together with a rag-tag group of brilliant military equals to overthrow his former boss' murderers, but in the end, he was ousted by Caesar's own adopted son Octavian, who had branded him a traitor, forcing him into exile*. Bound by a sense of duty, propelled by immense talent on the battlefield, Mark Antony's story is one of quiet tragedy. What could this man have achieved if he had set himself to goals of individual greatness instead of serving the needs of him who he had followed?

Michael Anthony, similarly, bowed to a tyrant, and was vanquished by that tyrant's son. His tenure as the bass player for Van Halen was riddled with humorous references to his short stature and drinking habits ("New Haven, prepare yourselves for this pint-sized, whiskey drinking, crazy mother right here"). Anthony often played into that persona, chugging what we were meant to believe was Jack Daniels from a Jack Daniels bottle. Playing a custom Jack Daniels shaped bass. Running and diving on the stage and wearing a cape, acting the clown. And this is all just from one video, too (Van Halen — Michael Anthony DRUNK BASS SOLO:, YouTube, uploaded January 11, 2008).

But to truly appreciate a person's talent as a musician, to respect the genius of that person's musicianship, it becomes necessary to delve beyond the theatrics. To push beyond the drama. One could spend the whole warm season indoors poring over how it went wrong for Michael Anthony — how he went from being Eddie Van Halen's Ginger Rogers doing every run up the fretboard backwards and in white Reebok high tops, well, being a member of the Cabo Wabo Band, the Waboritas, and also in Chickenfoot. But celebrating the downfall of a musician this talented is akin to focusing only on the fact that Mark Antony died by committing suicide in exile with his mistress out of desperation and disgrace, forgetting for a moment that he had once re-united the Roman Empire, cast out Julius Caesar's murderers, and sat at the head of it all while his mistress was the ruler of Egypt.

Van Halen introduced themselves to the world in 1978 with Michael Anthony's bass sloughing through a low-hanging distorted quarter note on track one of side one of the band's self-titled debut: "Runnin' With The Devil." Aside from the occasional fret slide (a sort of engine rev to offset the solid beat of his slow motor chug), Anthony doesn't stray from this rhythmic slog through the whole track — until, that is, Eddie hits his guitar solos, in which we see something unique to rock and roll music in this timeframe.

In 1977 we had punk rock take the cake. Anarchy came from the UK, all right, but four New York brats made a conscious effort to strip the elements of blues from rock 'n roll and play their own version. Building on simpler rock songs, like a dumbed down version of Black Sabbath's 1972 "Paranoid," you began to hear the rhythm section no longer, well, playing rhythm. You also stopped hearing the bass harmonize with the lead guitar parts, and instead just reinforcing the root of the power chord. The three-chord punk revolution gave way to the hair metal domination. But somewhere trapped inside that whole mess were four valley wizards with a fondness for R&B rhythm sections, sock-hop backing vocals, power metal guitar solos, and hard-boogie.

Van Halen recorded *Van Halen* as live as they could in the studio, with almost zero overdubs, and as many musicians playing to track at the same time. Where most bands would have a rhythm guitar track do the heavy-lifting, Michael Anthony comes through at

*details surrounding these events may have been left out for literary dramatic purposes

intervals through the solo to harmonize with the lead leaving the rhythm work to Eddie's throwaway backing rhythm overdub.

There's no special origin story for Van Halen. No elite professional musicianship. It was four guys in various garage bands playing it out for nearly four years full time before they landed a record deal. It's a punk rock garage story before punk rock. It's a superstar stadium rock band without the professional coaching of a trained, young musician growing into a band. And because of this, Van Halen lived a dream of exactly that — big solos, large stage sets, over the top productions, and no one could tell them the right or wrong way to do it. At the same time, their heroes were all still traditionalists — players. Guys who knew their scales and their keys. And so as the band grew into that role for their first album and their first big tours, they, too, became players. And in some moments, like listening to Michael Anthony harmonize his bass with Eddie's soloing, it's easy to think that maybe Van Halen was the last true band of players out there.

We don't see much virtuosic bass playing on any of the albums. That can't be much of a surprise. With his last name plastered on every album cover, poster, tour t-shirt and promotional see-thru plastic sun-visor, Eddie Van Halen ruled over the band's process. Every album features an Eddie solo as a standalone track, most songs feature an Eddie solo as the hinge that folds the song into itself. It's clear he's writing the riffs. It's clear he's building the tracks. And if there's ever an argument in the band, his brother's the one with a double barrel kick drum pointed at your head.

Simpler bass rhythms serve the songs, and it's how Eddie wanted it played, and Michael Anthony understood what it meant for the band. Recording mostly live in the studio meant that the songs were able to be nearly fully replicated live on stage as a four piece perfectly to the studio version, and most of the studio versions have a lot of open space.

As Eddie said in reference to trying to figure something out for "Dancing In The Street," "I couldn't figure out a riff, and you know the way I like to play: I always like to do a riff, as opposed to just hitting barre chords and strumming." When Eddie does build a riff, it floats, flits, and switchback chugs on palm muted syncopation leaving the work of the bass to thunder along with the kick's patterned Brill Building pop beats. Or when we hit hard-shufflin' hyper-boogies like "I'm The One" and "Hot For Teacher" or "Loss of Control," Michael Anthony holds a swung solid eight-note rattle at 140BPM with a few walking toss outs to keep himself entertained, but you'd be stressed to pick them out with his bass turned so low in the mix.

It really is no surprise that a player like Anthony finds no where to turn. How, what, and when you play is dictated by the guitarist. His brother is the drummer. And your best advocate — the man who keeps you employed after it all goes down — is the clown who put a cape on you and called you "pint-sized." Your light is hidden, your soul is trapped, and your outlets are scarce. Revisiting the YouTube video titled "Van Halen — Michael Anthony DRUNK BASS SOLO" is something to behold.

The isolated audio from the track is clearly some type of modern avant noise artist using modulated synthesizers and a computer board to bend tones and arpeggiate notes. But there, on the screen, is our pint-sized hero in the cape he was adorned with by the Red Rocker himself, wearing Sammy's castoff green sun visor. And his Jack Daniels bass. Creating mountainous soundscapes and leading into fast-tapping picked out chords, he mugs for the crowd before falling to his back and dropping the floor out into a distorted sub

bass drone. His live performances become a literal release of everything built up. In the early 1980s, everyone's favorite punchline rock band member becomes an instrumental keystone in the avant noise movement, but only as a side project to when he's not being told to hold down a solid backbeat.

It's these edges that show through when the moment strikes. One bass solo per live show. A flourish here or there. These are marks of a caged animal pawing at the gate. Or, better yet, these are the glimpses of brilliance peeking through behind an iron curtain. Like a brilliant young artist trapped in totalitarian society, forced to produce new works that only praise the status quo.

It's no surprise that without an advocate in the group and with fifteen year old Wolfgang Van Halen finally able to legally join the band full time as a working member, forcing Michael Anthony out for good, that Anthony and Sammy Hagar eventually found kinship. What's also not surprising is that Hagar has relied on Michael Anthony to anchor each of his new musical projects, every time, and with such an amicable working relationship, the need for Michael Anthony to spring off on a crazy solos and pull huge runs and flourishes has faded into a simpler life, a retirement almost. A chance for him to take the lead has faded into smart, melodic toe-to-toe trade-offs with Joe Satriani building chords and key harmonics that play too effortlessly and end up sounding simplistic.

In this regard, Michael Anthony is the Great American Adjunct Lager — the Budweiser — of bass players. Technically, what he achieves is one of the most difficult styles to reproduce, and reproduce well. But taste-wise? The result is often designed to be a chuggable, crisp, background player to the rest of the evening. Beer is supposed to accompany the activity of the evening, not be the main focus of the night. Michael Anthony is the bass player, not the lead guitarist.

The television show *The Pickup Artist* on VH1 was based around a series of awful and odd behaviors that a man developed in in a book called *The Game* order to pick up women. But whereas the book was a mysterious tome of tried and true techniques, dragging them into public view exposed Mystery himself — a wonky disciple of *The Game* who dressed like a failed nü-metal loving magician's butler, and exposed just how curious and strange these techniques were. Perhaps the most innocuous of these techniques was the explanation for Mystery's signature furry top hat, goggles, crushed velour jackets and weird lip piercing — the concept of Peacocking.

With Peacocking, the person employing the technique finds unique visual cues that sets them apart from anyone in the room. A streak of pink in the hair, a weird rope necklace, a shirt with twisting dragons breathing fire back into each other nostrils: these are the basics. It's not designed to look... good. Instead, it's a way to grab attention. And attention is all that's needed.

And such becomes the bass playing of Michael Anthony. In the early years of Van Halen, in the proto-"Hot For Teacher" stylings of the "I'm The One" and "Bottom's Up!" shuffle, you can hear Anthony walk the fretboard like an old, farty bluesman. It starts with mild flicks and plops, and then after a few slides and rattles, he runs a flourish that swings a grace note into a triplet just on the last half of four before settling back into the heavy boogie groove. Something that pops, and shines just under the surface, a moment of peacocking. Like the glint of a rainbow trout as it flashes just under the surface of the river in the bright Montana sunlight

The flourishes aren't any foundation that you'd build a house on: no, that's what the bricks of the steady quarter — or swung eighth notes — are for. Instead, they exist like the funnyman at the office. In between work — and trust me, in Van Halen, Michael Anthony is doing *work* — it's the joke by the water cooler, and a darn funny one, too. Maybe a little out of place. Maybe without a segway and slightly jarring. But finally, the man you've never really paid attention to who kept his nose down and delivered his reports without fuss has started to come out of his shell.

"Light Up The Sky" is perhaps the best example of Michael Anthony's raw bass skill, thoughtfulness, and execution. Appearing on 1979's *Van Halen II*, it starts with a mean Eddie riff and Anthony follow along evenly, until the pre-chorus (right around :44 and 1:22), where he starts falling on solid chords to accentuate the complex harmonization with Eddie's guitar. When the chorus hits, he drops on a syncopated run up the D string giving his fingers a nimble workout that we don't get to hear on many songs. On the second half of the chorus, Michael Anthony pops another run to a low rhythmic bump the way an R&B bassist would lag behind the beat with a hammer-on gracenote walk, driving an urgency to the tempo of the track before dropping right back into the standard picked out eighth notes.

It's seeing an awkward kid in a ball-chain necklace with black stripes dyed into his hair walk up to a group of girls saying "what's this movie 'nobody puts Baby in a corner'" and seeing them all respond immediately with "*Dirty Dancing!*" He's just engaged a three set, and truth be told, if he works the system, he might see kino-escalation and number close (that means physical contact and getting a phone number in pick-up artist speak). It doesn't help the fact that from the outside looking in, it might still feel awkward at times. But, I suppose, that at the end of the day, the leading man is still getting the most dates and everything feels normal.

"Oh, the we finally meet the man with two first names."

The first time I heard that phrase was at a party in Burnsville, one town over from where I grew up. I was with Eric, who was cooler than me, at Eric's friend's party, who were all cool as well. They were all drinking alcohol, and Eric was drinking particularly more than I'd seen him drink because his mom was sick and he was having a hard time dealing with it.

But there I was, at a cool party in another city, meeting people. And they'd heard of me. Jesse Rob. The man with two first names. The elation at knowing I was even talked about eclipsed every shred of pedantry that made me want to correct people's spelling of my last name. Raub, you see, was probably being mispronounced by us Irish folk who were saddled with a German last name, so even if it *sounded* like I had two first names, I really didn't. But who could care about a technicality? I had a rep. One town over, I had a rep. And it was a girl who had brought it up.

Of course, things faded fast that night as it became clearer and clearer that I wasn't really much of anything (sober?) and that Eric was having more and more beer that it was time to leave before the spell of the Man With Two First Names was gone for good. I dragged Eric into my gold Saturn, drove back to his parent's, and we pushed his futon flat to sleep. Like usual, we split it in half, with his loving black lab crawling between us, switching off who she was spooning with intermittently through the night, Eric all the way tucked in against the wall and me at the edge.

It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes of staring at his bedroom's pale gray popcorn ceiling, debating what my potential new social standing in life might actually be (a

girl! a crosstown reputation!) before Eric leaned up over his dog, and up over me, and projectile vomited stale beer and the old nachos he'd microwaved just before we'd gone out all over the carpet in the center of his room. And so a Man With Two First Names knows his duty, and finds paper towels. Works silently, soaking the liquid from the carpet first to prevent the stench of beer from sinking in, in case his friends parents start to smell something off emanating from their son's room. Then there was the tracking down of soggy bits of tortilla chips, and undigested black beans. Bringing Eric a glass of water, telling him to sip on it slow, and telling him to roll back over and just sleep it off.

This is the reality of a Man With Two First Names. It's a bit part with a novelty twist. There's always an Eric, or an Eddie or David or Sammy to fall behind. A lead you can sidekick for. A steady stream of charisma that you can siphon little sips off to sustain your own personality, flapping open like a trap door rusty hinge to reveal a shred of the light you captured from the stars surrounding you. It's a role designed to pick up the pieces. Where talents are multitude, but plateau before you reach mastery. The Man With Two First Names can enter a room and leave a room without disturbing the atmosphere. The Man With Two First Names can kick off a party, but no looks for his number when he's not around. The Man With Two First Names grows to accept this position.

Everything culminates for Michael Anthony's peak and fade from relevance in Van Halen in "Hot For Teacher" off of 1984's *1984*, when Van Halen had fully grown from fish-out-of-water foursome to rightful stadium powerhouse virtuosos. It starts out with some of the most complex double-kick drum polyrhythms put to tape from Alex, and then leads into perhaps the most classic example of the two-hand tapping guitar technique that Eddie all but invented. When the bass rides in, it's Michael Anthony's job to roll the song steady along and rush it through. On the first ten to twenty listens, you won't even hear much. The playing between Alex and Michael Anthony is so tight that they push off each other to roll the song into one of the fastest rollicking stomps anyone had heard on major radio, and some of the tightest rhythm work playing from the pocket ever broadcast on the airwaves.

It's during Eddie's extended solo section that you hear a only a shred of brilliance in Michael Anthony refusing to play the only root. He bounces around a little bit before harmonizing against the solo directly, pushing up the third, and even taking the seventh in some cases. Like normal, there's no rhythm guitar track to back the solo. Once again, Michael Anthony is swinging "live in the studio" double duty by keeping the melody going and structuring the rhythm section of the whole band. And when he does let himself fly at the end of a phrase during the verse, it's in a way that services the song as a whole, and it's at that moment you can finally hear on tape what it sounds like when a wild horse is broken.

So here we sit. Examining the legacy of a man with two first names. He wasn't the first, and he won't be the last, but his story fits neatly into the narrative that weaves it's way through that of the men with two first names. The background player. The underconfident perfectionist. The sidekick. But at the same time, Michael Anthony's story gives us like him hope. Because for every Van Halen that we lose in our life, we gain a Hagar. And with every Hagar that we gain, we also gain a Chickenfoot. There's no glory in Chickenfoot. There's no quality either. But I believe — I have to believe — that at least, in Chickenfoot, Michael Anthony has found serenity. And with serenity, there exists no need for flamboyance.