

performers



dero-
smith



Steven Tyler,
Tom Hamilton,
Joe Perry,
Brad Whitford,
Joey Kramer
(L to R), 1977

By Scott
Schinder

IN A THREE-DECADE CAREER unparalleled in both the giddy exhilaration of its highs and the crushing depths of its lows, Aerosmith continues to embody the hormone-fueled liberation of the American teenage rock & roll experience like no other band of its era.



IN THE 1970s, the Boston-bred quintet played a major role in establishing the fundamentals of hard rock. But despite its seminal role in making rock sound bigger, Aerosmith has never abandoned its original mission as a gritty, unpretentious rock & roll outfit. The band has always retained an instinctive understanding of the importance of the groove, and its riffy, hook-savvy songcraft has always gone hand in hand with the cheerfully sleazy swagger of flamboyant frontman Steven Tyler's randy, double entendre-laden lyrics.

In its initial rise to arena-rock stardom, Aerosmith introduced such standards as "Walk This Way," "Sweet Emotion," "Back in the Saddle," "Mama Kin" and "Lord of the Thighs," lovably leering anthems that vividly captured the joys and terrors of youthful hormones run amok. And with its epic early magnum opus "Dream On," the band virtually invented the power ballad. Aerosmith's Seventies achievements alone would have been enough to guarantee the group's place among rock's greats. But Aerosmith had an utterly unprecedented second act up its sleeve, emerging from an ignominious fall from grace to stage one of the most remarkable comebacks in rock & roll history.

The members of Aerosmith came of age in the second half of the 1960s, their musical sensibilities shaped by the examples of the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds, bands whose approach to rock & roll was informed by their close ties to rhythm & blues roots, and the lesson wasn't lost on Aerosmith. Steven Tyler, né Tallarico, was a drummer, vocalist and former juvenile delin-



quent who'd spent several years drifting, with little success, through the Greenwich Village music scene of the late 1960s. Eventually, he split in frustration, heading for the vacation lodge his parents ran in Sunapee, New Hampshire. There, he met Joe Perry, a talented guitarist and fellow refugee from adult responsibility, working at the local ice cream parlor. Tyler, Perry and Perry's bass-playing pal Tom Hamilton soon pooled their talents to launch a new combo, relocating to Boston at the end of 1970, adding Tyler's high school chum Joey Kramer (who came up with the

name Aerosmith) on drums and Beantown bar-band vet Brad Whitford on rhythm guitar.

"We weren't too ambitious when we started out," Tyler later recalled. "We just wanted to be the biggest thing that ever walked the planet, the greatest rock band that ever was." The reality of Aerosmith's early days was considerably less grandiose, but after an extended period of dues-paying squalor, Aerosmith was signed to Columbia by Clive Davis in the summer of 1972.

Aerosmith's self-titled debut, released in the fall of 1973, didn't initially make many waves outside the band's home turf, but its audacious combination of rockist grandeur and good-natured sleaze made it clear these guys meant business. The sophomore effort, *Get Your Wings*, which inaugurated a long and productive association with producer Jack Douglas, arrived the following year and found the band developing its playfully powerful signature style into something distinctive and definitive. But it was with the subsequent breakthrough smashes *Toys in the Attic* and *Rocks that Aero-*

smith really came into its own, both as a commercial entity and as a spare, swinging outfit that could roll as well as it could rock.

The good times eventually turned bad. Escalating substance abuse helped exacerbate Tyler and Perry's already combustible creative chemistry, earning the pair their less-than-flattering nickname of the Toxic Twins. Perry, the band's instrumental star and one of his generation's prime guitar heroes, quit during the making of 1979's *Night in the Ruts*, and Whitford followed in mid-1981. Aerosmith continued for a couple of years with replacements Jimmy Crespo and Rick DuFay, but most observers agreed it just wasn't the same.

Fans rejoiced when Perry and Whitford returned to reconstitute the classic Aerosmith lineup for 1985's *Done With Mirrors*, the band's first album for Geffen. But it was 1987's *Permanent Vacation* that demonstrated that Aerosmith was truly back in the saddle. By that point, Tyler and Perry's boundary-crossing involvement in Run-D.M.C.'s hip-hop reworking of "Walk This Way" had exposed Aerosmith to a new generation of MTV-weaned kids, and the entire band had emerged from an extensive rehab program with a renewed sense of purpose. The increased focus was obvious on *Permanent Vacation*, whose timely convergence of rockist grit, seamless songcraft and state-of-the-art sonic savvy yielded the memorable hits "Rag Doll," "Angel" and "Dude (Looks Like a Lady)." Nineteen eighty-nine's seven-million-selling *Pump* continued Aerosmith's upward momentum, spawning the Top Ten singles "Love in an Elevator," "What It Takes" and "Janie's Got a Gun." The latter song revealed an unexpectedly sensitive, lyrical profeminist stance, belatedly demonstrating that there was some room for maturity in Aerosmith's extended musical adolescence.

By 1993, when Aerosmith released *Get a Grip* (including the hits "Livin' on the Edge," "Cryin'" and "Amazing") on Geffen, the band had already signed a new, much-talked-about megadeal with



Top: Tyler, 1998;
Tyler and Perry;
Hamilton, Whitford,
Tyler, Perry, Kramer



Columbia Records. Aerosmith's long-awaited return to Columbia came with 1997's *Nine Lives*, an eclectic transitional effort whose unpredictable combination of rock & roll basics and adventurous experimentalism suggested that Aerosmith's future remains a tantalizingly open book. Considering the band's proven knack for confounding expectations and silencing skeptics, Aerosmith may well have some more surprises in store. ●

