

Ace Frehley,  
Peter Criss,  
Gene Simmons,  
and Paul Stanley  
(clockwise  
from front)





# KISS

BY JAAN UHELSZKI

Four musicians with painted faces and platform shoes rose from the streets of New York to create one of rock & roll's biggest bands – and brands.

AT THE DAWN OF THE SEVENTIES, WHEN BOTH THE NIKE swoosh and the Apple insignia were still on the drawing board, four determined young men – guitarist/vocalist Paul Stanley, vocalist/bassist Gene Simmons, guitarist Ace Frehley, and drummer/vocalist Peter Criss – were busy designing a monolithic logo of their own. Consisting of four strong capital letters colored in shades of metallic silver or combustible orange, the powerful, instantly recognizable KISS emblem would eventually become ubiquitous worldwide. But unlike the Nike and Apple logos, carefully designed to appeal to jocks and nerds respectively, the KISS logo was created for *anyone* who wanted to rock & roll all night and party every day – meaning *every single freaking person on the planet*. ✨ The KISS product itself was pretty great: a variation on the music developed by heroes like Chuck Berry, the Beatles, Brian Wilson, and Led Zeppelin. A typical KISS song – “Strutter” or “Shout It Out Loud” – consisted of three or four minutes of deliciously chunky rock & roll, piled high with short catch phrases about being young and having fun, and usually topped off by an electrifying guitar solo. ✨ It was a tried-and-true formula, for sure, but the way the band delivered it was a different story altogether. KISS looked like nothing else in pop music history. Each member adopted a different persona: Starchild! Demon! Spaceman! Cat! Paul Stanley (b. Stanley Eisen, January 20, 1952); Gene Simmons (b. Chaim Witz, August 25, 1949); Ace Frehley (b. Paul Frehley, April 27, 1951); and Peter Criss (b. Peter Criscuola, December 20, 1945) were four perfect rock pitchmen dressed in platform boots, black leather, and white Kabuki faces, playing groundbreaking shows that set a startlingly high new standard for concert entertainment.





KISS live in 1973

Iggy Pop would brag that he killed the sixties, but KISS actually drove the final stake through the heart of the anticapitalist hippie era. Fueled by ambition, an unrelenting will, a prodigious work ethic, and innate musical gifts, the members of KISS made no bones about their goals. They wanted to play music, have a good time . . . and make lots of money. They were perhaps the first bandmates to see themselves as a brand, marketing their image in often funny and outrageous ways, licensing products as weird and diverse as KISS bowling balls, KISS condoms, KISS caskets, and thousands of other items that sold worldwide and made them multimillionaires.

It would be tempting to think that the band was all show and no substance, but there was a clear artistic point of view, with music and lyrics that were upbeat, direct, populist, and unambiguous. And even romantic, given the success of "Beth," from *Destroyer* (1976), Criss' paean to his long-suffering then-wife, who was actually not named Beth, but Lydia. The song was their highest-charting single ever, rocketing to Number Seven on *Billboard's Hot 100* in August of that year.

KISS may have looked exotic, but underneath the face paint and razzmatazz they were men of the people – and the people could tell, forming a fan club so devoted that they would be known as the KISS Army. KISS embraced the masses, unapologetically rejecting the hipper-than-thou attitude of artists like David Bowie and Lou Reed, or the intellectual

obscurities of prog-rock bands like King Crimson, Yes, and Pink Floyd.

The members of KISS were bright, but not too hip for the heartlands. While growing up in New York, they were a little unfinished – outcasts, if you will. They weren't captains of the football team with blond cheerleaders on their arms. They weren't pretentious art students. They were more like the guy who sat next to you in advanced biology class. They were smart enough to know their history, and sensitive enough to understand when it was time for a sea change.

They figured out exactly what kids wanted in the seventies and responded brilliantly. How? Just a year before the release of their self-titled debut album in 1974, they were still in the audience, still paying for their rock & roll. They were the ones standing next to you at the Fillmore East, hanging onto Robert Plant's every heaving note when Led Zeppelin opened up for Iron Butterfly, or elbowing you as you watched Pete Townshend execute his precise windmill

moves, or tried to figure out how Mountain's Leslie West got *that* guitar tone. They were the ones rushing the stage at Madison Square Garden to get a closer look at Alice Cooper in his night-blinding white satin suit, top hat, and ghoulish makeup. All of it was grist for the mill.

"Alice was a huge influence on us," explained Frehley. "We stole from Alice and we stole from Led Zeppelin and we stole from the Who. Just like every band after us copied us. But that's rock & roll."

---

**"It's not about a movement, just a simple philosophy: You're here once, let's celebrate life and enjoy ourselves."**

---



Mostly, though, their organizing totem was the Beatles. There was a failed effort to copy the campy New York Dolls: "We were just too husky to wear women's clothes and makeup . . . we looked more like drag queens," confided Criss. The boys wisely changed tactics, deciding to use makeup in a more dramatic, theatrical, and masculine way. Each member was assigned the task of coming up with a mask that reflected who he was on the inside, yet conveyed a persona that kids could identify with or fantasize about. Like John, Paul, George, and Ringo had done a decade earlier, KISS was determined that each of its members be a superstar.

But it's one thing to conceptualize such a grand idea, quite another to execute it. The true miracle of KISS was that members not only came up with outstanding ideas for their own personas, but also independently created face-paint designs that complemented each other while working as a graphic whole. Astounding, really. You could probably hire the best makeup artists in Hollywood and not come up with anything nearly as cool and sublime as the iconic Kabuki masks these young musicians created for themselves.

Rhythm guitarist and primary lead vocalist Stanley became the positive, androgynous Starchild. Bassist Simmons was his polar opposite — the dark, rapacious, sexually deviant Demon. Lead guitarist Frehley became the Spaceman, owing partly to his interest in science fiction. Criss, a true wild child of the streets, shape-shifted into the Cat because he needed nine lives just to survive.

"The makeup was war paint," Gene Simmons told *The Guardian* in 2012. "We played our early shows at a place called the Daisy [in Long Island]. There couldn't have been more than fifty to a hundred people in the place, but when we looked across the stage, we felt as if we belonged together. I remember seeing the Beatles as a kid and thinking there must have

been just one Beatle mother, cause they all looked like they were connected. There's no question that our outfits and our bootheels and our makeup were a unique definition of who we were and helped us become who we are."

**B**UT FOR ALL THE BRILLIANCE AND INSIGHT, KISS needed someone with business savvy to help the band take its grand visions to the bank. After its second show, it mounted a campaign to nab a manager with almost pathological single-mindedness. Armed with a well-thumbed copy of the 1972 year-end issue of *Billboard*, which listed every record company executive, manager, and booking agent, the band sent packages to any person it thought might help. Included was a photo of the band in proto-makeup, a bio, a pair of complimentary tickets and backstage passes to the next gig, and a rather professional-looking invitation printed up by one of Criss' friends.

The quartet received a number of responses, and fortuitously one of them turned out to be the right one, despite how it looked on paper. Bill Aucoin had never managed a rock band, but he had done a lot of other impressive things. He was the director of a music television show called *Flip Side*, and perhaps more propitiously for their unfolding destinies, he had produced *Supermarket Sweep*, a demented television game show where contestants with shopping carts sped through the aisles of a supermarket, making a mad grab for groceries.

But that wasn't what impressed Stanley. It was when Aucoin looked them all dead in the eye and said, "I'm not interested in working with you guys unless you want to be the biggest band in the world."

Aucoin also promised that if he couldn't secure a record deal in three weeks, the band was under no obligation to him. To the band's astonishment, he did better. He garnered a deal in two weeks, convincing his long-

KISS goes girl crazy, 1974.







**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
Gene Simmons, 1977; Ace Frehley touches up;  
KISS steps out in 1974; live in 1979; Paul Stanley  
with Paul Stanley dolls.





time friend Neil Bogart, then just forming his own label, Casablanca Records, to make them his first signing.

Was Bogart wowed by the music? Not particularly. As for the makeup and leather frippery, he told them he thought they should probably abandon it. But once he understood that KISS was resolute, he decided to embrace its vision completely. It was Bogart, for example, who came up with the idea that one of the band members should learn how to breathe fire – it was never quite clear why Simmons volunteered – and Bogart hired a professional magician to teach him.

Next, to drum up some publicity, Bogart devised a string of marathon kissing contests held throughout America to help cast the spotlight on his outrageous new act. The prize, an eight-day trip to Acapulco, was won by a Fort Lauderdale couple that locked lips for 133 hours straight. And KISS won a boatload of newspaper stories where it mattered most – the suburbs, where word of the group began to spread like wildfire.

**B**UT FOR ALL THE PROMISE, WILD IDEAS AND shared vision, KISS almost failed to launch. Despite positive word of mouth and the buzz surrounding their fantastic live shows, which featured flash pots, explosions, oceans of dry ice, and a drum kit that rose into the air, the first three KISS albums were surprisingly slow starters. By the time *Dressed to Kill* was released in early 1975, the band's label was close to bankruptcy and Bogart was beginning to panic and lose faith. The band needed a success – a big one. And they needed it now.

As Stanley recalled in his autobiography, *Face the Music*, “We were building a rabid following as a live act . . . but this wasn't reflected in our tepid album sales. With one hundred and twenty thousand sales, *Dressed to Kill* had done better than *Hotter Than Hell's* ninety thousand and *KISS's* sixty thousand. But it was nothing when we considered the crowds we saw at our shows. Where was the disconnect? What was going on?”

And then it hit him: The albums didn't sound like the band sounded live.

Manager Aucoin came to the rescue, with a brilliant plan that would completely change the course of the band's history. He proposed the band record the ultimate live album – it would be a souvenir of a KISS show, and more. They hired superproducer Eddie Kramer, who had worked with Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin, and recorded the Woodstock album.

After the shows were recorded, Kramer set about making the album evoke the same excitement present in their live concerts. When flash pots went off, Kramer replaced them with the sounds of actual cannons exploding. If live guitars were out of tune, they were corrected in the studio and given a little extra punch. Kramer also enhanced the sound of the audience by mixing in additional crowd noises, making each response sound like a little earthquake. While he might have fudged the truth a bit, the end product sounded fantastic, and made you want to buy a ticket for yourself. Released in September 1975, the two-disc *Alive!* gave the band its first solid U.S. hit single, the album's version of “Rock and Roll All Nite,” and scored the band its first Platinum Record. Other equally strong tracks on the disc – “Firehouse,” “Parasite,” “She,” “Black Diamond,” and “Cold Gin” – still make up the band's set list today.

After *Live*, there was no stopping KISS. The band went on to become the phenomenon it was meant to be, eventually selling over one hundred million records worldwide and racking up twenty-nine consecutive Gold Records, placing them just behind the

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**KISS**  
Casablanca 1974



**HOTTER THAN HELL**  
Casablanca 1974



**ALIVE!**  
Casablanca 1975



**DESTROYER**  
Casablanca 1976



**ROCK AND ROLL OVER**  
Casablanca 1976



**LOVE GUN**  
Casablanca 1977



**LICK IT UP**  
Mercury 1983



**REVENGE**  
Mercury 1992

Rolling Stones and the Beatles.

Over the years, the KISS brand has risen and fallen. Some of the personnel have changed – Peter Criss left in 1980; Ace Frehley followed in 1982. The band made a raft of solid albums (and some bad ones), took off its makeup, and then put it back on. Through it all, it has managed to keep the original creative spark from going out. Far from a flicker, the flame appears to be burning brighter these days than the mightiest Bic, at sold-out show after incredible show.

“KISS' appeal has always been timeless,” said the Great Demon Gene Simmons, as he offered the real secret to the band's success. “It's not about a movement, just a simple philosophy: You're here once, let's celebrate life and enjoy ourselves. And it's about empowerment, believing you can accomplish something. We're the proof of that. We were given up for dead before our first album came out, and I think we're like a rallying cry to fans of what's possible. Kiss concerts are no longer concerts. They are tribal gatherings.”