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ESSAY



WRESTLING GENE SIMMONS AND OTHER DEMONS

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A Kiss and Tell story . . . sort of

In the early 1970s, my mother, who was in her twenties and recently remarried, liked to cut out funky pictures from magazines and glue them to sheets of cardboard, collage-style, and hang them around the house as art (because we were poor and couldn't afford "real" art). One of these collages featured a picture of strange clown-like men, somehow omi-



nous, as if they were the bearers of diabolical news. Moreover, they appeared to be suspended on a pillow of flame, adding a splash of apocalyptic theater to the bad news. The photograph, I now know, came from the artwork adorning KISS's second

album, *Hotter Than Hell* (1974). I was four, maybe five years old at the time, and would

walk down our hallway en route to my bedroom or the bathroom just beyond it and stop to look at that picture. I don't remember anything else on that collage but the KISS picture, which held me spellbound—the makeup, the bat wings, that guy with his tongue dangling out. Little

did I know the strange and sometimes dark places that single image would lead me.

That was when we lived in a small clapboard rental in the southeastern desert of Washington State, where my stepdad

worked as an electrician at the Hanford nuclear-reactor site and my mother took shifts at a pizzeria called the Gas Light, while I poked sticks into anthills in the brushy field by our house, or picked cactus thorns out of my socks. It was an unsettled time. My parents were young and liked to throw romping parties in our squat rental. I'm an only child, but other kids—older and fond of trouble—would come over with their parents and we would swipe beers from the fridge and guzzle them under the cherry trees in the backyard until foam sprayed from our noses, and we tipped over. Inside, our parents smoked joints and swung their hips to the scratchy vinyl sounds of the Doors, Led Zeppelin, and sometimes KISS.

It is no surprise, then, that my first introduction to the music of KISS came by way of my stepdad's expansive record collection. He owned only one KISS album, *Rock and Roll Over* (1976), and I grew to love everything about it: its cartoonish cover depicting the members of KISS wholly transformed into their stage personas—Peter Criss as the Cat Man, Ace Frehley as the cosmically cool Space Ace, Paul Stanley as the Star Child, and, of course, Gene Simmons as the tongue-lolling,¹ fire-breathing

1 On the jacket art, his tongue is shown as forked or bifurcated. Traditionally, the forked tongue represents two distinct but fascinating character traits. First, doublespeak—one who speaks with a forked tongue. And second, sexual pleasure. People who surgically bifurcate their tongues do so for the sexual benefits and, apparently, can learn to move the forked tips interdependently. Tongue bifurcation is outlawed in many states, as it turns out, and many doctors refuse

Demon; its promotional stickers and posters stuffed inside the album; the sweet and thick chemical smell of the vinyl itself; the static electricity that held the jacket sleeve to the record . . . everything. But mostly I loved the music. The guitars. The solos. The roaring applause on their live albums. The volume and pelvic brio. They were superheroes. No, they were better than superheroes. They were rock gods *and* superheroes. What wasn't to like?

The Stilwell boys, who lived next door, were not so enthused. With their crew cuts, striped shirts, yellow teeth, and freckles, the three of them would appear on my lawn like a tiny picket line to proclaim, in unison, that KISS stood for "Knights in Satan's Service."² "Besides," the Stilwells

to perform the operation. Gene Simmons, who has worked very hard to create a persona of sexual prowess, has not undergone tongue-bifurcation surgery, but he has enacted a persona of someone with a forked tongue, one that readily befits the duplicity of a man-cum-Demon.

2 The rumor that KISS was in cahoots with Satan was widespread in the 1970s, but as Simmons notes in his 2001 autobiography, *Kiss and Make-Up*, the band did not dispel the rumor. When asked if they worshipped Satan, Simmons dodged the question, knowing that a nonanswer was "good press." Those who took KISS's name to be an acronym for wickedness were also, in the 1980s, quick to assign devilish meaning to W.A.S.P.'s name as well, maintaining that the name did not stand for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, but We Are Satan's People. Or, We Are Satan's Preachers. Or, We Are Sexual Perverts. When asked what W.A.S.P. stood for, front man Blackie Lawless—who seemed to have taken a cue from Gene Simmons—replied: "We Ain't Sure, Pal." Also, consider the famous bluesy Aussie rock band AC/DC. Again, naysayers quickly dismissed Alternating Cur-

would argue, “they got no talent.”

What ensued is what always ensued: a volley of *yes they dos* and *no they don'ts* capped by the Stilwells' inevitable ace-in-the-hole rebuttal: “They're not even *close* to Elvis. He's the *King*. Elvis could *kill* KISS any day of the week!”

My sound system in those days was a blue and white record player that closed up like a briefcase. The player's lid would yawn open, exposing the white turntable and a three-inch speaker in the box's corner near the volume knob. It was your typical three-speed machine: 78, 45, 33 1/3. I loved it intensely. When I wasn't slapping *Lord of the Rings* LPs on the white disc, or swinging my own bony hips to the Beatles' *Abbey Road*, I played KISS records: *Alive II* (1977), *Double Platinum* (1978), and *Dynasty* (1979) were the mainstays.

During my record-player days I had a crush on a girl named Christy Chambers and I spent hours in my room singing “Do You Love Me” and “Charisma,” imagining her as my devoted audience of one. All the things I wanted to say but couldn't—

rent/Direct Current, sniffing out what must have been the truth: Antichrist/Devil's Children. Or, After Christ/Devil Comes. Or, Antichrist/Death to Christ. After all, AC/DC penned creepy lyrics like, “If you're into evil, you're a friend of mine.”

At school, a girl I remember for her pigtails and yellow dress told me that Gene Simmons was so evil that he had a cow's tongue sewn into his mouth.

like “Do You Love Me”—could be conveyed through song, through the throaty lyrics of the Demon himself. His songs demanded that girls recognize the love they'd always had for you, but would never admit to themselves. And his songs were

colored with an attitude I liked instantly because it was, to my thinking, the attitude of a man.

The more I listened to tracks like “Calling Dr. Love,” “Two Timer,” and “Ladies in Waiting,” the more I wanted to *be* Gene Simmons. But there

existed complications—perceived or real—in becoming the Demon. Take his tongue, for instance. At school, a girl I remember for her pigtails and yellow dress told me that Gene Simmons was so evil that he had a cow's tongue sewn into his mouth, which is why his own tongue was so long. I didn't believe her, but how could I be sure? What did I know about tongues? To set the record straight, I raced home after school and scavenged every *Teen Beat* magazine and record cover I owned that showed the ubiquitous Tongue.³ I exhumed a magnifying glass from my sock drawer and enlarged the Tongue, searching for the faintest hint of what I imagined to be an incision line or scar, anything that might betray a cow's tongue. My study was incon-

³ In 2002, Simmons launched a *Maxim*-esque men's magazine titled *Tongue*, apparently now defunct.

clusive. So I studied cows. Anytime I saw one on TV or at the edge of a field while driving in our Plymouth Road Runner, I stared, straining my eyes in the hope that a cow tongue would flop out around a cud. That study was also inconclusive. Eventually, I settled on the central question: what, in fact, would make one's tongue that long? It wasn't long before I intuited the answer.

Stretching exercises.

Every day after school, I would burst through our living room door and race down the hallway, past the collage and on to the bathroom, where I started my own tongue-stretching regimen in front of the mirror. It's not easy to stretch your own tongue. It's a lot like trying to stretch a bar of soap in the shower. It escapes your grasp. So I held the tip of my tongue with a wad of toilet paper and pulled down with consistent pressure until the pain was so intense, so cumulative, that I surrendered, and spit the soggy wads of tissue into the sink.

Later, I started taking measurements with a plastic ruler, nearly gagging myself each time. After what must have been several weeks, I resolved that despite the pain, the daily torture, my tongue was not getting any longer.⁴

I was devastated.

4 Several years later I would meet a girl whose tongue was as long as Gene Simmons's. She knew of Gene Simmons not because of his music, but because of his tongue. "We were born with the same kind of tongue," she said. "Look." Her tongue fell out and my eyes goggled. I was stunned and remotely aroused. "Want to go to a movie?" I asked.

Because it was the seventies, my mother owned several pairs of platform shoes, big wooden things with leather straps whose designs reminded me of Ace Frehley's lunar space boots. I was what people called a latchkey kid, so during those afternoons when I was home alone, I would throw my KISS records on my dad's stereo system—an intimidating stack of components, tuners, 8-track and cassette modules, crowned with an automatic turntable. Four speakers the size of luggage trunks hung from the corners of our living room, suspended in aqua-blue decorative fishing nets. The system was a point of pride for Dad and for me too, especially on those days when I had the whole thing to myself.

Bedecked in my mother's clogs with my dad's stereo cranked to KISS's "Love Gun," I would windmill my arm on an old acoustic guitar with two strings while jumping around to scream out:

*No place for hiding baby, no place to run—
You pulled the trigger on my (da-da-da-dah,
da-da-da-dah) Love gun!
Loooooove—guuuuun. Love gun! Looooo-ve
gun!*

In case you're wondering, it never once occurred to me that a "love gun" was a euphemism for penis.⁵ In my mind they

5 Nor did it occur to me that a number of KISS's other songs centered on euphemisms for the penis as well. Consider the 1977 song "Larger Than Life" (translation: my pork sword is bigger than yours). It's a classic Simmons song. Guttural, thundering, and

were talking about some kind of real gun, one that discharged a love potion that made girls fall in love with you. It was brilliant. I wanted one. I would save my allowance.

Singing like that made me feel larger or older than I was. And to a certain extent, KISS made me feel invincible somehow. I would watch the neighbor boys endure merciless taunting and beatings at school, while I seemed immune—with few exceptions—to that juggernaut of playground cruelty. It was a difference I credited to musical preferences. A devotion to someone as cornball as Elvis would earn you endless noogies and wedgies, but an affinity for KISS won the affections from cute fifth-grade girls named Christine⁶ and the praise of one's peers generally.

So my obsession started like that, in

virile. And the lyrics leave little to the imagination: "I'm plain in size / You can't believe your eyes / what you've heard, were not lies / my love is too much to hold." Or there is the fetishistic "Plaster Caster," a song that recounts a woman in Los Angeles rumored to have taken plaster casts of innumerable penises, of which Gene Simmons's was allegedly one. But even its lyrics fell below my radar. I had somehow associated "Plaster Caster" with mummies (don't ask).

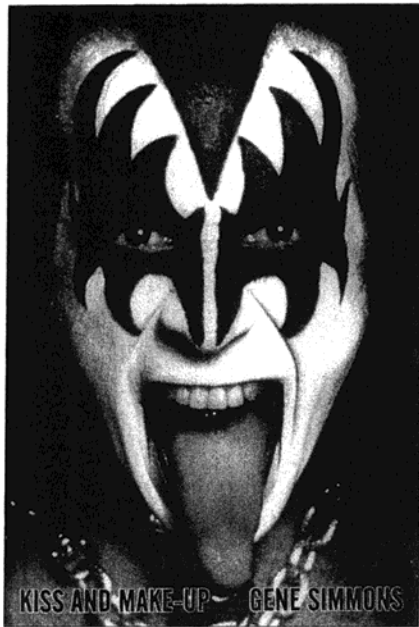
⁶ Largely because of KISS's 1977 classic, "Christine Sixteen." The takeaway lyric: "She's been around, but she's young and clean."

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the way so many of our obsessions begin. The curiosity, the connection, and then the tipping point, which I later recognized as a recurring dream that began around this time: I'm in a record store thumbing through the KISS titles and stumble upon a trove of their albums that

I've never heard before. Records with cool, mysterious covers. Records produced in England, Singapore, Guam. Records stuffed with cool promotional booty, like baseball cards and bubble gum and Shrinky Dinks. Of course nothing galvanizes obsession more than having to defend it endlessly. It is the bedrock upon which all brands of fanaticism squat.⁷ Growing up, I trotted my KISS loyalty out into the well-lit public. Being a KISS fan was a major part of my identity. Later, in college, as my fraternity brothers stomped around to the Violent Femmes, I saw my relationship with "the hottest band in the world" becoming more complicated. Put another way, KISS was nothing I could play at a party. Or at least that is the way I saw it.

⁷ It's no coincidence, then, that we've pulled the word *fan* (as in "I'm a KISS fan forever, bro") from its Latin root, *fanaticus*. And while it has become somewhat passé to invoke the OED's etymological take on words, I think that given Simmons's stage persona, such an invocation is warranted in this case: "Fanatic. *adj.* Of an action or speech: Such as might result from possession by a deity or demon."



Like most of my college-aged peers, I too was sorting out the particulars of my identity. But unlike many of my schoolmates and fraternity brothers, I had come from a home where college was something *other* people did. It wasn't for us. So I always felt a bit behind the cultural curve. In my mind, my affinity for KISS was an element of my personality that threatened to unravel this new, blue-blazer-red-tie-fraternity-English-major image I was trying on. After all, English majors tended to eschew bands like KISS and used words like *eschew*.

Once, when I revealed my obsession for KISS to my roommate, Tim—a guy who seemed psychically attuned to the world of good music, and whose side of the room was plastered with Fugazi and Hüsker Dü posters—he scoffed: “Oh, come

on, Brandon. Don't tell me you were a heshel!” That I had never heard that term only further illuminated my discomfort in this new college world. Ultimately, it was my own insecurities in that first year that forced me to swallow whole the things I loved most, and to horde my obsession.

Eventually, though, when I gained some confidence, I would mention KISS at a party in a self-effacing manner at first, preempting the kind of strike I had sustained from Tim. And then I would change tack, rerouting the conversation from musical merits to some of the quirky autobiographical details of Gene Simmons himself. I would tell his story. I had done my homework, reading articles, memorizing factoids about the man behind the mask, and at one point even resolving to write his biography. I would title it *Man of 1,000 Faces*.⁸

The more I learned about the Demon, the more I came to admire him as a man, and the more I felt drawn to his story and his childhood in particular. Most people don't know (or care to know) that Gene Simmons—an only child—was born Chaim Witz (pronounced *Hi-um Vitz*) in Haifa, Israel, on August 25, 1949. Or that he was raised by his single mother,

⁸ Title taken from one of the songs by the same title on his 1978 solo album, *Gene Simmons*. Actually, the song is an oblique tribute to Simmons's favorite actor, Lon Chaney Sr., who, in addition to playing in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, was known as the “Man of a Thousand Faces.”

Flora—a Hungarian Jew—who was one of the only members of her family to survive the Nazi concentration camps. His father, Feri Witz, once known as the tallest man in his Hungarian village, was absent more than present, and when he did come home to Chaim and Flora, he arrived with his Israeli machine gun, which he kept on the kitchen table. But he would soon vanish, after Flora caught him with another woman. From then on, it was just Flora and Chaim trying to get on with very little money.

It could not have been easy. Chaim, who had suffered from polio when he was very young, would pick *sabra* (cactus) from the brushy hills near his home village of Vade Jamal, and peddle them at the bus depot for change to buy milk or eggs.

Eventually, Flora recognized that she and Chaim would have to leave Israel if they were to get ahead. So she bundled up her boy, packed their things, and left their bullet-pocked apartment—a reminder of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War for Independence—to emigrate to New York and begin new lives. There the reinvention began. Shortly after their arrival, Chaim changed his name to Gene Klein. In *Kiss and Make-Up*, Simmons notes that he selected the name Gene “because it was more American than Chaim,” and Klein because it was his mother’s maiden name, and pursuant to the edicts of Judaism, the mother’s name is handed down in the absence of the father. “So I was not Chaim Witz, Israeli,” he delineates. “I was Gene Klein, new American.”

Gene’s entire world seemed to pivot on this “new American” mystique. In Queens, while living with his uncle and aunt (who had taken him and his mother in), and while attending a rigorous academic schedule at a yeshiva,⁹ Gene saw his first television set. In Queens, he first learned of cowboys. Read his first comic books. Heard his first (and most influential) rock-and-roll band, the Beatles.¹⁰ And, most notably—at least according to the Demon himself—he connected the dots that supposedly link the worlds of music and women. “I came to see the point,” he says, “since music—not just the twist, not just Nat King Cole, but all music—was my entrée to the soft, milky thighs of girls.” Simmons argues too that there is nothing more to rock and roll than the primal desire to “get laid.” Musicians who tell you they got into the business for the art are liars. They got into the business, Simmons maintains, to “chase skirt.”

Some of Gene Klein’s early interests, however, seem to belie this cocksure attitude. The Gene Klein of those days was a little, well, nerdish. He and his friends published their own magazines (many of which Gene illustrated himself) wholly dedicated to their favorite science-fictional books, horror shows, and mov-

9 For a short time, he actually studied to become a rabbi, but—he has confessed—his appetite for girls trumped his interests in theology.

10 In *Kiss and Make-Up*, Simmons also tells of listening to Chubby Checker in high school and winning twist contests. He wouldn’t dance with the white girls, because “they talked too much and dressed too dowdy.” The black girls, on the other hand, “knew how to shimmy and shake.”

ies.¹¹ They penned reviews and offered character analyses, plot summaries, and on and on. Hardly the kind of doings that typically woo girls with the “milky thighs.” And while he does portray an awareness of this apparent disconnect (the one between simultaneously fancying stories of extra-terrestrials and the downtown dames),¹² his interests, whether he admits it or not, always did, and have, run in the direction of art. Popular, kitschy art, but art all the same. Just look at his face paint, the design of which he himself created. His conception of and insistence on the costumes and face paint in KISS were gestures that married his triple interests in sci-fi/horror, art, and rock and roll. On makeup design, Simmons tells us that his “was taken from the Bat Wings of Black Bolt, a character in the Marvel comic *The Inhumans*. The boots were vaguely Japanese, though—taken from *Gorgo* or *Godzilla*—and the rest of the getup was borrowed from *Batman* and *Phantom of the Opera*.” None of these influences

11 Simmons edited and published *Cosmos Stiletto*, a comic born out of two separate comics, *Cosmos* and *Stiletto*. We can't be surprised that in the late 1970s, when KISS had reached their peak of fame, Marvel Comics produced a special KISS issue wherein the actual ink contained blood from each member of KISS. A famous photograph shows each rocker squirting his own blood into a barrel of ink at the Marvel production plant in Buffalo, New York. I learned about the comic book from the Stilwells, the freckly neighbor boys in Washington. That KISS had injected their *blood* into the comic's ink further proved to them a degree of wickedness on par with Beelzebub.

12 From the autobiography: “It became clear to us that, as much as we loved science fiction, it wasn't going to get us where we wanted to go with the girls.”

is evil so much as menacing, so we are left to puzzle over why Simmons, who once studied at a yeshiva, chose the Demon, the paragon of evil, as his stage persona. If we are to peer through the pyrotechnics and examine Gene Simmons's stage creation as a caricature, we might see that it isn't a reflection of wickedness, but an amalgam of the American popular experience. The persona that has become the Demon is a projection of everything we admire and fear. He is horror and sex and hero and villain. He is sage and jester, clown and king. He embodies both high and low culture. His caricature is the inevitable product when the worlds of Gaston Leroux and *Godzilla* collide. Strangely, he is both archetype and paradox.

But there were other influences as well that helped to meld the evolving Simmons identity. His mother, Flora, who worked all day in a button factory—a “nonunion sweatshop,” as Simmons calls it—insisted that her son could pursue music if, and *only* if, he attended college. That was the deal he struck with his mother, and it was a deal he made good on. “My mother's approval was extremely important,” he says. “She was the reason I never smoked or drank or got high—not when I was a teenager, not to this day. Because of her horrible experiences in the concentration camps of Europe, I was always very clear on the fact that I didn't have the right to break her heart. She had suffered enough.”

I am drawn to this passage for a couple of reasons. First, because it is a rare

moment when the mask is removed, the armor dropped, the swagger quelled, and we see—if only fleetingly—a man, real and exposed and vulnerable, and a son who loves and respects his mother. Of course there is the other thing that sticks out in this passage. Yeah.

You got it. The fire-breathing, blood-spitting, tongue-dangling, codpiece-wearing, dragon-booted, bat-winged God of Thunder, Agent of Evil, and King of the Nighttime World, aka the Demon, is a teetotaler. In truth, Simmons has admitted the occasional sip of champagne during toasts, but that is the extent of his “rock and roll all nite, party every day” lifestyle.¹³

¹³ It is truly bizarre, if refreshing, to read the autobiography of a rock star whose narrative premise isn't redemption through repeated attempts at drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Unfortunately, that one is such a tired story that we begin to gloss over the pages that would otherwise glare with all the gore of crooked spoons and needles and vomit and crashed cars and rectal-injected heroin overdoses. In *Kiss and Make-Up* we get a glimpse into a world utterly devoid of that kind of indulgence (other indulgences abound, God knows, like the 4,600 women Simmons claims to have slept with—how *this* doesn't break his mother's heart is a mystery). In fact, Simmons, who now owns a record label, has drafted a clause with all bands who sign his contract that requires them to be drug-free. If they are busted for, say, smoking a blunt, their contract will be terminated and they can be sued (by Gene Simmons) for breach of contract. Side note: Simmons has managed the careers of many musi-

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The other ounce of revealing trivia that may surprise some (or not), is that Gene Klein went to college. Not only did he go to college but he finished, and became for a short time a sixth-grade school teacher in Spanish Harlem. If he had any students who were bilingual,

Gene would have been right at home, as he was fluent, or least semi-fluent, in five languages: Hungarian, Hebrew, Turkish, Spanish, and English. This sixth-grade class was also where, apparently, he used a *Spider-Man* comic as a primary text. Ultimately, the twin forces of his unorthodox teaching techniques and the demands of his newly formed rock-and-roll band ended his teaching career.

That newly formed and short-lived band was called Rainbow, but later changed its name to Wicked Lester. It was the earliest incarnation of KISS. Fronted by Gene Klein and a cabdriver named Stanley Harvey Eisen (who would later change his name to Paul Stanley), Wicked Lester signed a record deal but never released an album. Inevitably they broke up and held auditions for a drummer and lead guitarist. When Peter Criscuola and Paul Frehley (who changed his name to Ace because

cians. In addition to discovering and producing Van Halen, he also managed Liza Manelli for a number of years.

of Gene's mandate that the band could not have two Pauls) joined the band, the act the world would come to know as KISS was formed. In those early days, Gene focused on the stage presence, on how to create a show people would remember. It would be dark. They would dress in all black. There would be fire. And, later, makeup. Influenced by the New York Dolls, Alice Cooper, and little-known acts like Wizzard and the Crazy World of Arthur Brown, KISS—and, more specifically, Simmons—even dabbled in cross-dressing early on. Membership requirements in the newly formed group included the willingness to “do anything.” When Gene first talked to Peter Criscuola on the phone, he battered the potential drummer with a litany of unsavory questions. “Are you fat?” he asked. Other like-minded questions followed. Did Criscuola have a beard or mustache? If he did, they would need to go. Would he be willing to wear women's clothing and cosmetics? And on and on.

KISS became the thing that demanded change. Names, identities, personae, and presence. And Gene was no exception. It was during this period that Gene Klein would again, and finally, change his name—to Gene Simmons. Why he chose this name is not exactly clear, but it has caused some confusion over the years. It appears to have been random. His decision evidently occurred on a subway. In a relatively close-lipped manner, he simply says, “One day I was Gene Klein. The next day I was Gene Simmons. I would never

be Gene Klein again.” Some have credited the name change to actress Jean Simmons, who glided across the silver screen in classic films such as *Guys and Dolls* and *Great Expectations*. (Consider his strange, orchestral arrangement on the 1976 KISS record *Destroyer*, titled “Great Expectations.”) There is also the late Jumpin' Gene Simmons, a rockabilly singer-songwriter. It seems dubious, at least to this writer, that the Demon borrowed his moniker from Jumpin' Gene Simmons, a guy mostly known for writing “Indian Outlaw” and for working with Elvis back in the King's heyday.

Eventually, what began with homemade costumes and simple whiteface paint grew into one of the most recognizable and memorable rock-and-roll acts in history. And central to the show was the Demon himself. His long tongue and uncanny, if creepy, ability to roll his eyes back so only the whites were exposed further fueled his already dominant and sardonic stage presence.¹⁴ But as if these carnival signatures weren't enough, Simmons incorporated two stunts into his act that made the Christian Right buckle to the floor: blood-spitting and fire-breathing. During the truly evil-sounding “God of Thunder,”¹⁵

¹⁴ In 1974, following KISS's debut-record release, Simmons appeared on *The Mike Douglas Show*, where he said that he was “evil incarnate.” A smattering of awkward chuckles could be heard from the audience.

¹⁵ Sample lyrics: “I was born on Olympus / to my father a son / I was raised by the demons / trained to reign as the one / God of Thunder and rock and roll / the spell you're under / will slowly rob you of your virgin soul.”

Simmons is flown out over the audience in a harness while banging on his trademark battle-ax bass guitar. He has the act down perfectly. The buildup. The suspense. The head-twitches that look creatural, lizard-ish, or demonic. Then the blood-spewing. If he were human, this hemorrhaging would require an ambulance. But he is not. He is other. "When I hit the stage," Simmons has reflected, "I was transformed. Offstage I was reasonably glib and paid attention to business. Onstage, I was all hell and brimstone. I became the Demon."

But what's a little brimstone without the fire? As the band and Simmons were slowly creating their image and stage presence, KISS's manager brought into the studio a magician who breathed fire across the room. The manager looked at the group and asked which member was going to spit flames during KISS shows. The answer seemed obvious enough. Henceforth, every time they play "Firehouse," from their self-titled debut album, Simmons emerges with a sword whose handle is engulfed in flame. (Again, more Komodo dragon head-twitching.) Fire alarms wail over the guitar distortion and crashing symbols. And there, center stage, while clutching the sword by the blade, the Demon spits a mouthful of kerosene, sending an enormous and hellish fireball above his head. On at least one occasion the Demon has accidentally set his hair ablaze during this routine. From the audience's point of view, and apparently from the point of view of conservative Chris-

tians, it appears as if he is actually *breathing* fire.

With Simmons's antics came the reactions, particularly to the blood-spitting. "Throwing up blood seemed to incite fundamentalist Christians," Simmons admits. "They actually believed I was a Devil worshipper, or perhaps even the Devil. The combination of the makeup, my tongue, and the blood meant something to them." This from the guy who had once considered becoming a rabbi.

The alleged connections between heavy metal music and Satanism did, in fact, mean a great deal to the conservative Right in the 1980s.¹⁶ And for me, it was a fascinating and rebellious link. The music, for all its purported darkness, had as its audience a marginalized class of kids who wore concert Ts, denim jackets, tight jeans, and long hair. It was a class to which I proudly belonged. I identified with the music because, at the very least, it recognized me. It seemed real and had a gritty authenticity to it, unlike pop hits on the radio, which felt silly and inconsequential. A lot of heavy metal music—while often murky and overcast—took on topics like greed and war (e.g. Black Sabbath's "War Pigs" or Metallica's "For Whom the Bell Tolls"), things that mattered. I remember

¹⁶ A spate of albums released during this period shocked small-town America for their devilish themes. Consider these few: Ozzy Osbourne's *Speak of the Devil* (1982); Mötley Crüe's *Shout at the Devil* (1983); Iron Maiden's *The Number of the Beast* (1982); any Black Sabbath album, but *Live Evil* (1982) in particular—clever for its palindromic phrasing; and Dio's *Dream Evil* (1987).

chugging beers once with a fellow metalhead when Iron Maiden's "Run to the Hills" came up. "It's fucked up what we did to the Indians, man," my friend said. I belched and agreed enthusiastically. The way we saw it, there was wisdom to be found in the lyrics. And if there wasn't wisdom then there were girls, and fast cars, and good times. With heavy metal, you couldn't lose.

We had spent only a few years in Washington before moving to Soda Springs, Idaho, a rural town in the southeastern corner of the state. Soda Springs was, and still is, heavily influenced by Mormonism, the town's dominant faith. In the late 1980s, local bishops handed out "blacklists" of devil-worshipping rock-and-roll groups and KISS made the list time and again.

"Which band is that?" elderly, blue-haired women would ask one another, fingering their lists.

"It's the one with that *terrible* man and his *tongue* and the blood and all that hollering and fire-breathing."

Of course my long-haired friends and I loved these kinds of reactions. We depended on them. The greater the reaction, the more righteous we felt about our posts among the throngs of metalheads. The very existence of such blacklists suggested to us that we were on to something worthwhile and invigorating.

But there existed an ebb and flow. Reactions flared and then quieted down in our fairly isolated community. And this

bored us. We could no longer remain passive in our ghoulish curiosities. I suppose we just didn't feel evil enough by dragging Main Street and listening to devilish ditties while glowering at blue-haired women at one of our town's three stoplights. We had to act. It goes without saying just how slippery a slope such curiosities can be. One day I'm hanging out at the arcade talking about Gene Simmons while eating a chili-cheese-dog, and the next I'm in a cemetery with three friends and a Ouija board, searching the box for instructions, asking how the hell it works. Of course we can't figure it out, call it a piece of shit, and loaf home feeling stupid. I really wanted to be dark and evil and creepy. I listened to the tunes. I wore a lot of black clothing. I failed science class. I got glum and moody. But part of me still liked to play motorboat in the bathtub. Part of me still liked Cracker Jacks and the surprises inside the box. And whoopee cushions. And *Archie* comics. So I was torn between the kid I was and the Demon I wanted to become. I was myself duplicitous.

I had heard that "real" Satan worshippers in New York or Boise or Salt Lake City sacrificed animals. But I couldn't imagine doing that, because I had cried during *Old Yeller* and *Bambi*. So I did the next best thing. I scissored a tuft of reddish hair off Ribbons, our Pomeranian, and burned it over a candle while listening to Ozzy and choking on the acrid, gamy fumes. I donned pentagram necklaces and looked up Aleister Crowley in the library's encyclopedia and memorized

facts about his life.¹⁷ I came close to playing the part, but in the end, all I liked was what I had always liked: the music. The power chords and the bass riffs. The drum solos and shredding vocals. Heavy metal music allowed us to be angry even if we had nothing to be angry about.¹⁸ It was imbued with an independent fuck-all attitude and as far as we were concerned, the darker, the better.

When I met Gene Simmons for my first and only time, I had convinced myself that it was something of a homecoming, a long overdue reunion. For some reason, I had it in my head that the Demon might recognize me. We met in Salt Lake City at the KISS Convention. It was the mid-1990s and I was in college, barely. As an uninspired English major, I was failing more courses than I was passing, so when I got

¹⁷ Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) was a Victorian poet, alpinist, occultist, and heroin addict who during his lifetime was called “the wickedest man on earth.” He was accused of, among other things, infanticide and cannibalism—charges that he evidently did not dispute. My friends and I learned about Crowley by way of Ozzy Osbourne’s “Mr. Crowley,” a famous lament on the *Blizzard of Ozz* album. We would learn too that Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page was obsessed with Crowley and had purchased Crowley’s legendary Bole-skine House on the shores of Loch Ness.

¹⁸ And here, I straddled the fence, because KISS was a lot of things, but it was never angry. Sometimes during my teen years I wanted them to be more evil than they actually were. On alternate days, however, I was glad that they were a lot like me—that they wore their wickedness on the outside, that their devilry was mostly fashion.

word that KISS would be in Salt Lake for a twelve-hour event that included an unplugged concert, Q and A sessions, and autographs, I bought my hundred-dollar ticket, bailed on my classes, and joined the ranks of my fellow KISS Army cadets. Although I had seen KISS in concert four times prior to the convention and would see them three times afterward, I had never seen them up close. I was ecstatic. But I also kept my enthusiasm under wraps around campus. Remember that mine was an embarrassing, covert devotion.

I went to the KISS Convention by myself. Salt Lake City was a four-hour drive north from my small college town in southern Utah, and I drove it the whole way listening to KISS, singing along and pounding my fist on the dash. There was a lot to sing about on that drive. I had just broken up with my girlfriend, was flunking out of school, had been arrested, and was driving on a suspended license in a car with borrowed plates (my own had expired so I lifted my roommate’s). I barreled down the freeway at illegal speeds, belting out the verses to “Detroit Rock City”: “Moving fast, doing 95 / Hit top-speed but I’m still moving much too slow / I feel so good, I’m so alive / Hear my song, playing on the radio.”

The convention was held at the Fairgrounds Coliseum in downtown Salt Lake City and I arrived just as things were getting under way. Inside, a virtual KISS museum took up most of the floor space, with Plexiglas cases filled with costumes, guitars, drum kits, gold records, lunch

boxes, key chains, remote-control cars, flashlights, and everything that was KISS. The crowd was small and intimate and comprised a fascinating cross section of the public: older, silver-haired men with polo shirts; women with children in tow; burn-outs with acid-washed jeans and frizzled mullets.

And then there were the impersonators. These are the serious KISS fans, the ones who have dropped thousands of dollars on all the accoutrements of KISS costumery: chains, platform dragon-boots, codpieces, bat wings, face paint, and wigs. I met one such guy in the bathroom. In full Gene Simmons makeup and regalia, he stood nearly seven feet tall in his boots and was struggling to re-buckle all of his armor after using the toilet.

“Good convention,” I said, toweling my hands.

“No,” he corrected. “Fucking *great* convention.” He stared in the mirror admiringly.

“You from Salt Lake?”

“Denver. I’m catching all the western conventions. Wouldn’t miss them for the world, man,” he said, sucking in his gut as he cinched down a leather strap.

When the unplugged concert began, the smallish crowd gathered around the stage—a platform that rose some six inches

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off the ground—and sat on the floor. Nearly everyone (including me, I’m afraid) issued the rocker’s salute, or the devil’s horns.¹⁹ It was an all-request concert. For two hours the audience shouted out their favorite songs while the band struggled with varying suc-

19 The rocker’s signature hand gesture, or devil’s horns (index and pinky fingers extended, with thumb and middle and ring fingers retracted), is seen by some as the Salutation of Satan. Origin of the devil’s horns in heavy metal has been hotly contested. Gene Simmons has long claimed that he was the first to introduce the gesture to heavy metal, evidenced by the artwork adorning their 1977 album *Love Gun*, where Simmons is seen performing the devil’s horns, although his thumb is extended. In point of fact, Simmons performed this gesture even before 1977 and cites Spider-Man and Doctor Strange as his sources for the gesture. Ronnie James Dio, however, has made similar claims, explaining that he picked up the gesture from his Italian grandmother, who used it to ward off the “evil eye.” This is also likely. The *mano cornuta* has long been the Italian gesture invoked to safeguard one from evil. Other critics cite the obscure sixties band Coven as the provenance of the devil’s horns. Lead singer Jinx Dawson is said to have used the gesture before either Simmons or Dio. Most critics do agree, however, that it was Satanist Anton LaVey (1930-1997), author of the infamous *Satanic Bible*, who explicitly linked the *mano cornuta* to Satan worshipping. For all the debates over the devil’s horns, however, it has—for better or worse—been the rallying sign of heavy metal for at least thirty years and shows no sign of vanishing.

cess to recall the songs' chord changes, solos, and lyrics. Roadies passed around cordless microphones so audience members could sing along or, in many cases, take the lead. I got to sing with the band for two verses of "Christine Sixteen" before the roadie relinquished control of my mic and passed it to some fat guy eating nachos.

After the sing-along concert, the convention eventually turned to the autographing segment. I had brought my electric guitar, hoping I could get it signed.

When it came time to meet the Demon, this is what I said; these words bore the cumulative weight of years of loyalty: "Will you sign my guitar?"

"Sure," he said as he posed with a girl for a photo.

"Cool."

He signed it with a silvery paint pen and said, "There you are."

"Thanks."

And that was it. My encounter with the Demon was dull and ordinary. There was no real homecoming, no cosmic séance, no recognition. Planets had not collided or imploded. The skies had neither cleared nor darkened. Nothing wicked that way came. So I walked away feeling stupid and boring, and berated myself all the way to the parking lot. 'Cool?' 'Thanks?' *That's all you got?* I hissed to myself. *Idiot. Chance of a lifetime and you say 'Cool' and 'Thanks.' Jackass.* And then in a fit of humiliation, I kicked my car tire and hurt my big toe.

If defending KISS or Gene Simmons was difficult in college, it became impossible when I enrolled in graduate school, where much of my course load centered on women's literature, ecofeminism, gender studies, and postcolonial theory. Strangely, though, the difficulty wasn't in defending Gene Simmons to the pasty, thin-lipped, hypersensitive academics. The difficulty came when trying to defend the man to myself. It didn't help that KISS hadn't, in my mind, generated a single good album in more than a decade, and that they were simply packaging and repackaging their same fifteen hits into newly decorated compilations.²⁰ It also seemed like every time I saw Simmons on television, either in VH-1's embarrassing *Gene Simmons' Rock School* or in an interview, he was making an ass of himself, and so I would turn the channel. (*Family Jewels*, his upcoming A&E *Osbornes*-esque reality show, is a program I will likely skip.)

It wasn't any one thing that led me away from my former hero. It was a lot of little things added up over time. For instance, a political gulf separated us. He was a Repub-

²⁰ In the last fourteen years, eleven out of thirteen albums have been various greatest-hits or live compilations. The only studio albums released—*Carnival of Souls* and *Psycho Circus*—were not only the worst albums in KISS's entire catalog (forty-four albums total, twenty-two compilation and/or live albums), but the worst albums I have ever heard, period. What bothers me most about this glut of compilation albums is that it feels as though the band (or Simmons, their marketing mogul) is counting on a stupid fan base to rush the record store for another package of lukewarm leftovers.

lican and I wasn't.²¹ Other ideologies set us adrift as well. Like a tried and true graduate student, I began deconstructing KISS lyrics and was dismayed, but not surprised, by what I found. And yet, I cannot dislike their old studio albums. I go back and forth. Old music: great. New stuff: yak excrement. Old Gene Simmons, a god. New Gene, a clown. Plus, KISS's marketing schemes and corporate merchandising felt Wal-Mart-ish and cheap.

But it wasn't until the infamous Terry Gross interview with Gene Simmons on *Fresh Air* that I pulled the plug completely. The entire thing was a catastrophe of *Hindenburg* proportions. Here Simmons had an opportunity to conduct a great interview and instead he played the card of an overinflated asshole. Or perhaps he wasn't playing a card at all. Maybe it was the real deal. The real Gene Simmons. God help us. For all the gory details of the interview, one can consult Terry Gross's book, *All I Did Was Ask* (Simmons has disallowed NPR to store the interview in its Internet archive). But for purposes of this essay, I will offer the following quotes which cut to the heart of his asshole-ness:

²¹ A difference that, for me, was a veritable deal breaker in the backdrop of the Bush Administration and the so-called war on terror. This kind of difference caused other musical divorces in my family as well. My mom and dad, for instance, had for years loved the Texan bearded trio ZZ Top, but when they learned that the band had essentially endorsed George W. Bush, they Dumpstered all their ZZ Top records. "Rotten sons-a-bitches," Mom said with a stony gaze.

TG: Let's go to the studded codpiece.

Do you have a sense of humor about that? I mean, does that seem funny to you?

SIMMONS: No. It holds my manhood.

Otherwise it would be too much for you to take. You'd have to put the book down and confront life. The notion is that if you want to welcome me with open arms, I'm afraid you're also going to have to welcome me with open legs.

TG: That's a really obnoxious thing to say.

It is obnoxious, to use Gross's word, even if it was meant in jest. But as the conversation progressed, it took on an ever more snide and condescending tone, to the point where I felt Simmons's derision wasn't aimed merely at Gross or at NPR, but at his fans, at me. In describing Ace Frehley he used the word *equilibrium* and then added, "Which is a big word, come to think of it. Just like *gymnasium*. This is NPR. That's why we're using big words." Eventually, he got what he wanted. He goaded Gross into a squabble, if only for a heated instant. After Simmons made some blathering jab about her reading a lot (read: too many books), Gross cut him off cold:

TG: Wait, wait. Could we just get something straight?

SIMMONS: Of course.

TG: I'm not here to prove I'm smart.

SIMMONS: Not you—

TG: I'm not here to prove that you're not smart or that you don't read books or can't make a lot of money—
SIMMONS: This is not about you. You are being very defensive. Why are you doing that?
TG: [laughs] It's contagious.

Ultimately, I am left with an unsettling question: to what degree have I become the Demon? For years I rushed to Simmons's rescue and defense, citing trivia and facts as a way to staunch the flood of criticism. I was panicked that I might be judged, by the heroes I kept. After all, you are what you worship. But so much of what I worshipped was rooted in delusions. Gene Simmons needed rescuing no more than he needed another dollar in the bank. Besides, rescuing is the work heroes do for ordinary people. It is the premise of heroism. It doesn't work the other way around.

Why should I be a fan when he's got himself?

For decades, Gene Simmons symbolized—at least for me—possibility and wonder, confidence and esteem, creativity and determination. Here is a man who pulled himself up by his dragon-bootstraps and entered the world on his own terms. But somewhere in the process he was lost to ego. Swallowed whole by his image in the mirror. Now he symbolizes only the hollow shell of himself, which means the symbol has become the worst kind of thing: a symbol without substance. All adornment and no core. Gene Simmons is a spoof of himself.

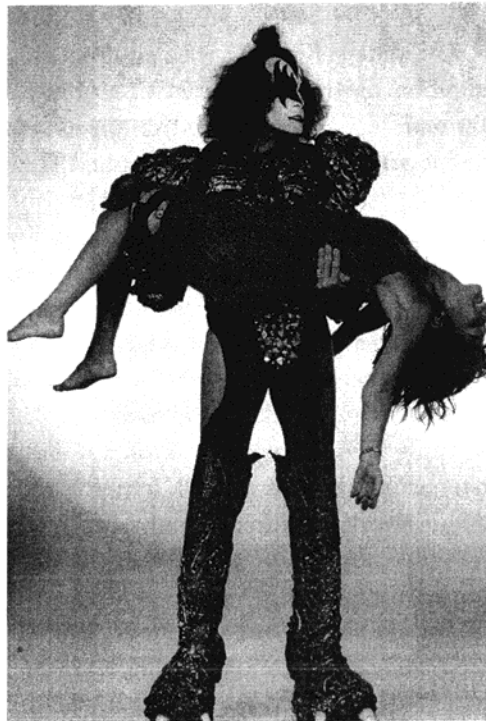
But it is easy to demonize the Demon. Too easy. We all have fallen heroes. If flaws define the man, then the sum of Gene Simmons is not wanting for definition. In 1981, Simmons wrote a song called "A World Without Heroes," which appeared on *Music from "The Elder,"* KISS's only concept album. A strange lamentation—especially coming from Simmons—the song (cowritten with Lou Reed and later covered by Cher) says that "In a world without heroes / There's nothing to be / It's no place for me." Heroes have always been important to Gene Simmons, and he doesn't use the word breezily. While some of his heroes are well-known (musicians, actors, comic book characters), some are not known at all. Consider Ron Weinreich, an Israeli soldier (and devoted KISS fan) who was badly injured in Lebanon during the recent Israel-Hezbollah clash. Upon learning about Weinreich, Simmons recorded a video message and had it sent to the soldier personally. "Hi, Ron," Simmons begins. "I can't tell you how proud I am of you, and how much the world and Israel owes [*sic*] you a debt of gratitude. From the bottom of my heart, you are a real hero, you are everybody's hero, you are my hero." At the end of the message Simmons launches into what the AP called "confident Hebrew" and says, "My name is Chaim, I was born in Haifa." Even if a political chasm divides us on this or other issues, I still find myself admiring his gesture, because it is a rare moment where we see the man genuine and compassionate and, most important, selfless.

How, then, are we to square the Gene Simmons in the Terry Gross interview and the Gene Simmons here? It is as if we have two distinct personalities. Do these contradictions simply mean that, like Walt Whitman, he is large,²² that he contains multitudes? Or is it that we are in fact dealing with separate identities, not Chaim vs. Gene, but the real man vs. his public persona? Or is it a tangle of all these factors? Perhaps it doesn't matter, ultimately, that he is duplicitous or speaks with a forked tongue.

In the end you peel back the mask and what you find is not evil or dark or mysterious, but sad and real and vulnerable and successful. What you find is not inhuman or superhuman, but human, actually. And in the end, you find yourself dismissing, if for a moment, the hubris and self-indulgence, and you have to applaud. You applaud because despite it all, that little boy who sold cactus at the bus station for milk and eggs has made an empire of himself. It is the stuff good stories are made of. It is tragic and empty, and yet it is also wonderful and so uniquely American that it demands to be recognized.

Although I am no longer a fan, I sometimes ponder the scant ways my life parallels the Demon's. We're both only children whose fathers vanished. We went to college when the odds were against us. We each took on our mother's maiden name and afterward we each changed our names again. We are both fathers ourselves now. We each have two children—a boy and a

girl, respectively. But that is where the similarities end. I am no longer a fan. I am just one man looking at another whose strengths and weaknesses are as old as song itself. And sometimes, when I see myself in my heroes, I have to look away. 🍷



²² No, not in that sense.



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