

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Fire-breathing, face paint, and blood — Kiss returns

By Jesse Kirchner

Dec. 28, 1996, I was at Worcester's Centrum Auditorium to see Kiss. In the 1970s, Kiss was the most well-known band in the world. Their distinctive grease-painted faces and outrageous costumes set them apart from any band before or since.

The group went through major changes in the early 1980s with the departure of drummer Peter Criss and lead guitarist Ace Frehley. Finally the make-up came off in 1983. This past year, the original members of the band began talking and realized that they no longer had the mental blocks that inhibited communication in the past. Peter and Ace joined Kiss for *Unplugged* on MTV, and then for the first time in 16 years, the four original members of Kiss donned the familiar 1977-era costumes to present an award at the Grammys.

Then the moment Kiss fans had dreamt about: They announced a worldwide tour beginning June 28, 1996, at Tiger Stadium in Detroit. Bassist Gene Simmons said it best: "We're gonna bring the entire show and just blow the fucking place apart." In six months, Kiss made \$45 million, more than any other live performers who made use of the whole year. Initially, critics blew off the tour as an outdated attempt to reclaim former glory.

Could a group just pick up where they left off almost two decades ago? Most bands couldn't, but Kiss could. Using new technology, Kiss rebuilt the stage from the Love Gun Tour of the late 70s. They were back. The fire-breathing, blood-spitting, guitar-smoking tour was back.

"You wanted the best! You got the best! The hottest band in the world — Kiss!" The battle cry triggered fireworks and the opening riffs to "Deuce." The song set was pure 70s. The entire show was classic Kiss from their first six studio albums. "Love Gun," "Dr. Love," "Firehouse," "Detroit Rock City" — they played them all.

My favorite part was Ace's guitar solo. It started out as an awesome solo, then smoke and flames started to come out of the guitar. He then switched guitars and continued his solo. Ace dropped to his knees three times, pointed his guitar upwards, and fireworks went off. He then switched to a guitar covered with thousands of flashing lights. Ace even sang a couple songs — "Shock Me" and "New York Groove."

Gene did his well-known fire-breathing after "Hotter Than Hell." He also did a bass solo during which he spat blood onto himself and the audience. When the solo was over, Gene rose to the top of the staging with the help of cables, and from there he sang the first two verses of "God of Thunder," which also featured a drum solo by Peter. For the last song, Gene went to one side of the stage and Ace and Paul to the other, taking position on platforms that rose up and over the crowd. The song ended and the lights went out, but the concert was far from over.

When the lights returned to center stage, Paul was there and began the opening to "Black Diamond." After the song, the stage went dark, and when the lights came back up, there was an empty stool on center stage; Peter walked out and sang "Beth." Then the entire band returned to the stage and bowed to the crowd. Paul prepped the crowd: "This song's about what we believe in, and I know it's what you believe in. 'Let's rock and roll all nite and party every day!'" For the final encore, the band ripped out its signature song.

I took my sister to the show as her Christmas present. We had our faces painted at the concert; she was done as Paul and I was Ace. It was a good way to get attention, and people were calling us Paul and Ace as if they knew us. I have only old concert footage to compare my experience to, but I believe that Kiss is better today than the first time around.

Kiss will be spending the rest of the winter in Asia, Australia, and South America. This spring they will be back in the United States. If they return to the Fleet Center, I'll be there as a full member of the Kiss Army.