

## Chapter 3 “Gene Simmons”

Gene Simmons epitomized both the end results of Beatlemania and the British Invasion, but most importantly the “American Dream.” Indeed it had been the Beatles who got him interested in music in the first place, but not from the nobility of the art of music making. Like millions of others, the Beatles appearing on the Ed Sullivan Show had a profound effect on Gene. But it wasn’t the music that made the greatest impression, it was the reaction of the girls in the audience. For any hormonal heterosexual, such a reaction by screaming masses of women was quite appealing. But even a horny teenager couldn’t escape the impact of the music, noted by the use of the harmonies and overall style of some of his pre-KISS demos and 1978 solo album.

Gene recalled his musical epiphany: “A long time ago, I saw the same television show that millions of other guitar players saw, one which was probably the single most important television event for the new generation of guitar players, The Ed Sullivan Show. I make it sound like the Bible, don’t I? But when I saw the Beatles on that program in 1964, I said, ‘Gee, you don’t have to get in line and do stuff like the Temptations; you can pick up a guitar and you don’t have to dance, you certainly don’t need a band in back of you, and anybody can do it.’ I also loved their gimmick - everybody had the same hairstyle. It was fun. A single image brought the group to mind right away; you didn’t have to think of their faces or who they were - it was just their style. They were a perfect group for the time. They were just a step ahead - not too far - and their hair was just a little bit longer than everyone else’s. Any longer than that and people would have thought they were bums; but at the time it was just perfect. Also, they played neat looking guitars. I had never seen a Rickenbacker guitar or a Hofner bass before. Everybody I had seen was playing those big ugly Fender basses. The Beatles were a compact little band, a terrific looking band. That was in ‘64” (Guitar Player, 1978).

The man who'd become the Demon also saw the adulation and applause as an appealing proposition. Even before KISS was the slightest of ideas in the minds of Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons, the character that was to become "The Demon" was taking shape in the mind of a young immigrant. Gene's background is probably the most interesting of all of the members of KISS and embodies the sense of the "American Dream," the basis on which the United States is built: All are welcome, but what is made of the unending opportunities is up to the skills and abilities of the individual, and the willingness to work hard. Add in a pinch of the Machiavellian concept of "Fortuna" or just plain luck. Yet, there is a certain amount of indecision the young man went through before finally finding his purpose, something which has seldom affected the man since.

Gene Simmons was born Chaim Witz, in Haifa, Israel, on August 25, 1949, the son of Florence Klein and Feri Witz. Gene entered a newly independent Israel, a tough small country surrounded by enemies with memories of the Holocaust still very fresh and real in the minds and on the bodies of many survivors. From the end of the Second World War, Israel became the destination for many of the few remaining Jews of Eastern Europe, those who had survived the Holocaust and those who wanted to escape the entrenchment of the Soviet sphere of influence as the Cold War began. The promised land was indeed just that for many of these survivors. It was from here that Florence, a Hungarian survivor of the Nazi concentration camps, attempted to pick up the pieces of her life only "to find that her parents were dead and that strangers had taken over their house. She found solace in a Zionist Youth Group, where she met Gene's father" (KISS Crazy #4). Little is known about Gene's father, apart from his occupation as a carpenter and that Gene had little contact with him since he was a young child.

Florence recalled, Feri "was the best looking guy, and he said I was the best looking girl" (KISS Explorer). Marrying in Jund, Hungary, in 1947 after a very short courtship of 3 months, "the

couple moved to Palestine, risking arrest by violating the British blockade” (KISS Crazy #4). Following their arrival, “Gene’s father went into the army; Florence was excepted because she was already pregnant. Life in Israel, she recalls, ‘was incredibly hard. There was no money to buy things. I made Gene’s first winter coat from an army blanket” (KISS Explorer). Gene’s parents divorced in 1954 – Florence said that their quick marriage was a mistake and that “you need to know a person better” (KISS Explorer). In 1958 Gene and his mother emigrated to America, following the foot-steps of two of Florence’s brothers who had already moved there. Landing at La Guardia Airport after surviving the trauma of a one-stop flight on El Al, Florence found work at a dress making factory. Working from dawn to dusk she made very little “sewing buttons and buttonholes” (KISS Explorer). Living in Williamsburg, in Brooklyn, NY, with his uncle Larry and aunt Magda, Gene started to learn English and assimilating into his new environment.

In 1978 Gene recorded “When You Wish Upon A Star,” from the movie “Pinocchio,” as a tip-of-the-hat to Disney who had inspired him so much during his first years in America. Gene took it to be a personal mantra and also a challenge for him to make something of himself. Cartoons were an early aid for his learning the language of his adopted country, not just entertainment, and they often served as a guide to all that was possible. Gene also used commercials and television as learning aids, though it is not surprising that this sort of media caught the attention of young Gene who at that point only spoke Hebrew, Spanish, Turkish and Hungarian.

Another media format that interested and assisted Gene, not only in helping him learn English, but because the imagery caught his attention was comic books. These also played an important part in his life for many years to come. An additional connection that developed from his interest in comics, Gene soon became a fan of horror movies and thrillers after seeing a documentary on the great Lon Chaney, one of the premier actors of the genre who was called the “Man Of A Thousand

Faces,” due to his ability to play numerous characters. Gene later honored Lon by writing a song with the same title and naming his production company the same during the 1970s.

Soon after arriving in America Gene’s mother reverted back to her maiden name, Klein. With the divorce of his parents there was no reason for Gene’s mother to retain his father’s surname. Soon afterwards Chaim started to go by the name Gene, a name that was probably somewhat easier for people at school to deal with! Gene attended Newton High School, in Queens and was a reasonably good student. He worked odd jobs as a paper boy, and later at a butcher shop, to contribute to his family’s income while also funding his developing interest in horror films and comic book dealing.

During his early years, Gene apparently entertained the idea of becoming a rabbi, not too surprising with his background in the young Israel, but more likely a result of his being placed in a religious school by his mother to keep him out of “trouble” while she worked. Yet as he became more entrenched in American culture, this desire was to dissipate, as his interests in the horror genre, both in print and on film, grew (something that remains to the present). There would also be the small matter of reaching an age when he started noticing the other sex.

During high school (around 1961/2.) Gene started publishing his own comic book fanzine, “Cosmos,” which later merged with another fanzine to become “Cosmos/Stiletto.” Gene also did additional fanzines including “Faun” and “Tinderbox,” and contributed in writing to many others. Gene was given encouragement by Jack Gaughan, the artist for the science fiction “Amazing Stories” and “If” magazines. His growing output soon attracted the attention of the science fiction library at the University of Wisconsin. Most issues of Gene’s fanzines were limited to issues of around 150-200 copies, though many are obtainable today. The fanzines included articles and editorials, written by himself and others, reviews, letters and some comics and art. School friends Seth Dogramajian and Stephen Coronel were often involved. This interest in horror

dominated Gene's life for a time and he was nicknamed "Buggy" at school as a result.

This "hobby" was hardly compatible with girls, so it is not surprising that he would be so interested in women in later life. These girls didn't fully appreciate Gene's weight problems or his imitations of Bela Lugosi. Whatever issues Gene had with girls didn't last long and his sexual education quickly earned him something of a reputation. However, that is a tangent better covered by the man himself in his auto-biography...

While Gene may have been playing guitar prior to seeing the Beatles, the TV broadcast made him much more serious about it and music in general. One could have worse influences than the Beatles, yet much of what Gene had initially seen in the Beatles was later be taken to a whole new level in KISS. By 1964 Gene had started learning the guitar seriously and within a year had started playing music in his own bands or bands he joined, even though his skill with the instrument was not at such a level to really describe him as being a "player." Gene recalls this first guitar in an interview with Steve Rosen in *Guitar Player* magazine, "My mother went out and bought me a Kent guitar for \$15.00 from some kid. She bought it secondhand. The amp was a Premier with an 8 or 10-inch speaker; I used to turn that sucker up all the way to 10. Somebody taught me to do a bar of C, and I played 'Land Of A Thousand Dances,' 'Funky Broadway'- every song that ever had one chord for the entire song. I'd play the same chord up and down for hours and hours, experimenting with different variations. At the time, that 10-inch speaker was louder than anything in the house; we were kicked out of where we lived" (*Guitar Player*, 1978).

Some Gene's earliest bands were The Missing Links, Rising Sun, and the Long Island Sounds, who performed local high school gigs. The first of Gene's bands had their name transformed from "The Missing Links" to "Lynx" during an erroneous introduction at a high-school battle of the bands. In this band Gene simply sang though it wasn't long until he was also playing an instrument. Two songs, "There's A Place"

(Beatles) and “Cathy’s Clown” (Everly Brothers), are notable for being the first songs performed by Lynx when they participated in a talent show at Joseph Pulitzer Middle School. Lynx was comprised of Danny Haber and Seth Dogramajian on guitars and Gene on vocals. The two songs had specifically been chosen because they featured harmonies that enabled all three members to sing. The band won the talent show.

Another band soon followed: Long Island Sounds. This band included Seth, Stephen Coronel, Stan Singer, and Allen Graff. It was while with this band that Gene started learning to play the bass. Another interesting song in Gene’s early repertoire was “Hang On Sloopy” which was the first song Gene learned how to play. Somewhat amusingly, for later KISS reference, The McCoys, who originally recorded the song, included one Rick Derringer on guitar when this song hit #1 in the US in 1965.

Stephen Coronel had grown up with Gene, and the two were good friends. They had several bands together throughout high school, which continued after Gene had graduated. Gene attended Sullivan County Community College in South Fallsburg, New York where earned an associate bachelor’s degree. Gene quickly joined an existing band and renamed it Bullfrog Bheer. When Gene’s guitar player in Bullfrog Bheer became unavailable (due to sickness or quitting the band), he managed to persuade Steve to fill in for the summer. During this time Gene’s band even included a girl, Anna Dalva, and the two wrote a song, “Movin’ On,” together.

The band was the normal sort of college band performing covers, but were also starting to work out original material. This band was active around 1967-9 and did play live at venues such as Rockland House in the Catskills. This band remained relatively active until Gene transferred to Richmond College in Staten Island where he changed his degree major from journalism to education.

During the autumn of 1969 Gene hooked up with Brooke Ostrander and started to demo his material. He also continued to

write other material such as, “Chimney Sweeps,” which stayed in a folk/country vein that much of Gene’s early material demonstrated. With Brooke helping out on the basic recordings Gene soon had enough material to start shopping a demo to record labels. According to Gene they were doing stuff like “She,” “Amen Corner,” “Simple Type,” and “Leeta” around this time in a very McCartney-esque style. While few of these songs have yet made it into collectors’ hands, plenty can be said about them.

The Richcraft acetate, credited to Gene Klein, is sometimes referred to with the call letters of “353-1235,” which is actually a phone number, in this case Gene’s from the time when he lived in Flushing. Richcraft was one of several small Brooklyn recording studios, like Sanders, where Gene would bring Bullfrog to record material on the weekends. Like other small studios, Richcraft pressed vanity recordings, including a series of choir records for a local school. The “Stanley The Parrot” side is marked as “1.” “Leeta” is marked as “2” on the other side. Since this is a studio disc, it was never intended for release and is simply a vinyl pressing of demos recorded on reel-to-reel.

The sound production on both songs confirms that the songs are simply demos rather than fully produced pieces, though both songs are done extremely well! This recording of “Stanley The Parrot” runs 4:15 and is notable for including a 1:56 1960s sounding, Duane Eddy-style blue-grass instrumental section. Where the later connection with “Strutter” comes from is not always immediately obvious, though the chord progression pattern is alleged part! Lyrically, the song is more amusing: “Stanley the parrot regards himself as less than a man.” Gene has commented that the song was recorded in 1969 with him trucking his Bullfrog Bheer band down from the Catskills.

Gene as a folkie really doesn’t work. “Leeta” follows much the same vein: ‘Leeta forever please remember me / Leeta forever please remember me / I used to love her / Do you remember / Leeta, will you go / Leeta forever please remember me / Leeta forever please remember me / I used to love her / Do you

remember / Leeta, will you go // [Piano Solo] // I used to love her / Do you remember / Leeta, will you go'... In all, 2:27 of very early recorded Gene, which has been released on KISS' "Box Set." The exquisite pianist on "Leeta" is Brooke Ostrander. During the early part of 1970 Brooke and Gene were actively recording together, usually using Brooke's four-track. By the middle of the year they were starting to put a band together.

This is not the only source of early Gene material, for there is the prospect of his attempted publishing tape surfacing. This demo included a selection of 12 songs Gene had written. Gene sent it off to several music publishers, "The purpose of this thing is to show you what I have" (GS Cover Letter). The cover letter for the tape detailed the following songs: "Little Lady" (Coronel/Klein) 3:25, "Put On Your Slippers" (Klein) 2:40, "About Her" (Coronel/Klein) 5:30, "Amen Corner" (Klein) 4:55, "Feel Lazy Today" (Klein) 2:35, "A Reeves In The Eye" (Klein) 1:35, "Leeta" (Klein) 2:15, "Moon Maiden" (Klein) 3:34, "Eskimo Sun" (Klein) 3:55, "When I Awoke" (Klein) 4:15, "A Story" (Klein) 3:10, and "Stanley The Parrot" (Klein) 6:10. It shows the amount of material Gene had even at this early stage.

Some of the songs didn't include drums, "For reasons having to do with the clarity of the tape," had probably been recorded with Brooke, or on Bullfrog's weekend studio visits. However, Gene wouldn't generate enough interest in his material as a solo artist. The songs were eventually rejected by the publisher who stated, "Unfortunately, I'll have to pass." In hopes of developing a band Gene and Brooke placed an ad in the Village Voice for a guitarist. According to Gene, an 18-year-old Paul Stanley was rejected when he didn't sound "convincing" over the telephone. Gene apparently thought that Paul was a bit of a flake, too keen to be in a band.

Michael Schwartz wrote about the early meeting of the two: "Gene's guitarist in his college band Bullfrog Bheer ran off with a girl just before a weekend gig. Gene headed into NYC to

see his friend Steve Coronel, looking for a replacement. Paul happened to be playing in a band with Steve, and was introduced to Gene at Coronel's apartment as Steve's other songwriting friend" (Butterfield's KISS Auction Introduction). Stephen and Paul were in a band called Tree at the time. A further connection in this band was through Marty Cohen, who had also played with Gene in an earlier band called Cathedral; Marty had originally suggested a replacement member for one of Paul's earlier bands.

Since Stephen only filled in for Gene in Bullfrog Bheer for a short time, it is likely that this first encounter took place in late 1969 before Gene transferred to college in Staten Island in the fall. The circle was forming as if the two were being drawn together from opposite sides of the Twilight Zone! Later in 1970, Gene and Paul would again meet at Stephen's house when Gene was trying to get another band together. Again, Gene rejected Paul, but Paul hardly had a very good impression of the bearded Gene dressed in overalls and wearing extremely tacky sandals, during Gene's folk phase between Bullfrog Bheer and Wicked Lester!

During 1970 Gene permanently switched from guitar to bass, though he'd played the instrument with many of his early bands. Gene recalled the change occurred roughly, "Three years after I started on guitar. My first bass was a Segova, which was a Japanese bass - a copy of a Hofner with a microphone pickup. You could talk into it and your voice would come out of your amp" (Guitar Player, 1978). As for the reason for the switch, Gene remembers, "Live in concert, guitarists look a certain way. There's that male/female thing that develops naturally from guitar players - shaking your hair and preening and doing that kind of thing - and that's got nothing to do with my personality. I'd just as soon bash a guitar over somebody's head as subtly move my shoulder back and forth. Aesthetically, guitar's not my instrument. The bass has more to do with what I'm all about: Whatever the note is, you understand it. It's there and that's the note" (Guitar Player, 1978).

During the early years of his music career, Gene attained his BA degree in education from Sullivan Community College. This allowed him to take work as a teacher, a choice of employment that didn't last too long, but it at least gave him something many starving artists lacked – an income! Teaching at a Public School #75 in the Upper West Side (96th Street and West End Avenue), Gene was soon at odds with his “Elders” for using Spiderman Comic #36 as a teaching tool. Apparently, this was not his only unconventional activity while teaching as he'd also bring his guitar to school and play Beatles songs for the kids...

The logic and justification behind using the comic book as a teaching device, according to Gene, was simple: “I knew they loved comic books but didn't really care about reading” (KKO). The reaction was, “Not approved,” or “We don't appreciate this,” but what could one expect from someone who's college term paper was titled “The Social Significance of the Panel Graphic Art Form” (COOH). Perhaps, with a faulty revisionist analysis, Gene's approach was unique: attempting to motivate and interest students with tools they could relate to – Shakespeare probably wouldn't work so well in an urban environment. This is the stuff of urban legends!

Gene's minority background gave him another reason to like the idea: “All the classic literature the schools teach is peopled with white people, so there's really no emotional commitment with the kids. So I figured that Spider-Man being raceless in the sense, that he wears a mask – anybody can be Spider-Man” (COOH). In some ways this is another version of the Disney-cricket story of “when you wish upon a star.” It is also probably an approach that was ahead of its time.

By late 1970, Gene, Paul and Stephen were working together in a band called Rainbow. This development came more from the trio just becoming more involved with each other. While Brooke and Gene were the primary members behind putting the band together, Paul had answered their ad for a guitarist only to be rejected. Instead, Gene brought in Stephen who in turn

suggested the addition of Paul on rhythm guitar. The band's first drummer was Joe Davidson. Joe had helped Brooke and Gene demo Gene's early material, though he didn't last long and was replaced by Tony Zarella. Gene, who was working non-menial jobs at the time, equipped his bands well with the hardware needed to perform. He also rented out equipment to other bands. As a result, Paul's earlier band, Uncle Joe, is purported to have rented some equipment from Gene for a gig earlier in the year, which Gene had helped setup. Gene then stayed to watch the show and became impressed by the young and enthusiastic Paul. Gene recalled that he rented them a PA and later played some of his own material solo with an acoustic guitar in his very Beatles-esque style.