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KISS LOVES YOU

Written by Tio Esqueleto

In 1993 KISS was experiencing moderate commercial success with their latest studio album, *Revenge*. It was nowhere near the attention they had received back in their 1970s grease-paint glory days, but compared to recent offerings, and with two singles, "Unholy" and "Domino" getting rock radio play, *Revenge* was by all means a success. Gone were the day-glow spandex and ripped blouses of the previous ten years. Instead it was a return to black leather and studs and all things metal. The fans took note, as this was one step closer in the direction they had all been longing for, but were told would never happen. Could it be? Were the make-up and boots to follow? Or, better still, a full-blown reunion with all four original members? Over the next five years fans would get their wish, for better or for worse.

KISS Loves You is a documentary by Jim Heneghan that looks into the world of KISS fandom at this particularly crucial point in the band's history. Its focus is on convention-goers at the time and, in particular, follows rival tribute bands, Strutter, Firehouse, The KISS Family, and one-time Ace Frehley tribute artist, Bill Baker, as their idols triumphant return leads to unexpected consequences.

Heneghan sets the mood by first taking the viewer to the show floor at a KISS convention where we meet the many colorful characters (many painted up as their favorite member) in attendance. Think heavy metal trekkies, if you will. It is here we learn that it is the fans, not the band, who are responsible for putting on the event, and the fans would love nothing more than to see their idols put aside their differences, put on the make-up, and give it one last go around as the KISS they had originally fallen in love with.

It is also here that we meet rival tribute bands, Strutter and Firehouse, each aptly named after defining songs from KISS's seminal first album. Also in tow are likable, up-and-coming tributists, Dressed to Kill. All three attempt to make a living on the rapidly growing convention circuit, but it is the bitter and childish rivalry between #1, Strutter, and #2, Firehouse, that is on display here. It would appear that life emulated art when faux Peter and faux Ace of Strutter (the premiere KISS tribute band at the time) had had enough of the way they were being treated by faux Gene, and broke off to form their own tribute band. What ensues is an entertaining, tactless, array of cheap shots (some even aimed at supposed idol, Peter Criss), backstabbing, and questionable business practices in this surreal arena of competitive impersonation.

In the end, all is for naught as KISS first start to hold their own official KISS conventions where they perform live (still no make-up, no Peter, no Ace), shutting down any unofficial KISS conventions along the way, and cutting out any potential tribute gigs for the rivaling camps. When asked what a reunion tour would do for the tribute business as fans could now opt for the real deal, faux Ace of Firehouse speculates with confidence that it could only help to create more buzz and more bookings in small towns in rural America where the "real deal" wouldn't be playing. Ultimately, after the full-blown reunion extravaganza begins in 1996, both bands find themselves out of work and are forced to make amends, pool what members and resources they have left, and champion on once again as Strutter.

Heneghan also focuses his lens on the family Ventrice, or The KISS Family, as the patriarch lovingly refers to them throughout the film. They are a four-member unit each with his or her own favorite member. You have Dad, a drum fan, as Peter Criss; mystery family member #2, who doesn't say a word, but is clearly the Gene fan of the brood; a four-year-old son who says he loves Paul Stanley, but looks a little coaxed, if not just a shy four-year-old, and finally, there is Mom, who admits she just got into KISS, and has conveniently chosen to go with Ace.

As with the other fan focuses on display here, we follow The KISS Family through the unofficial conventions, where they take it all in and further their son's Paulophillia. Next we rejoin them at the official convention, where the family (in full regalia) has shelled out \$100, each, for tickets, as well as go through the trouble of getting a custom-made plaque professing their son's love for Paul Stanley complete with a photo of junior in full make-up and firehouse helmet, in hopes that they can maybe present it to Mr. Stanley, himself. A lot of work went into this plaque, and it eventually makes its way to Paul during a Q & A, only to be left behind after the band has left the building. The filmmakers retrieve the forgotten plaque from a stagehand at the venue who agrees just how embarrassing it would be to go through all that hard work and sentiment only to have it tossed aside at the end of the night. The whole plaque debacle is a real crusher all the way around.

We revisit the Ventrice family six years later. The reunion tour has come and gone and, sadly, so has the family Ace. Mom and Dad are now separated, with Dad's new lady-friend now part of the mix. The filmmakers tell Dad that his son's plaque was left behind and that they retrieved it from the venue that same day way back when. It takes a couple of minutes before he realizes exactly what happened and clearly he is hurt and disappointed. Junior is now ten years old and, sans Paul make-up, is ready to move on to something new.

Bill Baker is also under Heneghan's microscope. Tribute artist and one-time friend of Frehley's, Baker's focus is strictly on Ace. He looks like Ace, can talk like Ace, and even owns a great deal of original Ace artifacts, including the star

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earring he wore on the first album cover, original *Destroyer* and *Love Gun* costumes, and those amazing Japanese marionettes (you know the ones) often seen in fan-club pictures of Ace back in the day. Aside from collecting and impersonating Ace, Baker also befriended Frehley in the early '90s while doing work on his guitars. It was this guitar work that landed Baker his collection, as he would tech the guitars in trade for memorabilia and time spent with his idol turned friend. As with a lot of KISS fans, Baker separates Ace from Gene and Paul, pointing out how cool and down to Earth he is (we even get to hear a message Ace left on his answering machine saying he's really sorry he missed him at a recent gig and to give a call back), and conveying just how lucky he was that he had picked "the good one" to emulate. It is clear that Baker is not only a Frehley fan, but Frehley's friend.

Flash-forward, we learn that ever since the *MTV Unplugged* special and reunion tour that followed Frehley hasn't been in touch with Baker nor will he return his phone calls. Basically, a phone call from the majors was all it took to cut Baker out of his life completely. Now it is here, and only here, that Baker let's slip that Frehley would occasionally ask him for money, putting to rest any viewer speculation as to why the sudden disconnect. Hurt, Baker has since sold most of his collection (affording himself a home) and has now moved his focus towards Elvis, ultimately trading in one lighting bolt for another.

KISS Loves You is a backhanded love letter that reads both ways, from fan to artist and artist to fan. Its focus is on those of us who took that ride from *Revenge* to reunion, and its aftermath. From wishing for something I would never get (to see the original four in make-up), to finally getting everything I had asked for and more (multiple shows on multiple tours and an album), to just plain over saturation (KISS bathrobe) and overkill (KISS caskets?). It was hard. I was there. I got KISS fever from a *Revenge*-era videotape called *KISS: X-Treme Close-Up* that a friend had to force me to watch. Up to this point, all I knew of KISS was the pinball machine at the old roller rink, the song on my first K-tel record ("I Was Made for Lovin' You"), and the guy with the tongue was in that Tom Selleck movie with the robot spiders. Very limited. The first half of the tape chronicled the early years of the band, from inception to breakup, and I must have watched it fifty times. Being a superhero freak, and a horror-movie geek, this was so up my alley. Add to that my recent obsession with everything 1970s, and I was a bonafide born-again KISSian.

Heneghan could have easily turned his lens on my friends and me at the time and gotten similar results. I was at many of the same events, including the now infamous convention in Troy, Michigan, when Gene and Paul showed up unannounced and reclaimed some original costumes that had gone missing from their private collection only to show up later on the convention circuit, all of which is caught in Heneghan's film. To say this little film turned out to be strangely personal to me, would be an understatement. That is not to say that a KISS fan under different circumstances couldn't or wouldn't enjoy it, or the same of a non-KISS fan for that matter. Like all good docs, it takes a very specific subject and reports it in a matter that's both interesting and engaging, regardless of prior affiliations. However, I took this very same ride, in a lot of ways, bumps and all, and now I have a nice little 70-minute film as a souvenir. First piece of KISS merchandise I've picked up in quite a while.

Written by [El Bicho](#) on 12/11 at 11:58 PM

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