

Kiss at Casino Rama (Concert Review)

Written by Chris Alexander
Wednesday, 27 July 2011 12:14



As many Fango readers know already, your editor is indeed a card-carrying member of the Kiss army (literally; the card is in my wallet, in *front* of my driver's license). I have been a serious fan since I was a little boy, borrowing Kiss records from the library, eventually saving up my allowance to get my first slab of vinyl—which was, oddly, *THE ELDER* (because of this, I still have warm ties to that controversial, commercially DOA 1981 rock opera...in fact, it might be my favorite in the catalog).

I bought as much Kiss krap as I could find—I had posters, flags, hats, shirts. I would draw pictures of Gene Simmons (as I've said before, especially in the cover feature in *FANGORIA* #298, Simmons' Demon persona was my first monster) and wished I was Paul Stanley. I loved the mythical otherworldliness of the band—the visual aesthetics which were part garish, full-color, sexed-up Hammer horror movie and part Barnum & Bailey circus. I loved the music, which was screechy, fast, dirty, sometimes epic (*THE ELDER*, again), anthemic and full of a kind of lunatic energy. Coupled with a love of monsters, comic books and science fiction, this love for Kiss would put me on the path—for better or worse—that I'm on today, and—especially considering I've since passed all this passion on to my kids—I cannot see this enthusiasm ever ebbing.



So perhaps I'm biased when reporting on a Kiss concert. Blinded a bit by love. But who cares? Here I sit in a hotel room in Ontario's Casino Rama, a monolithic entertainment center two hours outside of Toronto in the semi-rural community of Orillia, the day after watching Gene and Paul and succeeding Catman Eric Singer and Spaceman Tommy Thayer blow shit up. The Rama stop is part of Kiss' relatively brief "Lost Cities" tour, which sees the band hitting off-the-beaten-path arenas across Canada and the U.S. for what is, in essence, likely a warmup for a bigger tour that will launch later in support of their impending new studio album, a follow-up to 2009's ultrasuccessful *SONIC BOOM*.

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Casino Rama looks like a kind of First Nations spaceship; it's angular, labyrinthine and larger than life. This is the second time I've seen the band rock this unusual venue, and it's such a strange place to see them, really. And I mean that in a good way. You drop into any big-city arena to see Kiss and it's what it's supposed to be, a deluxe rock-and-roll show. Here at Rama, as you step away from the clinking carnival hypnotism of money-sucking electric bandits and step into the compact 5,000 seat-auditorium, it feels like you're literally on another planet, completely self-contained and somewhat surreal.

After a brief backstage visit and getting a photo snapped with the band, myself, my wife Carrie and Fango writer Kelly Stewart trickled inside to see the sold-out show—my fourth in two years, I might add—and when the Kiss curtain dropped and that drone began and that scream came over the PA: “AlIIIIII righhhht Casino Rama...yooooooooo wanted the best! Youuuuuuu got the best! The hottest band in the world, Kiss!”—as it always does—I felt like that 8-year-old kid again. Coming days after the headline horrors of senseless mass murder in Norway, and the endless assorted ills that choke us daily, this was certainly the balm needed to distract.

And that's the real beauty of Kiss. Whether you adore their shtick or abhor it, Kiss exists to do one thing: entertain. After owning the planet in the mid-1970s, enduring internal turmoil, lineup changes, revolving trends in commercial hard rock, unmasking, breakups, putting the makeup back on and then more internal turmoil, the band as it stands now is a tight, taut, well-oiled machine designed to tear you apart. Someone said to me once that before you die, you have to see two things: the Grand Canyon and a Kiss show. And it's true.



Seeing middle-aged men (the youngest member of the band, Thayer, is 51) strut around in spandex and monstrous boots may seem ludicrous to some, but Kiss has always celebrated

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the impossible, refusing to be defined by the conceptions of what others think they should be. Simmons still stalks the stage in his armor and bat wings, drinking kerosene and spitting fire from a medieval sword, vomiting blood and worming his legendary tongue around (no levitation this time, unfortunately) and becoming that mixture of Godzilla, Dracula and malevolent ogre that has given the band much of its iconic presence. In fact, as Simmons has aged (he's closing in on 62) and the creases in his skin absorb the greasepaint, his Demon act has become, dare I say...creepier. When those lights turn green, and that bass starts to throb, Simmons looks like some sort of ancient gargoyle, and even though he has become a ubiquitous presence in pop culture, it's still so damn alien and scary, especially when the act morphs into Simmons' signature song, the lumbering "God of Thunder." And it's also so clear to see where later acts like GWAR and Slipknot found perhaps their greatest sources of stage-presence inspiration.

Stanley has had hip replacements and is approaching 60, but is still a force of nature: fit, commanding and—something that rarely gets noted—a frankly blistering guitar player. And his voice—which, coming at the tail end of a tour, as this show did, sometimes bears the rasp of excessive strain—was in topnotch shape and is still (perhaps just behind, or maybe tied with, Robert Plant) among the greatest in rock-and-roll history. Thayer's burden has not only been to fill the long-departed Ace Frehley's silver tights but to shadow his string-tripping signature guitar stylings, and it's a shame that, again, his own abilities are often not as celebrated as they should be. But on such recent tracks as "Modern Day Delilah" (the show's opener), his furious work on the lead riff is almost out-of-body, it's that articulate and exciting. And when the show stops midway for his solo—where rockets shoot from the neck of his ax and rupture the light fixtures, and Singer battles him with demented drum solos and rocket-launcher antics, it's definitely a show highlight, ridiculous and brilliant.



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Outside of a few missing tricks (the aforementioned grounded Gene, no opening risers), the show was still Kiss as they exist today, in top form, taking no prisoners. Alas, I wish I could say the same for the crowd. The floor was filled with folks who were more concerned with texting on their iPhones (something that Simmons made fun of as the hydraulics pushed him skyward during the closing, confetti-cannon-blasting classic "Rock and Roll All Night") and staring at the spectacle, as opposed to participating. No matter; there were enough of us eternal children present to lose our minds (and voices) screaming at the feet of these consummate showmen who sparked our dreams and who refuse to go gently into that good night.

