

KISS is Born

By late-December 1972 guitarist Paul “Ace” Frehley was added to the band and KISS was born. Well nearly, the Wicked Lester name was finally dropped the following month. According to Bob Kulick, Ace fit the requirements of an image-driven band better than he did, regardless of measuring musical ability. Gene and Paul simply told Bob the truth, though they also wanted to keep in touch (DS-BD3). When Ace was invited to join the band, he was unsure whether he wanted to join the band after learning that they didn’t really have a recording deal after all. Many dates have been thrown about for Ace auditioning and joining the band, but Lydia Criss is adamant that “he was there for Christmas” (Firehouse #60).

The next part of the process for the band was to define what they were going to be. The image the band went for came from a variety of sources, including experimentation that had began during the late part of 1972. According to Peter, the band started out as just a regular band without the leather and heavy makeup. This was a step back from the white face of November 1972. When the band went to Madison Square Garden to see Alice Cooper (June 3, 1973), the master of shock and glam made a definite impression on the young men who strongly desired to do something different from the mold that made so many bands similar. Alice had a glam look, in some ways, but his show also transcended the music. At their rehearsal loft the band started working on ideas on how to make their band different, building on the attitude of the New York Dolls and the image and showmanship of Alice Cooper!

Gene remembers that the makeup was an idea that, “Happened in 1972 in our rehearsal loft at 10 East 23rd Street, even before Ace joined us on lead guitar, we started painting up our faces,” (Netcafe) which would date that to the late-fall/winter of 1972. Several photographs of the band, then a trio, exist showing that the white-face had closer similarities to mime than anything else. At that point the band still didn’t even have a name, and they knew they wanted one that had to do with sex, drugs, and

rock 'n roll. Eventually, Paul came up with “KISS” while he, Gene and Peter are driving around. The rest of the members agreed with the numerous possibilities of the word, especially once other possibilities such as “Fuck” and “Crimson Harpoon” had been discarded.

Gene recalled, “The name popped out of Paul’s mouth while Peter and I were in the same car with him. It just happened” (Netcafe). And once Ace came up with the logo it was more than just a name. In the years since the foundation of the band it has been suggested that Paul helped refine the logo in some way, whatever that means, though that seems to take away from Ace’s immediate distinctive visual contribution particularly the Nazi-inspired “SS.” The party line in 1977, according to Paul, was “Ace was an art student and he designed it” (Circus, May 1977).

With the makeup came the experimentation, but many components of what made KISS were not developed until Bill Aucoin signed on as manager in August 1973 and brought in Sean Delaney to work with the band. The period that immediately followed Ace joining the band was about defining themselves as a band. According to Peter, it was Bill that suggested that the members keep their identities a secret. More of the unknown “Superhero,” which must have ironically appealed to Gene with his previous usage of Spiderman! Bill Aucoin took the idea that the band were developing to a new level, an important guiding hand to the fledgling band. With all the pieces intact, it was time to take on the world. But Aucoin was still in the future.