



'MUSIC FROM THE ELDER'

THE UNAUTHORIZED STORY OF
**THE MOST SPECTACULAR FAILURE
IN THE HISTORY OF KISS**

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Introductory Chapter
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Many of the greatest albums in rock history were created during times of personal upheaval in their creators' lives. The Rolling Stones' 1972 double-album masterpiece 'Exile on Main Street,' for example, was recorded as the band hid from England's tax collectors by temporarily relocating to southern France.

Unable to find a suitable studio, the Stones decided to create the album at the beautiful villa Keith Richards had rented, only to have the guitarist frequently miss many sessions in favor of indulging his raging heroin habit with the assortment of famous friends that floated in and out of the house.

Somehow, amidst all the chaos and personal conflicts, the Stones synthesized all of their formative influences - blues, country, rock and soul music - into a completely unique and powerful blend, with the result perhaps their most cohesive musical statement to date.

Stories like these feed the romanticized notion that creative types thrive in times of crisis, as their struggles force them out of their personal comfort zones and cause them to reveal previously unattainable new levels of talent and vision.

But it doesn't always work that way. Kiss, one of the most commercially successful hard rock bands of the '70s, found themselves in a similar predicament early in 1981, prior to the recording of what would become their ninth studio album, 'Music from The Elder.'

Original drummer Peter Criss had just officially left the group, and their lead guitarist, Ace Frehley, was demonstrably eager to depart as well. The band had alienated their core audience with two pop- and disco-influenced albums that also failed at their intended task of connecting with a larger mainstream audience.

Just a few years after being able to sell out any arena across America, Kiss found themselves unable to risk any kind of a national tour without a new hit album. To make things worse, lavish spending and poorly advised investments had left the band in bad financial straits.

In short, Kiss needed to reverse their fortunes. At first, they had a safe and conservative plan in place: enlist legendary producer Bob Ezrin, who helped create one of the band's most successful and best-loved albums, 1976's 'Destroyer,' and make a back-to-basics rock album that would reconnect them with their old fans.

One catch. Ezrin, fresh off the massive success of Pink Floyd's 1979 concept record 'The Wall,' had bigger goals in mind. What if Kiss, conqueror of many challenges, once again aimed higher? Suppose they established themselves as more serious artists with their own themed album, perhaps one capable of launching an accompanying tour, film, book, and follow-up albums?

Kiss decided to go for it.

Oboes, clarinets, a string section and timpanis were summoned. Bassist Gene Simmons (an avid comic book lover) constructed a detailed mythical backstory to serve as a framework for the album's lyrics – a tale about a young boy in medieval times proving his worth for a vaguely defined epic quest.

Ezrin even brought in former Velvet Underground songwriter Lou Reed, with whom he had worked on Reed's 1973 solo album 'Berlin,' to help write songs for the project. The team barred anyone from the label from hearing anything until the record was finished, and promised they would all be amazed by the results.

That would not be the case. Nor would Kiss be as creatively successful as the Stones or Pink Floyd:

"With 'The Elder,' Kiss pushed crap in a new and scary direction. What a horrible, horrible, horrible album." - Pitchfork.com

"It was pompous, contrived, self-important, and fat." – Paul Stanley, 'Behind the Mask.'

"Only two tracks resemble the Kiss of old, while the rest is downright embarrassing." – Allmusic.com

"As a Kiss record, I'd give it a zero. As a bad Genesis record, I'd give it a two." – Gene Simmons, 'Behind the Mask.'

If you had a time machine and a really perverse desire to watch other people shuffle uncomfortably in their seats and exchange awkward glances for forty-two minutes, there's no place and time you'd rather be than the meeting where Kiss first played 'Music from the Elder' to the anxious staff at Casablanca Records.

The album starts off not with guitars, drums or bass but instead with gentle woodwinds straight out of 'Lord of the Rings.' Frontman Paul Stanley trades in his usual full-throated, screeching sexual boasts for a tender falsetto as he wonders *"Who steers this ship through the storming sea? / If hope is lost, than so are we"* on the opening track, 'Just a Boy.'

Both that song and its follow-up, 'The Odyssey,' seem much better suited to be the opening segment of Andrew Lloyd Webber's new musical than part of the comeback album from the authors of eight-track anthems such as 'Love Gun' and 'Detroit Rock City.'

Things do get slightly more conventional (and, as we'll discuss, surprisingly rewarding) from there. But the departure from the band's traditional sound in favor of sometimes stiff progressive rock flourishes, the absence of charismatic lead guitarist Ace Frehley from all but a few tracks, and perhaps most of all, the completely incomprehensible if not frequently laughable lyrics doomed this record from the start.

In short, with two out in the bottom of the ninth, Kiss took a big, hopeful swing, and... missed terribly. Everyone from their record label to the fans pretty much hated 'The Elder' on first listen. It flopped right out of the gate, sales-wise. Amazingly, Kiss fell even further from what they thought was their rock bottom to discover new levels of career despair.

In retrospect, it's pretty easy to label a band like Kiss making an album such as 'Music from the Elder' as one of the most ill-conceived decisions in rock history.

And yet, there's something oddly admirable and appealing about the madness behind this strange, ultimately unsuccessful and largely forgotten record.

Of course some outliers claimed it as a "cult classic," as they have with every ambitious misstep from 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' to 'Showgirls,' but labeling 'The Elder' "camp" is missing the point. The record is noteworthy due in no small part to its flaws.

As we'll detail, obviously the band's internal strife, troubling monetary position and public perception issues played a role in the misguided decision-making process that led to the creation of 'The Elder.'

But the fact remains that when the chips were down, and their very livelihoods were on the line, Simmons and Stanley never lost their nerve. Instead of playing it safe and reclaiming already captured ground, Kiss chose

to double down and reach even higher, despite being completely out of their element and without any realistic hope of having their insane gamble pay off.

The same hunger and drive that led Kiss to don makeup, platform boots and outrageous costumes back at the start of their career in the early '70s, to say nothing of learning how to breathe fire, was still present nearly a decade later. They proved it by teaming up with a (by his own admission) drug-addicted producer, orchestra musicians and even a future alternative rock icon in an attempt to completely change their stripes.

We're here to argue that, viewed in the proper perspective, the results are not nearly as embarrassing as you might expect. More and more it seems other people are coming around to that viewpoint. Although for years Kiss treated the album as some sort of embarrassingly uncool blood relative, fans have steadily increased their calls to hear 'Elder' songs performed in concert, despite the band's claims not to remember the lyrics or even the chord progressions.

Still, the demand seems to have had an effect. After performing the album's lone (and minor) hit 'A World Without Heroes' at mid-90's acoustic shows, and bemusedly breaking into short segments of various 'Elder' tracks at concerts over the past few decades, the band recently surprised 2011 "Kiss Kruise" boat trip attendees with a joyous and seemingly impromptu medley of songs from this much-maligned album.

There are two notable aspects of this performance, thoughtfully preserved for digital eternity on YouTube: the good-natured humor with which the band tries to revive their memories of this time in their creative lives, and the passion and fervor with which many of those in the crowd wind up leading their idols in singing the lyrics to songs they wrote but can't fully remember.

Could it be that that 'Music from the Elder' is finally getting its deserved mass critical reconsideration? Well... no, actually, everyone mostly got it right the first time. But is it really that far-fetched to think that Kiss, famous for never missing an opportunity to squeeze every last dollar out of their history, will finally shine a light on this dark chapter of their past, perhaps by finally staging the elaborate theatrical shows they had planned for the 'Elder' tour prior to its stillborn release?

Again, probably not. But, the album is still worthy of further exploration. As you'll see, it could be argued that the lessons learned in both the creation and the failure of 'Music from the Elder' enabled Kiss to rise from the ashes and re-establish themselves as one of the biggest rock bands of the '80's, starting with their surprisingly complex, thematically unified, and hard rocking 1982 LP 'Creatures of the Night.' (Could it be they just needed another shot at the concept album?) Besides, everybody always writes books about classic albums where everything goes right. Let's get into what happens when things go utterly wrong.