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**Transcript of Gene Simmons and Terry Gross, host of NPR's Fresh Air.
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Introduction (Terry Gross): When KISS started performing in the '70s, the band became famous for its look as well as its music. They paint their faces in bold black-and-white patterns that seem inspired by comic book superheroes and villains. They also dress outrageously, in wardrobes that include giant platform shoes, breastplates, and codpieces. The band has been the subject of comic books and movies, and has had all kinds of merchandising tie-ins. Now Gene Simmons has a best-selling memoir called *KISS and Makeup*. Gene Simmons is his stage name; he was born in Israel in 1949, the son of a Holocaust survivor. When he was ten, he moved with his mother to Queens, New York. There he dropped his Hebrew name and became Gene Klein.

Terry Gross: Gene Simmons, welcome to *Fresh Air*.

Gene Simmons: Thank you.

Terry Gross: Let's start with the makeup. Did you like being covered up on stage, did it make you feel any less vulnerable, or any less like Gene Simmons or your other names -- Gene Klein or Chaim White, which was your birth name?

Gene Simmons: Close, but no guitars. It's Chaim Witz.

Terry Gross: Oh, thanks. Okay.

Gene Simmons: You said it -- well, the name came out through gentile mouth, so it didn't quite have the flavor. It came out bland.

Terry Gross: Well it's ... it's not a gentile mouth.

Gene Simmons: Ooh! Maybe it's a discussion we can have.

Terry Gross: Okay.

Gene Simmons: But let's not start something we're not going to finish.

Terry Gross: Right.

Gene Simmons: But in terms of the, uh, what was the question about makeup?

Terry Gross: Did you like being covered up by makeup, and did it make you feel less vulnerable or, you know, less like Gene Simmons --

Gene Simmons: Well --

Terry Gross: -- Gene Klein, or your birth name ...?

Gene Simmons: I don't feel covered up more or less than any girls feels covers up-- covered up, when she wears makeup. The makeup is simply an extension of the personality and, uh, colors, clothing, makeup all

express something. And getting up on a stage was chance to sort of live out the ... oh, I don't know, sort of a scream therapy meets a rock and roll band version. I wanted to put together the band I never saw on stage. I wanted to be in a band that gave bang for the buck. I wanted to be in the band who didn't look like a bunch of guys who, you know, should be in a library studying for their finals. You know, I wanted stars up on stage. And regular people just didn't look big enough. So we wore 8-inch platform heels, put on more makeup and higher heels than your mother, and made more money than your banker.

Terry Gross: [laughs]

Gene Simmons: So it all kind of works out.

Terry Gross: Did you pattern your makeup on comic book heroes?

Gene Simmons: Um ... my makeup came as a result of a lot of things, all things Americana. Godzilla, horror movies, science fiction ... uh, Black Bolt, which was an Inhumans Marvel comic book, and science fiction certainly. So it's comic books, sort of, all things sort of American pop culture. The rest of the guys in the band had different notions. Paul put on the red lips and the star over his eye as a kind of an exaggeration of what he thought a rock star was, because he always wanted to be a rock star. I was never interested in being a rock star. I always wanted to be Boris Karloff. And Ace -- who's the spaceman in the group, you know -- has delusions of grandeur, and perhaps gravity doesn't quite affect him in the same way, which is to say that he doesn't have good equilibrium, which is a big word, come to think of it. Just like "gymnasium." This is NPR. That's why we're using big words.

Terry Gross: How would you describe the pattern on your face?

Gene Simmons: A banker's pattern. When you look at it, it says, "Boy that guy's got a lot of money." You know why I'm pulling your leg? Because I can't touch it from where I am. This is a serious kind of --

Terry Gross: [laughs]

Gene Simmons: This is a serious program.

Terry Gross: Well, we'll get to that a little later.

Gene Simmons: I'm not going to play like this serious --

Terry Gross: We'll get to the tally a little later.

Gene Simmons: Because this is all -- after all, it means very little. I'm in a weird band. We've done very well. The American Dream is alive and well. And in terms of what it all means, it's sort of academic, really. It's about two guys from the intelligentsia, which is not the intelligence service, who sit around and sort of contemplate their navel. At the end of the day, it means nothing. At the end of the day, food tastes good, I like it or I don't like it. And KISS? Yeah, I like him or I don't like him, that's a conversation, and it's never-ending. But what you can't argue with is the American notion, which is "of the people, for the people, by the people." They vote with money. You and I, we just sit here and we talk and toss the ball around. That doesn't mean a lot. So at the end of the --

Terry Gross: Are you trying to say to me that all that matters to you is money?

Gene Simmons: I will contend, and you try to disprove it, that the most important thing as we know it on this planet, in this plane, is, in fact, money. Want me to prove it?

Terry Gross: Go ahead.

Gene Simmons: The first thing you need -- besides air, which so far is free, and by the way if you went scuba diving, you're paying for air -- the other thing besides that is food, it's what we need to survive. I don't know what other tool I would use besides money to buy it. Although, as a woman of course you have the ability to sell your body, then get the money, and then, with that, get food. But ultimately money is part of it. And so --

Terry Gross: [laughs] You -- you -- you are weird.

Gene Simmons: Really? How do you get food?

Terry Gross: Well, not by selling my body. But --

Gene Simmons: But that's a choice you have that I don't. But getting to the money part, money is the single most important thing on the planet, including the notion that uh, love gives you everything. That's a lot of hogwash. Because although I subscribe to the romantic notion of life --

Terry Gross: Well, let's cut to the chase. How much -- how much money do you have?

Gene Simmons: Gee, a lot more than NPR.

Terry Gross: Oh, I know. I -- you're very defensive on money, aren't you?

Gene Simmons: No, I'm not, I'm just trying to show you that there's a big world out there, and reading books is wonderful. I've certainly read, well, perhaps as many as you have, but there's a delusional kind of notion that runs rampant in --

Terry Gross: Wait, wait, could we just get something straight?

Gene Simmons: Of course.

Terry Gross: I'm not here to prove that I'm smart --

Gene Simmons: Not you --

Terry Gross: I'm not here to prove that you're not smart or that you don't read books or can't make a lot of money --

Gene Simmons: This is not about you. You're being very defensive -- why are you doing that?

Terry Gross: [laughs] It's contagious.

Gene Simmons: Yeah.

Terry Gross: Can we get back to your makeup? What do you use to paint your face, and do you ever break out from that?

Gene Simmons: No, it's actually oil-based. It's Stein's makeup ... is one of the brand names, but you can use lots of different ... lots of things. I don't think I've ever been asked that question. But no. My skin is more beautiful than yours. I would be quite more popular in jail if I so chose.

Terry Gross: [laughs] What do you do to take the makeup off? What do you use?

Gene Simmons: You use, uh, Ponds. You know, the same stuff women do. Or you can use a, uh, a Stein's concoction, which is, you know, sorta similar but more ... industrious. Industrial. Industrious means sort of ambitious. Industrial in strength.

Terry Gross: Now, clothes that you've worn onstage include fishnet stockings. Spiked platform heels --

Gene Simmons: That's actually untrue.

Terry Gross: Not -- no?

Gene Simmons: No. Better research needed. Fire your research person. No fishnet stockings. Never. Not in this band.

Terry Gross: Oh I'm sure I saw you with fishnets --

Gene Simmons: We catch fish with fishnets.

Terry Gross: I was sure I saw you in them. But that's all right. I ... I trust you. I trust you on that.

Gene Simmons: Don't ever do that, I'm a man.

Terry Gross: No. Let's get to the studded codpiece.

Gene Simmons: Oh yes.

Terry Gross: Do you have a sense of humor about that?

Gene Simmons: No.

Terry Gross: Does that seem funny to you? Are you --

Gene Simmons: No, it holds in my manhood.

Terry Gross: [laughs] That's right.

Gene Simmons: Otherwise it would be too much for you to take. You'd have to put the book down and confront life. The notion is that if you want to welcome me with open arms, I'm afraid you're also going to have to welcome me with open legs.

Terry Gross: That's a really obnoxious thing to say.

Gene Simmons: No it's not, it's being -- why should I say something behind your back that I can't tell you to your face?

Terry Gross: Wait, it -- it -- has it come to this? Is this the only way that you can talk to a woman? To do that shtick?

Gene Simmons: Let me ask you something. Why is it shtick when all women have ever wanted ever since we've crawled out of caves is, Why can't a man just tell me the truth and just speak to me plainly? Though, if I do that -- you can't have it both ways.

Terry Gross: So you really have no sense of humor about this, do you?

Gene Simmons: Oh, I'm laughing all the way. You know, we're --

Terry Gross: Oh, to the bank, right?

Gene Simmons: Well of course. [laughs] Don't I sound like a happy guy?

Terry Gross: Not really, to be honest with you.

Gene Simmons: I was going to suggest that you get outside of the musty place where you can count the dust particles falling around you. And get out in the world and see what everybody else is doing.

Terry Gross: Having sex with you?

Gene Simmons: Well, if you chose, but you'd have to stand in line.

Terry Gross: Well, that's the thing. We might as well get to this since you ... since you keep bringing it up. Uh ... yeah. You've had 4,000 --

Gene Simmons: I didn't actually, you did.

Terry Gross: You write in your book you've had 4,600 sexual liaisons --

Gene Simmons: You're supposed to say "so far."

Terry Gross: So far.

Gene Simmons: Right.

Terry Gross: To you, this will be asking the obvious, but why have you wanted so many encounters?

Gene Simmons: I can only spell it in three letters. M-A-N. When a woman ... and, look, I'm not here to say that I'm a scientist, or pretend or portend to be anything else -- those are semantics of course, but then neither you or I are anti-semantic. The notion is plain. And I read a book called *Myth of Monogamy*, which actually, sort of, uh, approached the subject and verbalized it, and I finally understood what it was. Because every woman suspects that the man she's laying next to is not necessarily going to be, well, "faithful" is the word. And privately she tells her girlfriends, "Oh God, all men are dogs." You're correct. And I'm here to tell you that in my deluded, uh, perspective, perhaps, it's biological. The first, "man" -- and women -- if man was predisposed to be monogamous, and we all lived in caves at that point, there were one or two alpha males, and the rest were females. Either way, if we were monogamous, within one or two generations, we would all be cross-eyed and retarded. Get it?

Terry Gross: So let me ask this. You say you've had sex with about 4,600 people. Women.

Gene Simmons: Women. Yes.

Terry Gross: Um, do you actually count? I mean do you have, like, a book --

Gene Simmons: You know, you know, I never --

Terry Gross: -- in which you keep hash marks, or --

Gene Simmons: I never paid much attention to it, because I've always lived my life the way my mother taught me to live with, which is that every day above ground is a good day. Don't look over your shoulder at society's rules, or whether or not you please anybody else except you, because at the end of your life, right before they stick you underground, you can't go into the "would'a, could'a, should'a." You can't do that great Jewish joke. What's a great Jewish whine? "I wanna go to Palm Springs." Doesn't fly. You're responsible for your own happiness, and women have to get that notion of, don't look to your guy. You have to figure out what makes you happy. And I did, a long time ago. I'm an only child, and I had a lot of time to figure it out. And so what I figured out a long time ago was, every day should be enjoyable, a, if you will, um, Epicurean hedonist. Look it up in your Funk & Wagnall's. And what it means is, life is the pursuit of pleasure. And I've done very well pursuing it. And so the band has been around 30 years. We're right behind the Beatles in the number of gold records by any groups in history. Somebody likes us. Women, and their sisters, and their moms, seem to want to express their adoration and/or fan-worship, or perhaps they want to see if my oral appendage actually does have a spin-and-dry cycle, and whether or not it has the ability to whip up a good froth. Ladies, I'm here to tell you it does. So for whatever reason they deem me worthy of their companionship, I was more than glad to oblige. And so, almost 30 years ago, I started taking photos. Polaroids. And I still have them to this day. And so, when the book was being written, Crown Publishers, who published my book, wanted to know -- you know, you can't just say "I did this" and "I did that," you have to give specifics. So I sat down and started counting. One, two, and so on. And arrived at about 4,600 and change.

Terry Gross: Are you interested in music, or is the goal of being in a rock band to have sex a lot?

Gene Simmons: I believe in my heart that anyone who gets up there and says what they're doing is art is on crack, and is delusional, and that in point of fact, what they really ... their modus operandi initially -- perhaps it changed when they started to question their sexuality, but clearly, initially -- it was to get laid and make lots of money. And anybody who tells you otherwise is lying to you. The reason we all wanted to pick up instruments initially ... you know, publicly, anyway -- I will grant you there are those people who really love music and simply want to do it as a private pleasure. The jury is out, I have no comment, but as soon as you get up publicly and want other people to hear it, it seems odd that we really get off on the notion that the opposite sex, the fairer sex -- that's you -- like what we do. And perhaps, if we do it really well, you'll think, "Gee, he's not only talented and bright, but he's kinda cute, too." That's what we're hoping for. Against all odds. And in music, it's the great aphrodisiac that says that even though I'm short, fat, ugly, bald, and ... and I'm hung like a second-grader, but if I'm in a rock band, I've got a better than average chance of bedding you down than if I was a dentist. I didn't make those rules. I come from Israel. I'm ... I'm simply a student at your feet. This is what I've noticed.

Terry Gross: Are you interested in music at all?

Gene Simmons: Don't you love this interview? Tell me the truth.

Terry Gross: Well, I think it's kind of a drag, because you're making speeches.

Gene Simmons: That's right.

Terry Gross: And you're being intentionally obnoxious. [laughs]

Gene Simmons: No, I'm not. I'm being a man.

Terry Gross: That's what I mean. You're being intentionally obnoxious by defining everything that you're saying as being a man.

Gene Simmons: For me. Well, I can't talk --

Terry Gross: I know better, I know all men -- a lot of them -- don't define --

Gene Simmons: No, no, no, no, no.

Terry Gross: -- define it the way you're speaking.

Gene Simmons: I always define ... No. You're wrong. I always defined it as "for me." I kept doing that over and over again. What bothers you is you're finally hearing a man tell the truth, instead of "You're the only one I'll ever live with and you're the ..." He's lying. He's lied ever since he was twelve. "I promise I'll pull out." He's lying, and I refuse to play that game, I refuse to stand up in front of a rabbi and my friends and the woman I love -- who I will tell you I can love with all my heart -- and promise she will be the only one I will ever have until the day I die. That's a lie.

Terry Gross: Do you like the movie *Spinal Tap*? And do you think that *Spinal Tap*, um, has any comment, uh, on ... on --

Gene Simmons: Rock and roll? Sure. Oh yeah. Sure. I think it's all funny. When you really think about it, I'm not delusional enough to think that what I do is important to life as we know it on this planet. No. But neither is what you do. You know, the world can get along very well without us. Farmers are more important. Teachers, and firemen, and so on, because if they're not around it really affects us. Your job and my job, whether you wear less makeup and I wear more makeup, is to entertain people. And I'm here to tell you: I'm very entertaining. I don't know about you. But this is NPR. [laughs]

Terry Gross: What exactly is NPR in your mind?

Gene Simmons: I never knew! It always sounds like a sixth-grade schoolteach -- see, if I was in charge, give me the reins, I would get -- National Public Radio! [snores] People start snoring. I'm not questioning the content. You should have bright people on. Maybe you should never have me on again, if you don't think I'm bright. Clearly it should be a wonderful place for people who read and are bright to have a conversation, a discourse perhaps, without hearing whatever it is you hate about the outside world. Fine. How about some style? Give me a little -- give me a little spice, instead of this bland ... Have you ever heard the *Saturday Night Live* version? It's pretty spot-on.

Terry Gross: Have you listened to it enough to know if it's spot on?

Gene Simmons: Sure. I was in -- here -- I was in Los Angeles and did a quick one. P.J. O'Rourke, who's great, who wrote for *Rolling Stone*, was on with myself and one other gentleman I don't remember, and the instruc -- you know the teach -- heh ... sorry. The DJ guy gets on, "GOOD-AF-TER-NOON, GENE." I'm going, what's the matter? Why are you talking like that? "WHAT-DO-YOU-MEAN?" I'm going, you know what? Let P.J. talk. P.J. the DJ. You need s-- as a listener --

Terry Gross: Well --

Gene Simmons: I would beg you guys to get something else on the air. Something with style. I'd change the call letters. NPR. I'd change it. Give it some oomph. Lexus! Locus! Something. See?

Terry Gross: Well I'm going to get back to some questions about KISS, and we'll see where we get to. One of the things you've done on stage is your fire-eating. How and why did you start doing that?

Gene Simmons: So that people can say, hey, look at him fire-breathe. Why does anybody, uh, why -- why does a little boy put a frog in a little girl's hands? Because she screeches and goes "Aaa!"

Terry Gross: Did you learn from magicians how to do it?

Gene Simmons: Yeah. I learned from a guy named Magico, who was actually, uh... you know, warned me about everything, and the first time I tried it I burned the corner of my hair. You know, it was very dangerous and, you know, continues to be.

Terry Gross: What about throwing up blood? Did you consult a magician for that too, or a special effects guy?

Gene Simmons: No. Nope. Nope. It's when nobody's looking, fill your mouth full of it, and get into it. But what does it all mean? Nothing! It means for two hours we're going to make you forget about the traffic jam, and the fact that your girlfriend is whining, or whatever else is going on in your life, and for two hours we give you escapism, that's what it means.

Terry Gross: What was the age of your audience when KISS started to perform?

Gene Simmons: That's a good question, because in 1972 or 73 when we first started, it was late teens, I'd say 18 to 20, 60 to 70 percent male, and then, uh, when KISS became the No. 1 band, you know, within a year and a half, we were playing Anaheim Stadium and we had toys, games, comic books, everything you can imagine. The age really widened. And we had fans as young as 3 years old. And then through the '80s and stuff, the audience got older as we did less toys, less comic books, and so on. And now in the '90s and the 2000 era, we've got over 2,500 licenses: There's a KISS Broadway play on the way with Rob Roth, who directed *Beauty and the Beast*, a KISS cartoon show with the people who do *Transformers* and *Beast Wars*. In other words, there are KISS comic books in the works. Superman meets KISS. That's going to be the kickoff of the new *Superman*, uh, rather, the new KISS comic books series. So we're going everywhere. I can be on the cover of *Playboy* magazine, and I can sell comic books and bubble gum to younger fans. And it's all good. And instead of being in a rock and roll band -- who the hell wants to do that? I don't -- I want to be in a rock and roll brand. I want to be Disney without the overhead. And I'm on the way.

Terry Gross: Let's talk about your background. Uh, you were born in Israel, several years after the war ended. Your mother, during the war, was in a Nazi concentration camp. Um, do you have any memories of life in Israel?

Gene Simmons: I do. The German Nazi concentration camps, in WWII, which the entire German population -- or enough of it that you can say the German population -- bought into hook, line, and sinker, was the result of my mother's and millions of other people's misery. And Israel was a strange place anyway. It was certainly not an easy place to go to, but six months after the "independence" of Israel was recognized by the U.N. and who knows who else, I popped out. So, where I was born was really an accident like everyone else, and growing up in Israel was sort of like being in a box where you're not aware that the outside world exists. I certainly never saw a television set. I didn't know about Kleenex or supermarkets or anything. All I knew was you heard stories in school about David and Goliath and, you know, all these wonderful great superhero stories -- and the sea is splitting open and wide and our people go through it and then it crashes again on the Egyptians -- you know, all these great stories, but, and then people slowly

started to tell me: No, no, this is the place it happened, you're actually living in it. It was tough to take it. So at eight-and-a-half years of age, when I came over to America with my mother, it was like being thrown into another dimension. I'd never heard of Santa Claus or Christ or Christmas, never knew anything about Christians or that there were other kinds of people. And from then on I became a sponge. I wanted to just take it all in. It was just way beyond anything I could ever imagine. And television. The great television. And rock and roll. And horror movies and science fiction and comic books were my education. And I thank God that those were what I learned instead of having to read *Jane Eyre* at an early age, because it wasn't anything -- it wasn't anything I could relate to.

Terry Gross: I know you went to a yeshiva as a boy, were you from an orthodox family?

Gene Simmons: No, nobody in the family was orthodox, but when I came to America, my mother, being a single mother, had to go out and work, from 6:00 in the morning till 7:00 at night, so she put me in a yeshiva, which is a Jewish theological seminary. In other words, you're studying to be somebody, and I was studying to be a rabbi. And they fed me and clothed me, and you sort of take care of your child that way, you don't have to worry that your child is on the street. And so while I was there I saw one world, the closed world. And when I turned on television, people were flying through the air and they had capes and there were cartoons and, you know, just amazing things. And I wanted to go there. I thought that was a lot cooler than yarmulkes.

Terry Gross: What's your mother's reaction to KISS?

Gene Simmons: Well, it's interesting. Good question. My mother is probably the wisest person I've ever known. She's not schooled, she's not well-read. But she has a philosophy of life that makes well-read people seem like morons. She doesn't talk a lot, uses very few words to express herself (unlike myself, who likes the sound of his own voice). So here's a woman who'd been through the German Nazi concentration camps of WWII and still thought that there was goodness in humanity and thought about the fact that the glass was half full instead of half empty. And when asked, well, "What about your son? He's in this weird rock band, he's ... dresses weird and, you know, apparently he has lots of liaisons with girls and stuff ... What do you think about that?" She says, "Well, as long as he doesn't use drugs and alcohol and doesn't hurt anybody, I don't care about the rest." You know what? She's right.

Terry Gross: You've said that you don't use drugs.

Gene Simmons: Never have.

Terry Gross: And you've never had a drink of alcohol.

Gene Simmons: That's not true. I've never been drunk.

Terry Gross: You've never been drunk. That's right. Yeah. Yeah.

Gene Simmons: I, literally, at parties, when somebody says "toast," I try to take a sip. But, without saying it for effect, it's true when as soon as I smell alcohol I start to gag. I may be blessed with some kind of chemical reaction against it, but I won't go near the most beautiful woman who's got my name written all over her if she opens her mouth and smells like a truck driver who's just drank Bud. I'm outta there. Gone. It always struck me bizarre that women are willing to paint their mouths beautifully with lipstick and yet smoke and drink and make their breath smell like ... a garbage heap. So ... I can't do that. I can't be around people who numb their senses. Everybody's allowed as far as I'm concerned to take their own like or numb themselves to oblivion, but I could care less. I have no sympathy for anybody who has the -- lives in

America, especially, and who decides, You know what, I'm going to numb myself. Drugs, alcohol, cigarettes ... So I'm happy to be alive every single day. And I want my senses working 24 hours a day. And if you were in my room and we were going to have a liaison, and you were high, you'd be out on your butt before you could spell your last name. Because if you don't want to experience me with all the senses God gave you, you don't deserve to be with me.

Terry Gross: Um, you know, you -- you --

Gene Simmons: I think you should.

Terry Gross: -- you said you don't have sympathy for that guy on the roof who keeps saying, "I'm going to jump."

Gene Simmons: None.

Terry Gross: But my impression is you don't have much sympathy for anyone. You -- you're so into yourself! You're just so deep into yourself.

Gene Simmons: Well, I think ... I think everybody should be. If it sounds like admiration coming out of you, I accept it. I think ... it -- life is too short to have anything but delusional notions about yourself. Which is -- you should really like yourself more than you deserve to, because the alternative isn't very good. You should really think you are better looking than you are, because the alternative is ... sort of ... you know, some ... some bad notions. And so I'm aware, as a sane person, that I'm not the best-looking guy in the world. I'm aware of it. But when I go into a party, I will walk out with your girlfriend.

Terry Gross: Um, just one more question before we wrap up.

Gene Simmons: As many as you want.

Terry Gross: I would like to think that the personality you've presented on our show today is a persona that you've affected as a member of KISS, something you do on stage, before the microphone, but that you're not nearly as obnoxious in the privacy of your own home or when you're having dinner with friends.

Gene Simmons: Fair enough. And I'd like to think that the boring lady who's talking to me now is a lot sexier and more interesting than the one who's doing NPR. You know, studious and reserved, and -- I bet you're a lot of fun at a party.

Terry Gross: Well, we'll leave it at that. Gene Simmons --

Gene Simmons: Sure!

Terry Gross: -- thanks so much.

Gene Simmons: I look forward to our meeting.

Terry Gross: [laughs] Bye-bye.

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