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Gene Simmons: 'Rock Is Finally Dead'

The Kiss rocker expands on his thoughts about the past, present, and future of recorded music

By Nick Simmons





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I spoke with my father about his legacy, the legacy of his contemporaries, and the state of the music industry today. Invariably, it seemed, we began to talk about file-sharing.

*But this is not that old story of an out-of-touch one-percenter crying victim. As so many pointed out during the now-infamous Napster public relations war, the rich/famous/established musicians are not the victims of the digital revolution. **My father** instead laments the loss of opportunity for my generation, those who have begun to sense that it may no longer simply be a matter of dusting our hands, learning a skill, and putting in the time. There is a system that is broken for those of us who love songwriting, instruments, and all the soul of the analog, and it is now working against us — unless we conform. Unless we decide to stick, safely, to pop, and let gray men in a boardroom write our songs for us, dress us, and sell us from somewhere in the shadows.*

The death of rock music came, as we all feared, not as a bright, burning explosion, but as a candle that slowly faded away—and in my father's view, we are all at fault, for slowly leeching its fire without giving back any of our own.

NICK SIMMONS: You once said the music business isn't dying — it's dead. What would you say to young musicians and songwriters today trying to navigate this new terrain?

GENE SIMMONS: Don't quit your day job is a good piece of advice. When I was coming up, it was not an insurmountable mountain. Once you had a record company on your side, they would fund you, and that also meant when you toured they would give you tour support. There was an entire industry to help the next Beatles, Stones, Prince, Hendrix, to prop them up and support them every step of the way. There are still record companies, and it does apply to pop, rap, and country to an extent. But for performers who are also songwriters — the creators — for rock music, for soul, for the blues — it's finally dead.

Rock is finally dead.

I am so sad that the next 15-year-old kid in a garage someplace in Saint Paul, that plugs into his Marshall and wants to turn it up to ten, will not have anywhere near the same opportunity that I did. He will most likely, no matter what

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he does, fail miserably. There is no industry for that anymore. And who is the culprit? There's always the changing tide of interests — music taste changes with each generation. To blame that is silly. That was always the exciting part, after all: "What's next?" But there's something else. The death of rock was not a natural death. Rock did not die of old age. It was murdered. And the real culprit is that kid's 15-year-old next-door neighbor, probably a friend of his. Maybe even one of the bandmates he's jamming with. The tragedy is that they seem to have no idea that they just killed their own opportunity — they killed the artists they would have loved. Some brilliance, somewhere, was going to be expressed, and now it won't, because it's that much harder to earn a living playing and writing songs. No one will pay you to do it.

The masses do not recognize file-sharing and downloading as stealing because there's a copy left behind for you — it's not *that* copy that's the problem, it's the *other* one that someone *received* but didn't pay for. The problem is that nobody will pay you for the 10,000 hours you put in to create what you created. I can only imagine the frustration of all that work, and having no one value it enough to pay you for it.

It's very sad for new bands. My heart goes out to them. They just don't have a chance. If you play guitar, it's almost impossible. You're better off not even learning how to play guitar or write songs, and just singing in the shower and auditioning for *The X Factor*. And I'm not slamming *The X Factor*, or pop singers. But where's the next Bob Dylan? Where's the next Beatles? Where are the songwriters? Where are the creators? Many of them now have to work behind the scenes, to prop up pop acts and write their stuff for them.

Here's a frightening thought: from 1958 to 1983, name 100 musical anythings that are iconic, that seem to last beyond their time.

NS: The Beatles, The Stones...

GS: Elvis, the Beatles, Michael Jackson, the Stones, Jimi Hendrix, the numerous classic Motown artists, Madonna, U2, Prince, Pink Floyd... The list goes on. Individuals, all unanimously considered classic, timeless, revolutionary. Now from '84 until today, name some. Just give me a few — artists that, even after their passing, are or will be inescapable.

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Artists on the same level as the ones I just mentioned. Even if you don't like them, they will be impossible to avoid, or deny, even after they've stopped making music and maybe passed on. In fact, they become bigger when they stop. Name artists that even compare with the ones I just named.

NS: Nirvana?

GS: Nirvana. That's about it. They are *the* notable exception. Keep thinking. It's harder, isn't it, to name artists with as much confidence? The pickings are so slim, and it's not an arbitrary difference. There was a 10- to 15-year period in the '60s and '70s that gave birth to almost every

artist we now call "iconic," or "classic." If you know anything about what makes longevity, about what makes something an everlasting icon, it's hard to find after that. The craft is gone, and that is what technology, in part, has brought us. What is the next *Dark Side of the Moon*? Now that the record industry barely exists, they wouldn't have a chance to make something like that. There is a reason that, along with the usual top-40 juggernauts, some of the biggest touring bands are half old people, like me.

NS: What does this bode for the industry of the future?

GS: There is no record industry, unfortunately. Not like there was. There are some terrific bands out there — Tame Impala, which you turned me on to, and so on. And during the '60s and '70s they would've become big, I'm convinced.

But, strangely, today, everything pales before Psy's "**Gangnam Style.**" Look up the numbers on that song. He blows everyone else out of the water.

NS: The biggest song of all time is an Internet meme. Sounds almost like popular music is jumping the shark.

GS: Yes. My guess is that despite those numbers, it will still pass from the public eye in a short time. I don't know what that means, but it's clear that longevity is practically dead, and new artists that stand the test of time — meaning, artists whose art can survive them, who become icons — are so rare as to almost be nonexistent.

NS: Considering that it doesn't seem to affect you directly, how did you become so outspoken about this? Along with a few public figures I could name, you've been one of the most vocal critics of file-sharing.

GS: My perspective is decidedly different than perhaps the perspective of somebody who was born here. If you're a native-born American, my contention is that you take a lot of things for granted. All the freedoms and opportunities you have here are expected, and you feel entitled. I think this has taken over the American psyche. I find that many of the more patriotic people are immigrants, and they're the ones who stand still when the flag goes up, out of gratitude. My sense is that file-sharing started in predominantly white, middle- and upper-middle-class young people who were native-born, who felt they were entitled to have something for free, because that's what they were used to. If you believe in capitalism — and I'm a firm believer in free-market capitalism — then that other model is chaos. It destroys the structure. You'll never understand unless you're the one that wrote the song, and you were the one that had the band, whose music people took without paying you for. Once you're the one who's been robbed, there's a moment of clarity.

And let's be clear: I'm not the guy to be pouting and complaining about stuff. I make a decent living. I'm very, very lucky. But that's because we started before the chaos, in the days when people had to buy records. If you didn't like a band, you didn't buy their albums, and the people decided.

NS: They voted with their dollar.

GS: That's right. And going back to that national psyche thing... I firmly believe that there's something missing in America, and it used to exist, and it's now corny. Patriotism is

|| *"Patriotism is corny, and that's a sad state of affairs."*

corny, and that's a sad state of affairs. It really ■
is. I don't care what side of the aisle you're on — I find faults in both, some social and some political issues — but everywhere, people are taking a lot of things for granted. And you would know the majesty that is America if you came from hundreds of other countries I could name. If you come from a place where every day above ground is a life-threatening event, and you had the same ambition and values as the most successful people here, you would never reach the same heights. And of course this applies to Western society at large, but America especially. I think every day, we forget about the — and here's the corny part — glory of America. And that's too ~~fucking~~ bad.

NS: Any last thoughts?

GS: Always, but I think I've talked enough for a lifetime.

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