

# When KISS Rocked Cadillac

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never-seen photos

KISS was on the cusp of superstardom when a small, conservative town in northern Michigan invited the band to visit. The rest is rock history.

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Fin Costello/Redferns

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It sounds like a Hollywood screenwriter's fantasy: a small-town high-school football team turns around a losing season, inspired by the music of wildly theatrical rock and rollers from New York. The team contacts the group with an unlikely ask: Would they consider visiting, so the town can say thanks? The band, on the cusp of superstardom, agrees — resulting in one of the most improbable, wholesome, heartwarming stories in rock history. But this was no movie: the year was 1975; the town was Cadillac, Michigan; and the band was KISS. Here, after unearthing never-seen photos from the event, FOTO celebrates an unrepeatably pop-culture moment, and speaks with a man who helped make it happen.



Fin Costello/Redferns ROLLING THUNDER Jim Neff (above, at right, in light-colored pants) was a 28-year-old assistant football coach and history teacher at Cadillac High in 1974 when the varsity Vikings experienced a rocky 0-2 start to the season. "I was a big KISS fan," Neff told FOTO, "and I started playing their music in the locker room to get the team fired up." When the Vikings started winning, Neff wrote to KISS' management to let them know about the team's reversal of fortune. To his astonishment, KISS graciously replied; they were thrilled that their music inspired the Vikings to victory. Pictured: The October 1975 Cadillac High School homecoming parade; KISS can be seen in the distance.



Fin Costello/Redferns PLAYING THE FIELD Rocking out to KISS, the '74 – '75 Vikings won seven straight, and ended the season as conference co-champions. A year later, realizing KISS was playing a concert just 140 miles south, in Kalamazoo, Neff contacted the band again and asked if they'd visit Cadillac: The town wanted to show its appreciation for a winning season. And that, in a nutshell, is what sparked two unforgettable days of unlikely fellowship between, at the time, the world's most outrageous rock and roll act and a quiet, tight-knit Midwestern community of 10,000. Other photographers attended the Cadillac event, too, but these pictures by Fin Costello, an Irish music journalist who shot Deep Purple, Humble Pie, and other major rock groups of the '70s, are unique: They've never been published — until now. Pictured: KISS' Paul Stanley goofs around with the Cadillac High football team, October 1975.

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Fin Costello/Redferns HEAVY BRASS KISS lead guitarist Ace "Spaceman" Frehley and drummer and occasional vocalist Peter "Catman" Criss with the Cadillac High marching band, October 1975. (Today, more than 40 years later, neither Criss nor Frehley plays with KISS.) "We kept the news about KISS coming to town under wraps until days before they arrived," Neff told FOTO. "We didn't have the capacity to handle hundreds, or maybe even thousands, of fans descending on Cadillac. But when the marching band's conductor heard about it, he listened to the album 'Dressed to Kill' and in a few days he taught the kids to play one of KISS' greatest songs, 'Rock and Roll All Nite.' The guys in the band got a huge kick out of it."



Fin Costello/Redferns HEADS OF THE CLASS Paul Stanley, Peter Criss, Ace Frehley, and Gene Simmons with the Cadillac High football team. KISS arrived in Cadillac on October 9, 1975; the band's landmark double-live album, "Alive!" had been released just weeks earlier. The album stayed on the Billboard charts for two years, and a dizzying array of punk, hard rock, and metal bands have cited it as an influence ever since. (Pitchfork gave "Alive!" a rare 10/10 rating when revisiting the album on the 30th anniversary of its release, in 2005.) That KISS was feted by a small, conservative town at the very moment the band was transitioning from face-painted curiosities to rock royalty who would go on to fill arenas across the globe and sell more than 100 million records adds resonance to the Cadillac event. After October 1975, neither the town nor the band would ever be the same.



Fin Costello/Redferns



Fin Costello/Redferns CAT PEOPLE Peter Criss with kids in the Cadillac High School gymnasium, October 1975. "The band played its concert in the gym at night, so it was too late for young kids to attend," Neff said. "But a bunch of little kids came to the sound check in the afternoon. Everyone involved — the band, the stage crew, people from the record label — were all incredibly nice. I don't know how many pictures Gene, Paul, Ace, and Peter posed for during the two days they were in Cadillac, but I never heard about them refusing a single request. They were so generous. They didn't act like rock stars, or pull any prima donna nonsense. Everyone was just blown away with how down-to-earth they were." Case in point: Neff notes that the band's bass player, Gene "The Demon" Simmons, gladly acquiesced when the school principal asked that he not engage in one of his signature maneuvers, i.e., spitting fake blood all over the stage. KISS might have been shock-rockers but in Cadillac, they behaved like model neighbors.



Fin Costello/Redferns SAY CHEESE! Gene Simmons poses with Cadillac High cheerleader Milissa Codden. "You know," Neff said, "this was not really a story about a concert, or a football team, but a small town coming together with a rock band from the big city and just having a blast. It was a day at the circus, for crying out loud." Neff, 71, retired from teaching in 2000, after working at Cadillac schools for four decades. Today, he lives in the same house that he and his family have lived in the since the 1970s, a short walk from the high school. "The team still lets me walk the sideline during games," he told FOTO, with a laugh. "Like I know what I'm doing."



Fin Costello/Redferns ON FIRE KISS in front of the Cadillac Fire Department, October 1975. (Note the "CFD" bas relief between the doors.) "I give tours to KISS fans all the time, what we call KISSStory tours," Neff told FOTO, "and there are certain places everyone wants to see. The football field, of course. The gym where the concert was held. And the old firehouse. There are some famous shots of the band with that truck, but I've never seen this one before," Neff said of the photograph above. One of KISS' most popular songs, recorded for "Alive!" as well as the band's self-titled 1974 debut, is called "Firehouse." ("Get the firehouse / Cause she sets my soul afire / Get the firehouse / And the flames keep gettin' higher.")



Fin Costello/Redferns BREAKFAST CLUB Cadillac High School principal John Laurent speaks at a breakfast the morning after KISS' concert in his school's gym. "The town leaders held a civic breakfast once a month, and as it happened the one in October was scheduled during homecoming weekend," Neff recalled. "But there's no way the band thought they'd get keys to the city and be celebrated by the mayor and other leaders wearing KISS makeup." Neff also noted that "Gene Simmons did [Laurent's] makeup, which is why it looks so good." Others, who had the work done by high-school students, "weren't so lucky."



Fin Costello/Redferns WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE KISS with Cadillac Mayor Pete Wagner (in front of Paul Stanley); school superintendent Bill Smith, in the plaid jacket; and the mayor's wife, with Gene Simmons' hand on her throat. Note the signed copy of "Alive!" on the table, and the plaques held by many of the attendees, designating them "honorary members" of KISS. "It was surreal, but really sweet," Neff said, "how this blue-collar community — a place of family-owned stores, with more churches than gas stations — embraced these rock and rollers, and vice versa."

The mutual affection was especially remarkable in light of the fact that, according to Neff, "the frame of reference most people in Cadillac had in terms of live music back then was seeing wedding bands or performers lip-syncing at a school dance." One can imagine that a leather-clad, studded-codpiece-sporting rock band with song lyrics like those in, say, "Hotter Than Hell" might scandalize people unused to such things. ("She looked good / She looked hotter than hell / All dressed in satins and lace / I looked at her and it was just too clear / I had to get on the case.") But perhaps the music drowned out the words, leaving everyone happy.



Fin Costello/Redferns CENTER OF ATTENTION Two kids hang out at center court in the Cadillac High School gym during KISS' sound check, October 9, 1975. Like so many now-legendary rock and roll concerts — Hendrix at Monterey Pop in '67, for instance, or the Sex Pistols' fiasco of a last show in January 1978 — the KISS concert in Cadillac was special enough that countless fans today like to claim that they, too, were there. But as Neff points out, "only a few hundred people attended the concert. If you listen to all the people who say they were there, our gym somehow miraculously held tens of thousands of people that night." Before the show, Gene Simmons appeared to light a homecoming bonfire on a football field behind the gym by breathing fire from his mouth — a stunt he performed on stage countless times by spitting a mouthful of kerosene at a lit torch. In fact, Neff says, the bonfire was lit by a local Eagle Scout, who ignited a gasoline-drenched pile of wood at the moment Simmons spat fire in its direction. "Gene didn't light that thing," Neff says, "but if you weren't standing right next to him, it sure looked like he did!"



Fin Costello/Redferns THE KISS WAY KISS in a limo during the homecoming parade in Cadillac, October 10, 1975. The band had arrived in town in limos, and everybody assumed they were leaving the same way. But that wasn't the KISS way of doing things. "They go straight to the football field, and this enormous helicopter lands right on the 50-yard line," says Neff (seen above, in light pants, just to the left of the limo), a note of awe in his voice 40-plus years later. "After hanging out with the kids, just friendly and polite as hell, they left like genuine rocks stars. They flew off into the sky, in their full outfits, their face makeup, everything. A perfect ending to an amazing couple of days."



Fin Costello/Redferns THE KIDS ARE All RIGHT Paul Stanley playfully puts his famous satin arm cuffs on a young girl — Jim Neff's 6-year-old daughter, Amy. (Behind Stanley, Ace Frehley bounces a wide-eyed baby on his knee.) "So many rock and roll stories end sadly," Neff told FOTO. "Band members die. Groups have ugly break-ups. But this story keeps going on because it's totally positive. Wire services picked it up when it happened, and news about the event went worldwide. All of a sudden, KISS is a band for everybody, not just for rabid fans. The group got what probably ended up being millions of dollars' worth of free publicity, right when their live album was climbing charts all over the world. That period in their career will always be associated with Cadillac," Neff said. "And we couldn't be prouder."

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