

Music from The Elder

**KissFAQ Interview with Rob Freeman
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KF: How is it that you got to work on the project with KISS?

The first project I worked on for KISS was Ace's solo album for Casablanca Records, *Ace Frehley*, which I recorded and mixed with producer Eddie Kramer in 1978. The album achieved a good degree of commercial success, with multi-platinum sales and a hit single, "New York Groove." It also garnered critical acclaim. But I believe it was the distinctive sonic character of the album that drew the attention of Ace's band mates and others in the KISS organization to my work (I'm in no way meaning to understate Eddie's unique contributions). Over the ensuing couple of years, I worked on a variety of smaller projects for the KISS organization such as radio spots and demos. Also during that time, I was fortunate to be given the opportunity to design and install a 4-track home studio and a state-of-the-art home theater system in Paul Stanley's uptown NYC condo.

Then in December 1980, someone from the KISS office rang me up and asked if I would work with the band on a new recording project. I heard it might be for a new album, and naturally I was thrilled at the prospect of working with KISS again. In early January 1981, I began recording tracks with KISS at Ace in the Hole, Ace's home studio in Wilton, Connecticut. There was no producer-for-hire present, just the band and me, as recording engineer. These were the first recording sessions to feature Eric Carr's extraordinary drumming.



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Ace in the Hole Studio as seen in original sales brochure

KF: What was Ace in the Hole Studio like?

Ace in the Hole was bunkered into the hillside adjacent to Ace's house. John Storyk, of the renowned Walters-Storyk Design Group, did his usual exquisite job designing and

constructing the facility. Ace had genuine love and respect for the recording arts and seemed to have spared no expense when it came to the acoustic quality, technical layout, and cosmetics of his studio. Ace in the Hole may have been a private recording studio, but it was as professional and fully functional as many major commercial studios of the day.

The studio complex included a spacious control room and a large, open recording room. The control room was appointed with lots of wood but had enough acoustic traps placed throughout to effectively reduce sonic reflections, making for more accurate recording and mixing. The studio room was also abundant with wood and featured a mirrored wall and a construction glass wall built at odd angles to each other so as to disperse standing sound waves. The acoustic characteristics of the wood, the mirror, and the glass combined effectively to give the room that sought-after “live” sonic quality. There was an acoustically deadened booth-like area designed for recording drums or other instruments that might benefit from a tighter, less open sound and some large “gobos” (movable baffles) for creating smaller areas of deadened acoustics where needed.

In addition, there was a tile and mirror bathroom that was wired for recording or for use as a live reverb chamber. For the latter, sounds could be selectively fed from the control room into the bathroom, played out through a speaker (adding natural bathroom reverberation to the sound) then mic’d and returned to the control room. At one point I put a guitar amp in there to capture one of Ace’s solos in that lively acoustic environment. We might have also recorded some of Gene and Paul’s background vocals in there as I can recall the sound of their voices singing and cracking jokes from inside that bathroom.

KF: Apparently Ace’s studio was tricked out with the latest technology of the time. Do you remember any of the gear you utilized?

Ace in the Hole had an MCI 600 series automated console (not one of my favorites, but very popular in the day), an MCI JH-16 2” 24-track tape machine with full remote, and two MCI 100A 2-track tape machines for mixdowns. An outboard equipment rack on wheels sat right next to the console and another multi-bank rack was installed into a large cabinet behind the engineer’s seat. All the rack spaces were filled with a good assortment of signal-processing equipment—compressors, noise gates, equalizers, filters, effects generators, etc.—some of them with warm vintage tube electronics. Sitting on top of the console was a LARC remote for a Lexicon 224XL digital reverb and multi-effects unit, truly a state-of-the-art system at that time. All the acoustic spaces and electronic tools for making great recordings were there.

The mic closet at Ace in the Hole was filled with a fine selection of popular mics, among them condenser mics by Neumann and AKG and dynamic mics by Sennheiser, AKG, Beyer Dynamic, and Shure. There were also plenty of direct boxes for recording guitars, basses, or other electronic instruments directly into the recording console.

Then there were Ace’s guitars and amps! During the *Ace Frehley* album sessions at Plaza Sound Studios, NYC, Ace had his extraordinary collection of guitars and amps all lined up in the studio. At Ace in the Hole, he kept only a few choice guitars and amps set up but would often duck out and return with another and another and yet another guitar or amp. Ace’s collection wasn’t just for show, although it was truly fabulous to behold; it provided a palate from which Ace could choose just the right combinations of touch and sound. As oddball, humorous, and lovable as Ace could be, he was dead serious about his instruments, his amps, and his studio. I felt so privileged to be the one running Ace in the

Hole for him at that time.

KF: What were the sessions like at Ace's studio?

The hour-long commutes to and from Ace's studio were a heady mix of the beautifully serene and the terribly treacherous as I zoomed up and down the pristine Merritt Parkway and through the curvy, well-moneyed hills of Wilton in icy winter weather. I often arrived at the appointed hour before any of the band members, including Ace, whose slight commute—a short walk from his living room down a flight of stairs, through his KISS memorabilia-laden playroom, and down a long, sloping gold-record-adorned hallway with skylights—gave him few excuses for tardiness. Someone in the house would buzz me in and I'd drive around back and park, hoping that Ace's fearsome-looking dogs were secure in their kennels. Once inside the studio, I'd busy myself with setups and calibrations, or playbacks of previous sessions until the band members all trickled in. Gene, Paul, and Eric would arrive in matching (in style, not color) Porsches, which made the studio parking area resemble a high-end car dealership when their cars were all lined up. I was told that Eric's Porsche was one of many band-joining gifts bestowed upon him by the others.

The sessions continued on and off throughout January and February and ran like marathons at all hours of the day and night. Since there was really nowhere else to go once you were there, we were all happily "trapped" together in the studio. When a session ran particularly late, I'd just sleep on the couch in Ace's playroom rather than risk the commute home in an overly exhausted state.

We recorded in highly energized spurts but would take long breaks during which Ace might disappear into his house for what seemed like hours, leaving the rest of us to either carry on without him or pass the time chatting or watching live KISS concert footage (over and over!) on the television set installed in the wall between the control room speakers. Paul had a terrific sense of humor—as did all the guys—and during breaks, he'd sometimes record comedic bits to play for the others. On occasion he brought his acoustic guitar into the control room and played Beatle songs. That was a side of Paul I loved—and would enjoy again during the making of the *Lick It Up* album—but I suspected few of his fans got to see. Ace would return from his upstairs respites sometimes decked out in outlandish outfits but invariably with snacks or meals in tow. No matter what tensions might have been present in the studio, when Ace arrived like that, one could only smile and get on with the session.

KF: Were all of the KISS band members present at Ace's studio?

All the band members of KISS were present at all of the "basic track" (or "tracking") sessions. Basic tracks, in this case, consisted of drums, bass, and two guitars performed live by all four of them playing together in the studio. As we got more into the overdub phase—replacing and/or adding guitars, solos, vocals, percussion, etc.—the studio thinned out at times with one or more band members opting not to show up for certain sessions. As a result, some sessions were considerably more low-key than others with only a single band member and me working together in the studio.

KF: How was the studio set up for recording basic tracks?

For the recording of basic tracks, the four band members were situated fairly close to each other in the studio, maybe 10 feet apart. The drum kit was set out in the open room (not in

the booth area). I placed close mics on the individual drums and cymbals and an array of “room mics” about 10-15 feet away from the kit to capture its sound in the room ambiance. Gobos were put around the guitar and bass amps in an effort to keep their sound from bleeding too much into the drum and room mics. Gene’s bass was recorded through a direct box in addition to having a microphone in front of his amp. I also set up a few vocal mics that were used for communications, cueing, and reference vocals. The band members all wore headphones with a mix of instruments and vocals that I set in the control room.

KF: Any recollection of band members switching instruments: Gene on guitar or Ace or Paul on bass? Remember anyone playing keyboards?

The band members mostly stuck to their designated instruments. Gene played bass on all the tracks but he might have added a guitar part on “Feel Like Heaven.” Ace and Paul always had terrific interplay between them when they laid down guitar tracks at the same time. They’d work out the parts together—chords and lines—and then divvy them up, sometimes doubling parts, sometimes playing off each other. I could count on lots of wonderful “stereo” guitar moments by splitting their tracks hard left and right in the mix. No keyboard parts were added to any of the tracks we recorded for this project. I have a fond recollection of a well-known studio percussionist, likely the late, great Jimmy Maelen stopping by to overdub a shaker and a backwards cymbal on “Feel Like Heaven.”

KF: How would you describe the vibe and interaction between the band members?

Overall, the sessions maintained a good-natured, pleasant vibe. A lot was accomplished amidst plenty of goofing around. But truth be told, I did sense some tensions brewing within the band even as we started the project. At various times they were all vocal about not being happy with this or that. The management people who sometimes hovered around the sessions had their own set of issues as well and often engaged in long “private” discussions with band factions. This was a time not too long after Peter Criss left the band—or was asked to leave?—so nerves were still raw from the splintering. There were a few times when I thought things might heat up enough to grind the sessions to a halt, but thankfully that never happened. Whenever the time for making music was at hand and the red record light went on, any discord among the band members melted away, and they worked together in harmony.

KF: You said the band members all had a terrific sense of humor. Got any stories you’d like to share from those sessions?

Throughout the long hours in the studio, you could always count on Ace to come up with entertaining ways to help keep moods light. He would bring in remote controlled toys and gadgets of all kinds and even various types of weapons. Ace had a video that was just a close-up of one of his friends wearing tons of shaving cream all over his face doing a rather decent impression of Ed Koch, New York’s mayor at the time. It was actually quite funny, and Ace reveled in playing it over and over again. He played a variety of other videos, too—not all in the greatest of taste. What can I say...Ace was, well, Ace.

Gene and Paul kept us in stitches with some weird song they kept singing for days on end. It resembled an American Indian chant and featured developing, ever-more-depraved lyrics poking fun at certain members of their road crew. It was brutally funny.

The studio bathroom, wired for sound, was also the source of some amusing moments. Paul was prone to singing, sometimes in funny voices, as he used the facilities. It was always interesting to hear what might be leaking (literally!) through the studio's reverb system.

KF: Unfortunately, Eric Carr passed away in 1991. What do you recall about working with Eric during these sessions?

Eric was a sweet, talented guy, and working with him was always a joy. I felt that he and I related very well together. During those sessions Eric confided in me about how he considered himself the luckiest guy in the world to have been accepted into KISS. He would say, "Last month I was playing in a Long Island bar band, and now I'm here, recording with KISS. How unbelievable!" He talked about the new Porsche the band had given him and how they set him up in a great condo in NYC, all expenses paid. He was truly humble about his recent change in fortunes. Fresh at the beginning of his time with KISS, Eric also expressed a touch of insecurity about his place in the band. I reassured him that from everything I'd heard, his band mates thought the world of him and truly respected him as a musician and as a person. It's interesting to note the change just two short years later during the *Lick It Up* sessions at The Record Plant, NYC. Although he still remained very amiable, by that time Eric seemed to take his status as a member of KISS more in stride.

Eric had an abundance of positive energy and was always ready to play. He'd arrive and go straight into the studio to begin tweaking the drum kit and warming up. When it came time to record, Eric would lay into his drums with everything he had, as if on stage in front of thousands of screaming fans. He was lucky to be in KISS...and they were lucky to have him.

KF: During the sessions at Ace's studio, the band was working on material that was more straight-ahead rock compared to what resulted on *Music from The Elder*. Is that what you recall?

Most certainly, yes! Eric brought renewed energy to the band—his band mates all said it—and those sessions afforded them all a chance to let loose and really rock out. I remember sitting in the control room listening to them playing together and thinking, "Wow, this *is* one smokin' band!" Whether rehearsing or recording, they played with tremendous energy and sounded rock solid.

KF: Rob, according to my notes, recording for the new KISS album initially ensued in March 1981 at Ace's studio. Sound about right? If you had to guess, how many weeks did you spend recording until Bob Ezrin showed up?

I've always suspected that some of the basic tracks I recorded during those sessions ended up on *Music from The Elder*, although I've never confirmed which, if any, those might be. If that were the case, then January 1981 would be a more accurate start time for the album, even though producer Bob Ezrin and his concept for the album were not yet in place. If not, then I suppose the actual album could have commenced sometime in March, though in Canada, not at Ace's studio. Either way, I believe it was in late February that Mr. Ezrin first appeared during one of the sessions at Ace's studio. I don't recall him participating in that session. Very shortly thereafter Mr. Ezrin, the band, and the multi-track tapes I'd been working on all upped and headed north to Canada. Unfortunately, I didn't

go, since Mr. Ezrin had his own engineers awaiting him there. That was ostensibly the end of my involvement with the project that later became *Music from The Elder*. Happily for me, there would be many more great recording sessions with KISS to come.

KF: How did the project end up at Penny Lane Studios and how much work did you do there?

The decision to take the project to Penny Lane Studios might have been made in order to give Paul, Gene, and Eric, all of whom lived in the New York City area, a break from the lengthy commutes to Ace's studio in Connecticut. Penny Lane had a wonderful Trident recording console and well-designed recording and control rooms. I had recorded several projects there prior to bringing in KISS and was always very pleased with the experience and, more importantly, the results. Because it was primarily a radio jingle production house operated by its parent company, Radio Band of America, Penny Lane Studios could be booked at very reasonable rates, but only after hours, and that meant overnight through dawn sessions.

The songs we worked on at Penny Lane were "Nowhere to Run," "Feel Like Heaven," and "Love's a Deadly Weapon." Since the basic tracks and some overdubs had already been recorded at Ace's studio, all that was left to do at Penny Lane was a final round of overdubs, including lead and background vocals, and then mix. For some reason, we never got around to recording guitar solos on "Nowhere to Run" or "Feel Like Heaven," so the solo sections of both of those songs remained open.

It was at Penny Lane that I developed a deep appreciation of Paul's incredible vocal abilities. Paul routinely delivered amazing, flawless vocal performances in a single pass of the tape—one take! Many singers, even seasoned ones, would be happy to record through the first chorus of a song only to stop before carrying on or trying again. Paul could visualize how he wanted his vocals to sound then commit them to tape, spot on, every time. Sure, we may have opted to fix something here or touch up something there, but for the most part Paul's vocals sounded polished just as he sang them—a remarkable talent, indeed!

Finishing overdubs and mixing the three songs at Penny Lane would take only four or five sessions.

KF: Do any of these song titles sound familiar?

"Deadly Weapons"

"One Step Too Far"

"Bad Reputation"

"Heaven"

"Feel Like Heaven"

"Nowhere to Run"

"Don't Run"

"Every Little Piece of Your Heart"

We worked on quite a few tracks. Some of them were complete songs presented by Paul or Gene and some seemed to develop spontaneously out of unfinished bits and pieces or studio jams. As I mentioned, the only songs we completed to any degree were "Nowhere to Run," "Feel Like Heaven," and "Love's a Deadly Weapon." Others on your list may have

been among the batch of songs we recorded, but I wouldn't recall them by name as many remained untitled and unfinished at the time.

One note: over the years, someone circulated the songs I recorded with KISS during those sessions on the Internet. Without exception those "Pre-Elder Demos," as I've seen them referred to, sound like they were sourced from someone's cassette copy (remember cassettes?) of a cassette copy—in short, the sound quality is pretty dreadful. It's so unfortunate because the master-quality versions of those songs sounded totally awesome!

KF: Can you pick your favorite song, or the one that stands out the most to you, from the sessions you did with Kiss in 1981. Why?

That's easy. I particularly enjoyed working on "Nowhere to Run," not just because I thought it was a great song, but also because the enormous dynamic range of the arrangement—from loud to louder to quiet to even louder—posed a real challenge to record and mix. The song's dynamics served up its greatest payoff. "Love's a Deadly Weapon" and "Feel Like Heaven," though quite different from each other, were both fairly constant dynamically speaking; once a good balance of tracks was established in a mix, levels for those songs stayed pretty much the same throughout. Not so with "Nowhere to Run." The intro hit like a ton of bricks. From there the song built to a huge peak before dropping down to a delicate bridge section comprised only of a beautiful falsetto vocal and a sparkly acoustic guitar, both tenderly delivered by Paul. Out of that section, the track swelled again and slammed into the end choruses (with yet another ton of bricks) and then continued growing bigger and louder even as the fadeout consumed it. I came up with a hooky background vocal answer idea for the "Nowhere to Run" choruses and was really pleased when the guys liked it enough to commit it to tape. I suppose that's another reason why I'm somewhat partial to that song.

KF: "Feel Like Heaven" -- the version that circulates among fans has some rather nasty lyrics. Was that the version you recorded with the band or did you work on a proper track?

"Feel Like Heaven" was one of Gene's songs. I believe the version you're referring to was Gene's original demo recorded in his bedroom closet 4-track studio. The 24-track version I recorded with the band was a smokin' dance/rock recreation of that demo, but with perfectly civilized lyrics. It was, as you say, a proper track.

KF: Do you recall a working album title for these pre-Elder sessions along the lines of *Rockin' with The Boys*?

I don't recall *any* working titles for an album at that point. We weren't in the process of compiling an album, more just throwing tracks together to see what stuck. One advantage of working in a private recording facility like Ace in the Hole is that you can spend inordinate amounts of time writing and tinkering without worrying about the clock ticking away expensive studio hours...and spend time we did!

KF: Do you remember there being any discussions at all at Ace's studio or at Penny Lane about constructing a concept album?

No, I never heard any discussions about a concept album during the sessions at Ace's studio or at Penny Lane. That's not to say there weren't such discussions going on, just

that I wasn't privy to them.

KF: Had you ever met Bob Ezrin prior to this experience?

I had never met Bob Ezrin prior to his appearance at Ace's studio in late February 1981. But the level of his success and the quality of his work preceded him, as did his reputation for being highly demanding in the studio. I recall looking forward to meeting him, but with some degree of trepidation. This feeling justified itself at one point when Mr. Ezrin was walking out the studio door and into the parking lot. I was inside the control room with some thirty feet and lots of acoustic baffling between us. I heard him snap something to me about packing up the 2" master tapes and sending them to an address in Canada that he rattled off just as he stepped through the door and his voice faded into the outdoor ambiance. I bolted after him and quite innocently asked if he would repeat the address so I could write it down. He just muttered something to the effect of, "If you didn't get all that, you shouldn't be working with me," got in his car, and drove off. That was the last time I saw Mr. Ezrin.

KF: The other engineers credited on *Music from The Elder* are Kevin Doyle and Corky Stasiak and the "Recorded by" credit reads Brian Christian, Rick Hart, Robert Hryeyna, and David Brown. Remember any of these gentlemen?

I may have crossed paths with one or two of them back in the day, but no, I can't really say I know any of them except by name.

KF: Chris Lendt, who worked for KISS's business managers, recalled the *Music from the Elder* listening party as a bizarre experience in that the label personnel couldn't believe what they were hearing was actually KISS. Do you remember there being an element of surprise at the listening party?

After *Music from The Elder* was completed, KISS held an album listening party at, if memory serves, A&R Studios in midtown NYC. People from the KISS organization and their record company were there. Food and drink were in abundance. I have no doubt that some people were flabbergasted by what they heard, but I, for one, thought that hearing the album blasting out from some fine studio monitors was an awesome experience! I was never one to get caught up in music biz politics or in any of the controversy surrounding that album. I was just happy to know that I had contributed some creative input to the band and their music.

KF: *Music from the Elder* is arguably the most controversial album in the KISS catalog. While some fans love it, others would rather forget it. After listening to this album so many years later, and as someone who worked on *Lick It Up* and Ace's '78 solo LP, what's your take on it?

I liked much of *Music from The Elder*. I thought it was a gutsy attempt at something intriguing that delivered enough outstanding moments to far outweigh any not-so-memorable ones. Granted, it didn't ooze typical KISS sound but rather was subtly infused with it like a nice flavored vodka. It possessed an understated elegance and passion that lurked just beneath the surface of it all. Apologies if I waxed poetic.

If I were to conjure any criticism of the album, it would be that it was too tightly controlled, manipulated even, with few opportunities for spontaneous moments of "studio magic" to

occur. At times it seemed like the album's *concept* steamrolled right over the band—which should never happen with a band as strong as KISS—leaving them pacing through their performances, unable to break free. It can surely be said Paul's vocals, although impeccably executed, lacked some of the unbridled fire we all know he is so capable of.

A couple of technical questions, if I may:

KF: In the guitar solo for “Under the Rose,” starting at 3:19, there is a strong use of delay to achieve a mirror-like effect. Can you outline how this would have been technically achieved in 1981?

The early eighties were not at all technologically challenged when it came to creating spectacular effects of all kinds for guitars, other instruments, vocals, or anything else. There was no lack of delay-producing options back then. Certainly whoever was playing that guitar solo (presumably Ace) could easily have kicked in an effects pedal set with a long delay (also known as “echo”) while playing. But more likely, that effect was created in the control room after the fact during the final mix or perhaps committed to tape sometime prior to mixing. They could have used any number of DDL (digital delay line) units that were around in those days; Eventide, Lexicon, and others made them. In a purely analog realm (as were *my* recording roots), that effect was easily achieved using “tape delay,” a common process in which a sound was fed from the multi-track tape to a secondary tape machine, recorded and played back there resulting in a delay (the delay time being dependent on the speed of the tape as it moved across the record head and on to the playback head). The delayed sound would then mixed with the original sound yielding anything from a short “slap” (a la Lennon vocals) to long, sweeping echoes. Tape delay could also be fed back onto itself creating an on-going loop of delays.

Now, as to which option was actually employed for the effect in the “Under the Rose” solo...I haven't a clue.

KF: The breakdown in “Mr. Blackwell,” starting at 2:52, is extremely odd. There is an almost violent use of panning, eerie vocals, percussion, and general sonic mayhem. Can you offer some insight into what's going on, studio trickery-wise, during this section?

Quite an interesting mishmash was created for the “Mr. Blackwell” breakdown. There's the wild panning you mentioned, with tracks split wide across the stereo field. Not being present at the sessions, I can't say for sure what else was done there. However, upon a quick listen, I hear a flanged high hat cymbal, a variety of vocal effects including backwards vocals, Eventide Harmonzier or possibly “varispeed” (variable tape speed) vocals, or vocals through a vocoder, percussion instruments including wooden blocks and ratchet, whammy bar guitar effects, and overdriven and heavily compressed bass guitar plucks swimming in reverb (a similar dose of which can be clearly heard at the beginning of “The Oath”). What do you hear?