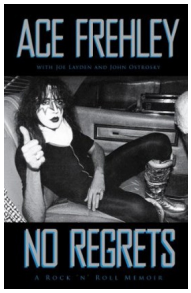
This is not your typical feature, as it deals with the legendary Ace Frehley of Kiss, who's not your typical rock star. I promise, it's not what you think.

It was Halloween week 2011. I picked up a copy of *The Village Voice* and scanned through all the Halloween festivities scheduled in New York City. I got to page 5 when I came upon a vintage photograph of Ace Frehley from the late '70s, in full Spaceman makeup sitting in the back of a limo, advertising a public appearance in midtown Manhattan to promote his new autobiography NO REGRETS. An unexpected treat, indeed.



Ace had been one of my childhood heroes, and one of my favorite members of the original band. Like most Kiss fans, I've heard dozens of wild and incredible stories about Ace involving alcohol, drugs, money and his scrapes with the law. I'd always wanted to know the truth about his exploits, and reading this book would help separate fact from bullshit. I checked out the calendar, and the date of the book signing fell on a Wednesday. I had to work that day, but I knew I'd figure something out.

As a freelance writer, my passion is relegated to whatever free time I have, or make for myself

(which means that when I should be sleeping, I'm writing). Fortunately or unfortunately, I have a good job that pays well, but it's highly demanding of my time, so I can't just leave the office whenever I want to do something personal. However, this was an exception, so on November 3, I hustled uptown to Barnes & Noble right around noon. As I turned the corner, there was already a line of fans snaking around the block. I tried to assess how long I would have to wait in line to get my job done, but quickly realized this wasn't going to work out. I got a knot in my stomach as I thought about how this crush of fans was utterly ruining my chances of meeting Ace. I was feeling pretty shitty about the whole thing, fantasizing about quitting my job so I could just stick around and enjoy myself. Of course, reality set in after a few moments, and I decided I would have to do the responsible thing and split.

As these thoughts ran through my mind, a woman standing in front of the Barnes & Noble caught my eye. She looked to be in her early 30s, with short, bleach-blonde hair and a black, swirly mustache painted over her top lip. She was wearing light pink pants and old-school Converse sneakers, and holding a big black camera with a telephoto lens. And she was topless. If her goal was to grab some attention amidst the chaos, mission accomplished. I tried not to stare, but any woman with the guts to stand half-naked in broad daylight on 5th Avenue in New York City should expect a few eyes on her. Most native New Yorkers walked by without giving her a second glance while the tourists giggled a bit and took photos with their cell phones. Oddly, this woman was hanging out with a guy who easily could've been mistaken for Ace *sans* makeup, if you didn't know what Ace really looks like.

There were plenty of older Kiss devotees hanging around who looked like they'd been fans for decades, plus many young faces representing the newer generation of fans. Of course, as this was a Kiss gathering, there was the obligatory assortment of weirdos. As I looked around at this motley group, I thought how utterly apropos this freakshow was to Ace. It brought back a vibe of gritty, strange and dangerous New York that I hadn't felt in 30 years, and it felt good.

Just for the hell of it, I went inside, grabbed a copy of NO REGRETS and went to the front register to pay. I asked the cashier where I had to go for the signing, mentioning that I was doing a piece for FANGORIA, in hopes of finagling my way ahead of all the other scrubs on line. Unfortunately for me, the folks at Barnes & Noble have a lot of experience handling events like these and are used to dealing with people like me slinging my particular brand of bullshit. I rode the escalator up the stairs to see first-hand that I didn't have a shot of meeting Ace unless I planned on staying here all day. I knew I was going back to my office empty-handed. Normally, this would be the end of the story, and technically, it is. However, much like Ace's Spaceman character, there's a little time travel involved here that adds another dimension to this story.

As I left Barnes & Noble with my copy of Ace's book tucked under my arm, staring back at all the folks who actually *would* meet Ace later in the day, my mind wandered back to a night long ago when I actually *did* meet him, but under much different circumstances.

It was New Year's Eve 1987 at Brooklyn's legendary L'amour rock club. The place was packed with fans dying to see Ace on his Frehley's Comet tour. My buddy Pete and I were about 10 feet from the stage, and could see the sweat pouring from Ace's brow as he played blistering solos throughout the night. We could also see Ace retreat to a stack of amps after the lights went down after every set, returning center stage when the lights went back on, snorting deeply for several minutes into almost every song he was playing. No further explanation required.

During the height of the show, someone in the booze-fueled crowd slapped Pete on the back of his leather jacket, hard. As loud as Ace and the band were playing, I heard the distinct crack of leather and saw Pete spin around, looking for the person responsible. We both assumed someone was trying to start a fight. Strangely, as we looked around, there was no one near us who looked like they could've been the culprit. Instead, I noticed a hot pink sticker stuck to the back of Pete's jacket and peeled it off. It said "Backstage Pass." We both thought it was a joke, and couldn't figure out why anyone would just randomly give us a backstage pass to meet Ace.

After the show, Pete gave me the pass and told me to go on without him. He wasn't in the mood to see Ace backstage; I think Ace's apparent drug use during the show bothered Pete, and I can't say that I blamed him. Unbelievably, whenever my pass was checked by security, I was given further directions to get backstage. When I actually arrived there, to meet one of my childhood heroes, it was a surreal moment—and quite a disappointment. I almost wished I had stayed behind with Pete. My first impression of Ace was watching him stumble around, appearing pretty high, while unsuccessfully trying to wrestle off one of his boots. Not exactly the way I imagined meeting one of the greatest rock-guitar gods of all time.

As I settled into the background trying to figure out what I should do next, I still couldn't believe I was backstage in the presence of the legendary Ace Frehley of Kiss. As I looked around the room a little nervously, I noticed the usual entourage of people hanging around: a few guys with long hair who looked like they had known Ace forever, a few guys who looked like they belonged anywhere but here, and a few pretty young girls. All standard rock-star stuff.

As Ace plopped down on a chair, laughing and mumbling incoherently as he changed into fresh

clothes, I took a good look at my hero. Although he was a multimillionaire who could afford any type of luxury he desired, he had the face of a street person who didn't have a nickel. It bore the signs of a man who had been living a hard life, and I was sad to see he had traded his famous makeup for such a worn-out visage. About 10 short years earlier, when I was 13, Ace's picture had been plastered all over my bedroom walls as the Spaceman, seemingly inhuman and invincible. Now, obviously not at the peak of his game, there was a very human, imperfect person sitting in front of me. Half drunk, half stoned, half whatever, one of my childhood heroes wasn't acting very heroic, and I didn't like it. At all.

While I continued to watch Ace stumble about, it occurred to me that the only reason I was able to meet Ace was because his star had fallen. Big time. With that moment of realization, meeting Ace Frehley suddenly equated with being a loser. And there was the ugly truth. My heart sank like a rock, and I really wished I had followed Pete's example and never come backstage. To say the entire experience was a letdown would've been a colossal understatement. All I could think about was getting the hell out of there.

No sooner did I want to leave than a young girl approached me and held out an open bag of chips. "Want some?" she asked. As I remembered seeing half the people backstage thrusting their hands into the bag, scooping out chips and shoveling them into their mouths, I simply said, "No thanks." Everyone hanging around looked like a bunch of dirtbags, and God knows where their hands had been. As I was in the presence of roadies, groupies and probably a few drug addicts with a disease or two, I wasn't about to play Russian roulette with my life over a few lousy chips. I took this as my cue to leave, as I didn't care anymore whether I got an autograph or not. I was pretty disgusted with all I had witnessed so far, and knew it wasn't going to get any better. Just as I began to leave, some dude pointed to me and said to Ace, "Hey, this guy wants your autograph…"

Ace was in a clean T-shirt and jeans by this time, and stood up from his seat. Even without his 8-inch platform Kiss space boots, he was still very tall and towered over me. "What's your name, man?" he said in a half-drunken chuckle. "Eddie…" I replied. As he had done a million times before, he scribbled his autograph: "To Eddie—Ace." "Here you go, man." I gazed down at the autograph in amazement. Even high as a kite, Ace was still polite and gracious to me, his fan. He then turned away and shouted in a drunken voice, "Hey! Let's all go to my apartment!" For a moment, I fantasized about joining this ragtag group and getting to see where Ace actually lived. Of course, the sobering reality of partying with Ace Frehley kicked in, and I knew that I would literally end up dead somewhere if I tried to keep up with this gang. Although extremely tempting, I knew this was indeed my cue to get lost. I rejoined Pete, showed him Ace's autograph and went home.

Fast-forward almost 25 years to the present day. As time has marched on, Ace has not only survived decades of alcohol and drug abuse, but to his credit, taken his lumps and grown as an artist. As a lifelong Kiss fan, I personally believe he has handled himself far better about his time in Kiss than his former bandmates and co-founders, Gene Simmons and Paul Stanley. After reading NO REGRETS and reflecting on Ace's personality in sharp contrast to Gene's and Paul's, it's no wonder Ace left the band not once but twice.

About the book itself: It's a fast, blistering read—much like Ace's guitar solos. Kiss fans of every stripe will enjoy the insights into his life before the group: his family life, growing up in the Bronx, dealing with school, being part of a gang, getting drunk for the first time, scoring chicks and finding his musical calling. Naturally, Ace's history and early life explain much of his behavior in and out of the band, and helps one better understand his tumultuous relationships with booze, drugs, sex, money, the law and ultimately Kiss. Reading one unbelievable chapter after another, it's amazing he survived those days to tell about his remarkable life.

It turns out all the bullshit I heard about Ace as a kid was true—and then some. It's a fascinating read for not only Kiss fans in general and Ace Frehley fans in particular, but for anyone who wants to go down memory lane back to the '70s and '80s, when rock 'n' roll, drug use and promiscuous sex were a part of most young people's lives, not just rock stars.

All these many years later, I'm extremely happy I got the chance to meet Ace, and even happier that he has lived to look back on his extraordinary life. After reading NO REGRETS, I better understand the man I met backstage on New Year's Eve 1987.