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 From the Los Angeles Times

The Outrageous Entrepreneur

Gene Simmons of KISS has built a mini-empire with his in-your-face media marketing.

By Josh Friedman
 Times Staff Writer

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As the tongue-wagging singer for the rock band KISS, Gene Simmons likes to brag about turning a band into a brand.

Behind the garish makeup, Simmons, 56, was the driving force behind a blitzkrieg of KISS-themed products, including lunch pails and caskets. The band's heyday is long gone, but Simmons says he's far from finished.

The Beverly Hills-based impresario is starring in two reality TV shows, developing a magazine, running his own music label and launching an entertainment-themed pay-TV show that will feature uncensored music videos and celebrity interviews. Think "Access Hollywood" meets "Girls Gone Wild."

Simmons, who calls himself "Disney without the overhead," still occasionally dons his KISS get-up to perform as the Demon.

"I'm as ravenous as ever," he said. "I remember when my belly was empty, and I didn't like the feeling."

Since January, he and entertainment industry veteran Richard G. Abramson have been marketing the Indy Racing League, the once-dominant auto racing circuit that has suffered since its split from CART, now the Champ Car World Series. Both "open-wheel" leagues lag behind stock-car racing's NASCAR in popularity, although Indy has the sport's signature event in the Indianapolis 500 and an emerging star in Danica Patrick.

Simmons got involved with the Indy Racing League after meeting marketing chief Phil Lengyel during a race at Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth.

According to Lengyel, Simmons pointed to an IRL sign and said, "Is that your logo? It stinks."

"We started off with a friendly confrontation," Lengyel said, "and we've been brutally honest ever since."

A few days after the race, Simmons invited Lengyel and the IRL's top brass to Los Angeles, where he and Abramson pitched an alliance with their company, Simmons Abramson Marketing. To launch the effort, Simmons wrote the foot-stomping anthem "I Am Indy" with the quirky one-man band BAG to serve as the league theme song.

"At the racetrack, you could just feel and breathe in the dust," Simmons said during an interview at his Benedict Canyon home, where his sprawling office is packed with KISS merchandise and memorabilia. "It was an old man's game in need of a makeover."

Saying "IRL" sounded like a disease, Simmons set out to re-brand the league as "Indy."

"These are individual, personalized rocket ships streaking 220 mph," Simmons said. "With 'I am Indy,' you're making a pledge of allegiance to the United Nations of Indy. The phrase knows no bounds — racial, sexual or otherwise. It applies to drivers, fans, sponsors."

Simmons Abramson Marketing may help "bring together what has been a fragmented part of the motor sports industry," said David M. Carter, head of consultancy Sports Business Group in Redondo Beach and a faculty member at USC's Marshall School of Business.

Still, he said, all a celebrity like Simmons or Jon Bon Jovi, who founded the Arena Football League's Philadelphia franchise in 2003, can do is "whet your appetite. It's then up to the sport itself to turn you into a customer."

Simmons and Abramson are uncharacteristically mum when it comes to their pay-television venture. It's known as NGTV, short for No Good TV, and will feature profanity-laced interviews and nudity.

The TV operation plans a public stock offering in the spring and is now in the "quiet period" required by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Simmons is chairman of the Beverly Hills-based company and Abramson is a board member.

Segments taped so far feature conversations with Ben Affleck, Angelina Jolie, Halle Berry and other celebrities, as well as appearances by musicians such as the Black Eyed Peas and Pink, the IPO filing says.

"The timing is right for this sort of leading-edge, uncensored programming in the pay-per-view business," said Alan L. Jacobs, chief executive of Capital Growth Financial, the Boca Raton, Fla., investment bank underwriting the deal.

Financial analyst Tom Taulli, author of "Investing in IPOs," advises investors to tread gingerly, noting that Capital Growth Financial has managed only a handful of obscure public offerings.

And NGTV has yet to generate revenue, let alone any profit.

"It sounds like a great concept and maybe it is, but it's still just a concept," Taulli said. "It could take six to eight months before the product even gets out there."

The company's auditor said NGTV, which has racked up \$16.8 million in debt in recent years, might not remain a "going concern" without the IPO proceeds, the prospectus notes.

"Hollywood is a hits-driven business, and you never know what the consumer is going to go for," Taulli said.

Simmons, who says KISS has grossed more than \$1 billion since 1974 from sales of records, concert tickets and 2,800 licensed products, could settle down to a cushy life with his companion of 22 years, actress and 1982 Playboy Playmate of the Year Shannon Tweed, and their two children.

But that wouldn't be his style. Instead, like Ozzy Osbourne did, he is starring in an unscripted TV show about his life — "Gene Simmons Family Jewels," now in production for the A&E network. The second season of "Gene Simmons' Rock School," a VH1 show in which he trains British kids to rock 'n' roll, is airing in Britain, and his

life also served as the framework for "My Dad the Rock Star," an animated show on Nickelodeon.

On top of that, there is his record label, Simmons Records, and Gene Simmons Game, an upcoming magazine with an electronic gaming flavor.

The Simmons touch, of course, is not always golden.

The self-titled CD "BAG," the first Simmons Records release in more than a decade, has sold a meager 100 copies, according to Nielsen SoundScan. Gene Simmons Tongue, the previous version of his glossy magazine, lasted 12 issues in 2002 and 2003.

Simmons met the 58-year-old Abramson in 2001 at a pitch meeting for an MTV game show. Abramson managed actor Paul Reubens' career as the Pee-wee Herman character in the 1980s and produced the film "Pee-wee's Big Adventure" and the Emmy-winning TV show "Pee-wee's Playhouse."

In addition to their other deals, Simmons and Abramson started working last year as advisors to ITU Ventures, a Century City-based venture capital firm. ITU Managing Partner Chad Brownstein, a longtime KISS fan, said he was watching "Gene Simmons' Rock School" late one night when he realized that the prolific marketer could help analyze potential entertainment investments for the firm.

Said Abramson, "People see Gene as this crazy character from KISS with his stage antics, when in reality he is a very smart, erudite guy."

Born Chaim Witz in Haifa, Israel, Simmons immigrated to New York at age 8 with his mother after his father abandoned the family.

A matinee showing of Walt Disney Co.'s "Pinocchio" helped inspire Simmons to think big, he said.

"When Jiminy Cricket sang 'When You Wish Upon a Star,' I thought that little bug was singing to me," he said. "I walked out of that movie theater, and he had done more for me than any religious figure ever could. I was empowered. It was electrifying."

Simmons and bandmate Paul Stanley, who control the KISS merchandising empire, trademarked the group's facial makeup and costumes early on and bought out guitarist Ace Frehley and drummer Peter Criss in 1980.

Simmons, who writes his autograph with dollar signs instead of the letter S, doesn't mind that KISS was never a hit with music critics.

"Credibility, schmedibility — anyone who thinks popular music is about artistry is kidding themselves," he said.

"Rock stars are not rocket scientists. There but for the grace of God any one of us is asking the next person in line, 'Do you want fries with that?'"

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The Simmons-Abramson team

Gene Simmons

Age: 56

Birthplace : Haifa, Israel

Career highlights: Co-founder of KISS. With bandmate Paul Stanley, oversees merchandising of the "rock 'n' roll brand." Other media projects include television shows "Gene Simmons' Rock School" and "Gene Simmons Family Jewels," Simmons Records and Gene Simmons Game magazine.

Trivia: Former schoolteacher; briefly managed Liza Minnelli's recording career; speaks German, Hebrew and Magyar (Hungarian).

Personal: Lives in Beverly Hills with actress Shannon Tweed and their two children, Nicholas and Sophie.

Richard G. Abramson

Age: 58

Birthplace: Syracuse, N.Y.

Career highlights: Once managed actor-comedian Pee-wee Herman. Produced the movie "Pee-wee's Big Adventure" and the TV show "Pee-wee's Playhouse." Arranged insurance-backed financing for movie studios. Developed databases for forecasting film revenue.

Trivia: Produced and directed Army films during the Vietnam War era, including President Nixon's Christmas message to the troops.

Personal: Unmarried; lives in Los Angeles.

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