

(LostBrain.com)

Is Aerosmith Our Friend?

On the bus up to Camp Olin Sang Ruby Union in good ol' Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, a friend of mine was looking just this side of a seizure, his over-spiked haircut head bobbing up and down to whatever madness his Walkman was dishing out. I remember hearing a lot of "Ow"s and "Yeah yeah yeah"s coming from his fuzzily worn phones. When he got bored, I got hooked. It was 1989, the album Pump had just come out. I was 11 years old and had no idea what F.I.N.E. stood for, but I knew I liked it, I liked it a lot, in fact, I liked it so much that my friend never got his tape back. Evidently, a 1978 Pete Rose Topps card was worth more to him. Evidently, my friend had problems.

It's the present and Aerosmith has come out with *O, Yeah! Ultimate Aerosmith Hits*—I find myself in Nobody Beats the Wiz in Upper Manhattan (New York's version of Oconomowoc) and I have this two-disc set in my hesitant hands. With not one Aerosmith CD in my present collection, I cautiously eye the back of the album: *Mama Kin*. Good. *Dream On*. Excellent. *Walk This Way*. Both theirs and Run DMC's version, an unexpected delight. But like two sides to every story, I find the contents of the other disc, and all I can see is *Don't Want To Miss A Thing*. You remember *Don't Want To Miss a Thing*, don't you? The Armageddon song? The only number one song in Aerosmith history? The song that probably alienated more longtime Aerosmith fans than any other? I feel torn. No, that's not true. I feel like a poseur.

It was a week into my Oconomowoc camp experience before the biggest part in my Aerosmith conversion arrived. Ben came into our tent guitar-first, which probably said as much about him as anything. He didn't just listen to it. He actually played it. Now I can't tell you that we became friends right away, nor that we became best friends, nor that our friendship lasted long, but I can tell you that he loved Aerosmith, and like any kid who had some good in him, he wanted to spread the vibe, man. You see, Ben didn't just have Pump. No, Ben had albums of theirs that went back to, get this, the seventies. From Toys in the Attic to Draw the Line, it was all played and processed. And when we weren't doing that we talked about what girls at camp we wanted to bang. We were very eleven.

I start to notice other songs on that second disc as I check my watch. Where do I have to be again? Nowhere. Good thing I reminded myself. Okay, I see *Livin' On The Edge*. Damn, killer riff on that one. Kill-er. It's getting harder to resist the \$22.98 the store is asking. I've spent much more on much less. Instantly every drink I ever spent on every worthless date comes to mind. Music, on the other hand, has always been a justifiable purchase. More worthy than most anything. Music relaxes, excites and sometimes even mind-expands. Music is what heroin, marijuana and mescaline would be if they ever had a seamless menage a trois. But this isn't about money. Never is. No, this is the little bullshit part of me that occasionally surfaces, the one ehivh still worries about what we own and what it says about us. In other words, is Aerosmith still cool to buy? An "As Seen on TV" label sits by the, believe it or not, hologram of the Aerosmith logo—this is

so corporate you'd think there would be a tip on how to write this purchase off your taxes next to the liner notes.

By the time I entered high school I owned every one of Aerosmith's studio albums, including their numerous and sometimes very unnecessary compilations. But, surprisingly, it wasn't so I could flaunt my "fandom." No, I just really dug them. While tons were rocking to What it Takes, I was air-guitarring classics like savvy Sick as a Dog and lascivious Lord of the Thighs. I was the real deal. This wasn't about image, it was about ecstasy. Somewhere in the midst of endless Aerosmith concerts in my room, my father died and my mother was less there when she was there. I remember being excited as hell about the Get a Grip album coming out—I mean I literally sprinted to the music store, out of breath, my left hand balled in a fist with just enough crumpled dollars in it for the purchase.

Aerosmith has probably now had more success for more time than anyone else in the Rock 'n' Roll era. Yes, the Rolling Stones have been around longer, but they have not truly had a juggernaut of a hit album since the 70's. Every Aerosmith album since *Permanent Vacation* has been relatively huge. They are more popular than ever. Still, the problem for many of their original fans is who they're popular with and what they're supplying in return for that popularity. *Jaded*, along with the aforementioned *Don't Want To Miss A Thing*, are so "balladdy" that they make *Angel* sound like Slayer after getting their Mensa scores back.

As I listen, it's obvious that Steven Tyler sings much better today than he did during Aerosmith's original hey day. Anyone who says he doesn't is being stubborn, not to mention deaf. Not that I don't admire stubbornness, but I also find it to be a real waste of time these days. I'm playing *Deuces are Wild* right now, a mid-90's song that I am singing along with full freaking blast. It's just a great song, *Beavis and Butthead* soundtrack or not. I'm just listening to what I like, instead of what I think I should like. *Falling in Love (Is Hard on the Knees)* comes on. I forgot how much I dug this one. This was critically labeled by diehard fans as their "selling out" stuff—Obviously my toe-tapping says I've been sold.

So, as you might have guessed, I did buy that *O, Yeah!* compilation album. And, as you also might have guessed, I'm enjoying it immensely. But does that mean I'm forgiving Aerosmith its profit-motivated sins? Well, first, I have to find them guilty of sinning. If I'm gonna play God, and as album buyers that's our right and sacrilege, then I must take a look at what's before me. The critics will wheel out Exhibit "A" and confidently rest their case on—what a surprise!—*Don't Want to Miss A Thing*. Penned via lyric-by-numbers queen Diane Warren, it was factory built for Billboard chart-topping. Case closed, right? Hmm, but what about *Permanent Vacation*?

"What?!" you cry out. "Are you attacking what might be the greatest Aerosmith album of all time?!"

No, not attacking, observing. I see many of its writing credits have included a Child, Desmond Child. A man whose track record is purely about chart success and nothing else. Does this ring a bell? "How can we be lovers if we can't be friends?"—That's right, he wrote a song for Michael Bolton! (And don't get me started on his pieces for Cher!)

"No!" you wail on the floor, biting on carpeting in a last-second-move to keep from swallowing your tongue. "They were selling out right even back then! It's all a sham! Now we'll have to go back to listening to Bryan Adams!"

No, you just have to understand that Aerosmith is four guys. Four guys who aren't drug-induced anymore, who aren't as pissed anymore, who are writing just as much about love as lust. Who have, believe it or not, changed. And why does that have to be such a bad thing?

You think I wanted to stay 11 years old forever?