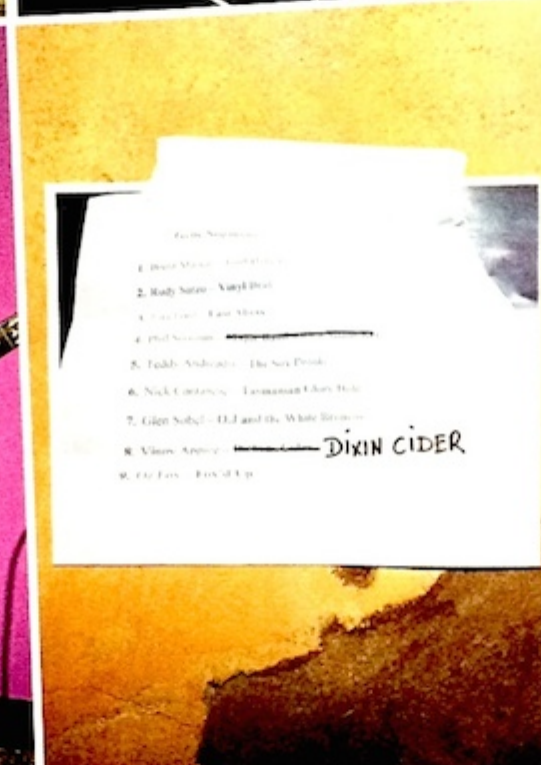




Cover story by Shana Ting Lipton published in British Airways' in-flight magazine *High Life*





Clockwise from above
One happy camper
and wannabe rocker;
the Las Vegas skyline;
'groupies' aka the wives,
girlfriends and mothers
of the campers; Skid
Row frontman and camp
counsellor Sebastian Bach
shares his tips: how to let
rip; the final night's set list

n a dark, purple-hued room punctuated by picnic tables, clusters of campers bob their heads as a band on a small stage cranks out Alice Cooper's *School's Out*. The tune's rebellious spirit embodies the carefree feeling of summer camp. But these campers aren't here to roast marshmallows. This is day one of Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp - Gene Simmons' edition, where wannabe rockers of all ages and skill levels, from São Paulo to Yorkshire, come to live out smoke machine dreams and play music with their guitar gods and heavy metal heroes.

The guys on stage - their 'counsellors' - have been in Guns N' Roses, Quiet Riot and Stryper, as well as Ozzy Osbourne's group; the drummer is even a member of Alice Cooper's band. The guest of honour will be none other than the tongue-twirling legendary Kiss bassist/vocalist, himself. I'm spending four days with this metal militia as a vocalist in a band, and will ultimately be able to casually boast, 'Yeah, I played Vegas' after our performance at House of Blues.

Although previously as free-floating as the musicians it employs, Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp - founded in 1997 by music and sports world insider David Fishof - now has a fairly permanent base in the form of a multi-room studio in Las Vegas. I roll up to its modest entrance in the back seat of a tricked-out Kiss limousine. Out front, a



few devoted loiterers mingle, their Groupie badges identifying them as the PG-rated version of the Pamela Des Barres crowd: the spouses or parents of the 45 campers whose ages range from ten to 67.

On this first day, we're introduced to our rock star counsellors and bandmates. From near-pros to the musically impaired, anyone with a spare \$6,000 can register for a basic package (which includes meals and entitles campers to discount stays at the Mandalay Bay). There are no auditions. The goal, according to the camp's music co-ordinator Doug Bond isn't so much to match musicians of the same playing levels, but for bandmates to have similar aims for the experience.

For the campers, smooth band dynamics are key, as anyone who's ever seen a Fleetwood Mac documentary can confirm. I'm placed in a mixed-level group – six men and me – led by first-time counsellor Oz Fox of Stryper. This is the second camp for one of our guitarists, North Carolina-based IT specialist Frank Ervin, whose first was with Sammy Hagar. 'First-timers come because of a celebrity; people come back because of the camaraderie,' he says.

One such star-chasing rock camp virgin is contest winner Kenny Begley, 42. Decked out in a DIY leather vest, adorned with a portrait of Simmons and protruding shoulder horns, this Midwestern

Norse warrior is here 'to meet the man, the myth, the legend Gene Simmons'. He adds: 'And I play the cowbell and sing as best as I can.'

On the first night, we christen our band Fox'd Up after our counsellor and compile our set list consisting of two Kiss songs, a Black Sabbath tune and Stryper's *The Way* – the last a complex aria of shredding guitar riffs and falsetto vocals, composed by Fox. Our good-natured 60-something hobbyist drummer struggles with the unusual drum parts and is already rubbing his temples in frustration.

As the only singer in the room, I'm promoted from back-up to lead vocalist. I note that we all communicate with each other via microphones – a bit like bantering radio hosts, too cool.

Clock-in for day two is at the relaxed rock star hour of 11am, but like any other hardworking stiffs, we put an intensive eight-plus hours into our 'work day'. As we toil through practice, my voice – normally primed for cocktail-infused Burt Bacharach karaoke tunes – is put to the headbangers' test. Then we sit down and write an original song – which we'll record on our last day. 'It's a song about privacy intrusion,' I tell my band, explaining that it's partly based on my law school studies – minus the data protection regulation (not very rock'n'roll).

But, as creative factions form, our band is beset by tensions. ■

One guitarist grits his teeth, forcing a smile and bows out of the song-writing session. Soon, it's just Fox, mortgage banker/bassist Mark Pontz and me. Phil Soussan, who was the bassist for Ozzy's band, among others, later explains such dynamics: 'There's a lot of friction. When you put all of these people together, instantly you have a family and in a family nobody gets along.'

A few hours in, heavy metal heartthrob Sebastian Bach of Skid Row – with his shampoo ad-worthy mane – bounces into our studio for a jam session. 'I just did [a Kiss song] in Hebrew!' he marvels.

Later, another camper with equally impressive blond locks, 15-year-old guitarist/vocalist Ryley Hughes enthuses, 'I sang *You Could Be Mine* with Sebastian. Not a lot of people can say that. And my hero complimented my singing!' Bach also gave him some tips, which he'll use when he plays with his band Savage Playground back home in Canada. 'I didn't come to the camp to play,' Hughes admits, 'I came here to get my song out and talk to Lita Ford.'

Such fresh-faced campers as Hughes and 14-year-old Miles Schuman seem hungry enough to grab any career opportunity they can, unlike the laid-back elders. Schuman raves: 'Through the camp I started a radio show and now it's being syndicated.' He not only keeps in touch with former counsellors including Whitesnake's Rudy Sarzo but he has them on his programme.

As night falls, campers and their 'groupies' wander the studio's halls – which are adorned with photos of past guests such as Motörhead's Lemmy Kilmister – seeking a jam room. An open door reveals the surreal sight of ten-year-old guitarist Ben Bluestein of Atlanta pelting out Jimmy Page riffs, with Dio and Black Sabbath drummer Vinny Appice, on a guitar that's nearly his height. 'The Queen of Heavy Metal' Lita Ford of The Runaways, raves 'Ben shreds!'

For those over-21s not joining the jams, a visit to the slot machines at the hosting Mandalay Bay or a drink at its coffered and columned Orchid Lounge – with its Sinatra-wannabe crooners – is in order.

On day three, in the buffet queue outside rock camp, tongues wag about last night and Sebastian Bach's wild evening at the Orchid. As camp lore now goes, the singer decided to join the live music act but he and the talent argued about the arrangement. It all got a tad 'Altamont' when a barfly tried to smack Bach with a music stand. The spectacle apparently resulted in the rocker being cuffed by hotel security. 'The coolest thing for a musician is to get carted away in handcuffs, but not get arrested,' says our bespectacled bass player, who was at the Sin City watering hole with Soussan and others.

The episode mirrors the volatility that's building up in the camp as the visit from Simmons and our climactic House of Blues show loom. 'Voices are cracking like crazy in here,' says Ford. She recalls a musician from the previous Judas Priest camp complaining of backache, a sore throat and bleeding hands and retorts: 'When you play rock'n'roll you've got to get your hands dirty.' Clearly, camper Ryan McGrath is following her mandate: 'My callouses bled through and my entire guitar was full of blood.' The California resident is a former American football player who had a short run with the Cleveland Browns and is attending camp 'just to jam with guys I grew up watching and still admire'.

After a visit from Scott Ian, guitarist of thrash metal band Anthrax – and a deafeningly cool five-guitar cover of Black Sabbath's *Paranoid* – it's time for our band to meet our very own hard-rockin' version of Simon Cowell: the monolithic Simmons. As we enter the performance space, Vinny Appice exits muttering, 'Gene's not in a good mood.'



ROCK BLOCK: WHERE TO HEADBANG LIKE A PRO ON THE SUNSET STRIP

Gazzari's, the epicentre of the 1980s hair metal scene, may have shuttered decades ago, but 'the jungle', to quote Axl Rose, is still home to some legendary clubs that thrilled big-haired denizens back in LA's golden age of heavy metal.

RAINBOW BAR & GRILL

This Spandex super-spot is apparently a favourite of Motörhead frontman Lemmy and why not? They have a table reserved for him at all times. In the heavy metal heyday it was also a shooting location for MTV's seminal TV show *Headbangers' Ball*. 9015 Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood, rainbowbarandgrill.com

TROUBADOUR

Though not technically on the Strip, Doug Weston's Troubadour famously launched Linda Ronstadt's backing band – aka The Eagles – on the scene. It was also a pit-stop for heavy metal bands lured by the 'pay-to-play' scheme of its early years. 9081 Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood, troubadour.com

WHISKY A GO GO

Beyond its notoriety as a venue for The Doors, this sound cave drew heshier royalty like Led Zeppelin and later, such rock poster boys as Skid Row, Pretty Boy Floyd and Mötley Crüe and, at one time, the writer of this article even handed out band flyers in front of this legendary club. 8901 Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood, whiskyagogo.com

THE ROXY THEATRE

Once a strip club, The Roxy also drew the likes of the hair metal crowd in the 1980s along with Alice Cooper. 9009 West Sunset Boulevard, West Hollywood, theroxy.com

IN THE BUFFET
QUEUE, TONGUES
WAG ABOUT LAST
NIGHT AND THE
WILD EVENING
THAT RESULTED
IN A ROCKER
BEING CUFFED BY
HOTEL SECURITY

Where spirits soar

LA rock stalwart Whisky A Go Go; sing out sister: Shana hits the stage for the final gig (above)



WANT TO JAM WITH ROGER DALTREY?

For your chance to record with The Who's Roger Daltrey at the next Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp, upload a video showcasing your talents in six seconds – vocals, drumming and air-guitar auditions welcome. The judges include Roger Daltrey, Gene Simmons of Kiss and David Fishof, CEO of Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camp. The camp takes place 16-19 October at Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut, and the prize, worth \$6,000, includes a three-night stay (rockcamp.com). Flights are not included. Roger Daltrey is also the patron of the Teenage Cancer Trust (teenagecancertrust.org) and is the driving force behind a series of concerts for the charity, which have raised over £17m. Visit bahighlife.com/rock for full entry details and terms and conditions.



Living the dream
Nick Catanese (left)
guitarist and mentor,
shares his rock wisdom
with an eager camper

Fox whispers in my ear, 'He's going to rip our song apart.' Like lambs to the slaughter, we step on stage.

'Why are you holding your bass way up there?' Simmons jeers at our bassist. Pontz awkwardly lowers his bass and we all eye each other. After a drum count off, we launch into our punk-style song, *See Through You*. Suddenly, I remember something Simmons said an hour ago during a camp Q&A – 'You know who wouldn't make it on *American Idol* and *X Factor*? The biggest stars on earth: Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan.' He imitated the latter's singular but unmistakably rambling and discordant singing voice – worlds away from Susan Boyle, to be sure, but totally rock'n'roll.

So, I let my vocals loose, releasing all the nervous jitters in a voice I've never heard before. The song ends and for a moment we hear proverbial crickets. Then Simmons says, 'I'm speechless. I don't even know what I could add to this.' He gets on bass and plays the tune with us. When he's finished, he praises our song structure, humming our tune as my bandmates gather their instruments. This could well be the rockin'est moment of all. Then, as a parting gift, Simmons demonstrates the most mesmerising and circus-worthy tongue acrobatics we've ever witnessed. We're lost for words.

Back in our intimate practice space, we're still buzzing from our Spandex Factor moment. Ever the den father, Fox refocuses our attention on band practice. I gain new-found respect for the musicians' work ethic – as it was once described by an egg-frying Ozzy Osbourne in a leopard-print bathrobe in a famous scene in *The Decline of Western Civilisation Part II: The Metal Years*.

Right now, it's crucial that our drummer nails that tough Stryper tune. But this moment – so soon before our stage shows – is still riddled with tension, as Fox tells our drummer 'one more time' yet again. Tears of frustration are shed and Fox'd Up shares a rockumentary moment. 'Let's not do the song,' says Fox. 'We're here to have a good time.' He gives the drummer a bear hug and, visibly moved, we all decide to drop the tune from our set and take a break.

In a similar spirit to our band's bonding moment, on the night of the nine camp bands' performances, the House of Blues is filled with a sense of camaraderie – and the scent of chicken wings. Fist-pumps and high-fives abound. And, like real summer camp, an awareness of time slipping away prompts a sense of pre-nostalgia.

One nurse-by-day/rocker-by-night Kiss super-fan shows off his freshly minted tattoo of Simmons' autograph. He and the fedora

and tie-sporting singer of his band are among the few campers who really dress the part. As showtime draws closer, I'm stressing about stage fright when the camp's sales rep Beth Porter pulls me aside for a pep talk. 'You're going to look back on this night as an amazing moment in your life. I just don't want you to miss out on it.'

I resolutely climb that stairway to heaven onto the amber and violet-lit stage. Ford's words echo in my head: 'Everybody should have stage fright. It means you care... if you don't care, you shouldn't be on stage.' I scan the audience, seated at informally scattered tables. It's largely made up of campers and their 'groupies' but I see a few unfamiliar faces – raucous Vegas revellers who 'woo' to the music in-between gulps of their cocktails. After a few drum stick clicks, the guitars roar and we're off.

Suddenly, I'm in the zone. Eyes shut, howling like a banshee, it's 1988 again and I'm on the Sunset Strip surrounded by hair and Spandex, inhaling an intoxicating blend of Aqua Net and smoke machine vapour. I dare not open my eyes or I'll be 'back in Kansas': my humdrum journalist/law student life. Soussan had warned me of the bittersweet rock camp comedown: 'It's kind of like the end of a tour.' So, like a true rock star, I'm already planning my comeback.

@ShanaTingLipton
Forthcoming Rock'n'Roll Fantasy Camps (rockcamp.com) include 'Special Edition Fantasy Camp' with Tony Visconti and Al Schmitt (6-9 November), at Foxwoods Resort Casino/Power Station New England, Mashantucket, Connecticut (foxwoods.com).



GO ON THEN... DESTINATION: LAS VEGAS

FIND IT AT BA.COM

British Airways flies to Las Vegas from London Heathrow. Flight time: 10½ hours.

COLLECT THOSE AVIOS

Join the Executive Club and collect at least 10,444* Avios for a return flight from London to Las Vegas. Or redeem your Avios – 50,000** will pay for a return journey.

FOR MORE MUSIC MAYHEM...

Want to rock out at five of the best LA venues? You'll find them at highlife.ba.com/la.