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By Geoff Edgers

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But now, with each of them pushing 60, the conflicts seemed ancient and downright silly. Their own projects waned. The Stray Cats, who sold millions of records during Ronald Reagan's first term by playing up rockabilly, were ready for a comeback.

It actually began last year when Phantom, in a phone call with Setzer, mentioned that the trio played their first gig in 1979.

"That's 40 years," Setzer says now. "That got me. I said, 'Shoot, it's time.'"

But he didn't want to just play old songs, Phantom agreed. The drummer asked for one of those Gene Vincent, swinging things. Setzer delivered a demo for a song called "Three Times a Charm." How about some Eddie Cochran? No problem. Setzer banged out "Rock It Out."

"Once you get two or three, you start rolling," Setzer says. Which is how the Stray Cats got to Nashville late last year and, over 11 days, recorded a new album titled '40,' their first since 1979. Next month, Setzer, Phantom and Rocker will embark on their most ambitious tour in years, starting with dates in Europe before returning to the States in August. (They play Wolf Trap in Vienna on Aug. 13.)

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Unlikely rock stars

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If you weren't around, it may be hard to understand the rise of the Stray Cats. It's as if they appeared from outer space, or at least a Pennacook-shaped time machine packed with hot rods, tattoos and Eddie Cochran licks. That a rockabilly trio could top the MTV charts in 1982, the same 1983, stuffed with leg warmers. Members only seem not merely unlikely, but impossible.

"I wasn't prepared," says Jeff Cook, the British guitar hero who first saw the Stray Cats as an unsigned band at a London club in late 1980. "Slim Jim had one snare drum, Lee Rocker on bass and Brian. I'm not putting down other rockabilly bands, but so many of them sounded great, but the lead guitarist isn't really the special. Brian was. Right in the

face of silly clothes and one-finger synthesizers, they came and just upset the apple cart."

They came from Massapequa, a small town on Long Island. Lee Rocker was born Leon Drucker, the son of Stanley, the longtime principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic. Years later, Leonard Bernstein would approach Rocker and tell him how much he loved the descending bass line in the Cats' "Runaway Boys."

"Growing up, there was really one rule and very little discipline, but the rule was that you took music lessons," Rocker says. "Whatever you wanted, but you had to take them."

James McDonnell (a.k.a. Phantom) lived just down the block, the son of a firefighter. He met Drucker in fourth grade at Fairfield Elementary, and the friends started jamming. The Druckers pulled their cars out of the garage and replaced them with an upright piano and drum set.

McDonnell loved music, whether the Beatles or the Stones. But as he got older, he started noticing the song credits. "That Aerosmith adapted '60s rocker Johnny Burnette's 'Train Kept a-Rollin' and that the Beatles played a killer version of Carl Perkins' 'Honey, Don't.' Humble Pie did Cochran's 'Gimme Shelter.'"

"Lee and I had always played," Phantom says. "We had some old, or guys that we played with, and we knew all the blues and Jimmy Reed and those kinds of songs. But at the same time, we were trying to find something that was a little bit different."

Enter Brian Setzer. He was two years older and had been taking guitar lessons since he was 6. By his 16th birthday, Setzer already had the look. He could play the guitar better than anybody they knew. He could also write music. And if he wasn't quite the loner reported in some of the early Stray Cats stories, Setzer did want out of Massapequa.

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MUSIC



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On their U.S. debut, 1982's "Built for Speed," the Cats are standing in front of Setzer's '37 Chevy at an auto body shop in Massapequa. Side One kicks off with "Rock This Town," driven by a slap bass line straight out of 1950s Memphis and a video that highlighted their distinctive look: "The song would crack the Billboard Top 10." "Stray Cat Strut" also on the record, was an irresistible, stinky jazz ballad that would rise to No. 3 early in 1983 and include a Setzer solo ranked by *Guitar Player* magazine as one of the top-100 ever. The Stray Cats would open for the Rolling Stones, tour the world and become video stars during the glory days of MTV.

"There was nothing like them," says bassist Johnny Regency, who

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"We love this music"

As long as it's been since the Stray Cats were genuine rock stars, they still act like them, operating with a kind of friendly capriciousness reserved for celebrities who have learned, too many times, how a dramatic quote can be taken or reported out of context. In person, Setzer is respectful, shy and sometimes evasive. He lives in Minneapolis with his third wife, Julie, and will talk endlessly about the music he loves, take out his Gretsch and even let you hold it. But he's not about to invite you over to meet the dogs. In an interview in a Minneapolis hotel, Setzer didn't want to go into much

detail about the dynamic described in Phantom's book, in which the drummer fat out rants that Setzer and Rocker didn't get along and described himself as the peacemaker. In the decade after the original break, the Stray Cats would occasionally regroup to make a record, but the tensions remained.

"Put it in this order," Setzer says. "Youth, success, separation, alcohol. All of that. I don't really need to get into it."

Setzer says he hasn't read Phantom's memoir, and these days, the drummer downplays the tension. It's as if his pals were listening when he also wrote, "Now, more than ever, the need to be friends with someone in your band is unnecessary. There has never been a problem on the stage and, at this point, everybody loves it, and we have nothing left to prove."

"I think the bigger picture really has come into focus," says Phantom, who lives about two hours from Rocker in Los Angeles. "If we scrutinize it, the why will become clear. We love this music. We're still the torchbearers for Eddie Cochran."

That comes through on "40," which includes plenty of rockabilly but also a driving handclapper time "Tom Petty guitarist Mike Campbell, and a Setzer instrumental ("Desperate") that could have been plucked from one of Clint Eastwood's spaghetti westerns.

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In April 2018, the Stray Cats performed at the Viva Las Vegas Rockabilly Weekend festival. Rocker, who may be the most emotionally restrained of the three, admits that he felt something as he stood in the wings. "It was just me, Brian and Jim," he says. "C'mon Everybody" on the sound system and 50,000 people and the sound of that crowd. That was really something that won't forget. And I don't even know what it was. But it definitely, it hit me. It was one of those moments that you know you just swallow and you go, 'Well, see you didn't want to go into much

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RUSS HARRINGTON

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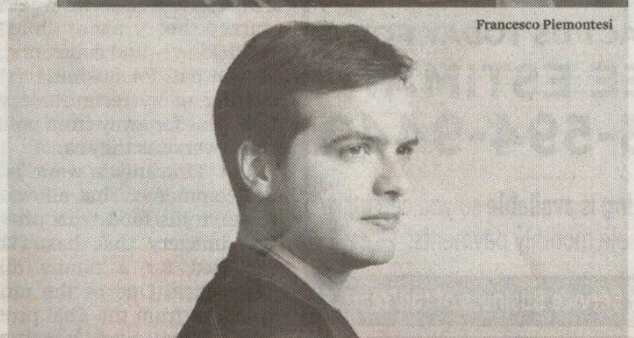


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Gianandrea Noseda
Music Director



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