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3 Questions with Brian Setzer

The musician is back on tour with the Stray Cats.

Jeanne Wolf



Like the title of one of his hits, “Rock This Town,” Brian Setzer shook up the music world, giving new life to rockabilly, that potent blend of country and R&B. In the '80s, he and his band the Stray Cats scored top-selling albums and sold-out concerts with songs

like “Runaway Boys” and “Stray Cat Strut.” As he told me, “Rockabilly had that primal energy that early punk rock had — the sound, the girls, the cars, the whole thing.”

After the Stray Cats broke up in 1984, Setzer, still sporting his trademark pompadour, went on to win three Grammys as arguably one of the greatest guitarists of all time. He got in on the revival of big band swing with the Brian Setzer Orchestra and over the years has sold more than 13 million records. Now he and the Stray Cats are bringing rockabilly back with a new album and a tour.

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Jeanne Wolf: Why did you decide to bring the Stray Cats back after all these years?

Brian Setzer: Our drummer Slim Jim Phantom called me and said, “The 40th anniversary of our first show is coming up and we have to do something.” When we started rehearsing, it’s like you’re riding your favorite bicycle again. We’ve got chemistry and still have the old magic. We call the record *40*. We weren’t sure who would even come to the concerts, and I think 20,000 people showed up at the first one.

JW: When you just want to kick back and enjoy some good music, what would I catch you listening to?

BS: You’re probably gonna laugh. I’ve got shaving music, truck driving music, evening music. When I’m driving during the day, I put on a serious bluegrass channel or the outlaw country channel, which I love. At night, I put on some jazz or some blues. The best sound is my old tube stereo record player. But when I’m out and about I just plug in my crappy little boombox with some rockabilly music or some old Lightning Hopkins or something. When it comes to recording technology, we’ve always mixed old and new. We kept the old — the tape echo, twang, stand-up bass, reverb. It’s just about whatever makes it easier to capture that sound that’s in my head.

JW: You say “The blues don’t stand a chance when you get up and dance.” Is it that motto that keeps you going?

BS: The crowds egg me on. They excite me. There’s a lot of people out there that just go through the motions. They kind of get up there and play. I can’t wait to do it. I’m a worker. It’s hard to kind of keep me at home. I just turned 60 and I went, “Where’d that number come from?” Sometimes I look back at myself and go, “I can’t believe that you’re in the same body after that crazy stuff you did when you were 18, but you’re still here.” What gives me the most joy is banging around with my dogs, and doing physical things. I rock it off on my motorcycle. That’s how I really clear my head and get song ideas going. I need to get out on the open road.