

# Brian Setzer Talks Stray Cats Reunion, Premieres New Tune 'Rock It Off'

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Russ Harrington

## Stray Cats

A couple years back, Brian Setzer found himself at a roadside motel in Lubbock, Texas. The pompadoured king of retro rock was due to play a show that night, and his frequent songwriting partner Mike Himelstein was on the phone asking how he was feeling.

“I said, ‘I’m a little off today, but don’t worry, tonight I’m gonna rock it off,’” Setzer tells *Billboard*. Himelstein thought that was a pretty cool phrase, so he asked Setzer what he meant.

“You know, if you have a hangover or you don’t feel that good, we say you’re gonna rock it off,” Setzer responded, sharing some of the Zen rock n’ roll wisdom he’s gleaned

from decades on the road with Stray Cats, the Brian Setzer Orchestra and various other projects. Ten minutes later, Himelstein called Setzer back with finished lyrics for a song called “Rock It Off,” about how music works like medicine when the conditions are right.

“Rock It Off,” premiering today on Billboard, was perfect for *40*, Setzer’s first new album with Stray Cats in 26 years. Due out May 24, the LP marks the 40th anniversary of the trio’s formation in Long Island, N.Y. Then as now, the Cats were crazy for rockabilly, the hopped-up strain of ‘50s rock made famous by Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran and pre-Army Elvis. With ‘80s hits like “Rock This Town” and “Stray Cat Strut,” Setzer and the gang brought oldies music into the new wave era and helped to birth an American rockabilly subculture that’s still going strong.

Four decades later, Stray Cats are ready to “Rock It Off” with the same three basic ingredients they’ve always used: Setzer’s twangy Gretsch guitar, drummer Slim Jim Phantom’s elemental thumping and Lee Rocker’s expertly slapped upright bass. Setzer says that “Rock It Off,” available for download with pre-orders of *40* beginning April 26, is one of those rare gems that comes together without much thought.

“I’ve been writing songs for quite a while, and I’m realizing the simplest ones are the hardest ones to write,” Setzer says. “All the good titles and all the good riffs have been taken. ‘We Will Rock You’ by Queen: How simple and beautiful is that? ‘We Will Rock You.’ It’s right in front of your face.”

Fortunately for Setzer, the mythical wellspring of titles and riffs hasn’t run completely dry. The new album boasts colorfully named songs like “Mean Pickin’ Mama,” “Devil Train” and “Cat Fight (Over a Dog Like Me).” On the standout “Cry Danger,” the Cats venture out of their ‘50s comfort zone and move boldly into ‘60s garage-rock territory. The track features an intro guitar riff that’ll make any Beatles fan instantly think of “Day Tripper.”

“Mike Campbell wrote that riff,” Setzer says, name-checking the longtime guitarist for Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. “That inspired me to write that song. That’s how songs come about sometimes. He even called it a backwards ‘Day Tripper’ riff. And then I came up with the chords. I told Mike Himelstein I wanted some atmospheric lyrics—something a little more artsy—and it came together.”

“Cry Danger” is about a dude who rolls into his hometown with emotional baggage and a black cloud over his head. He “rode a reckless highway” with “a girl who had a past,” and now he’s got no choice but to keep on moving. It’s a bit like “I Attract Trouble,” another *40* highlight about rebels doing rebellious things in a mythical mid-century America. For that one, Setzer dials in surf-noir vibes and even quotes a lick from the classic ‘60s instrumental “Pipeline.”

The most far-out track on *40* is “Desperado,” which isn’t an Eagles cover but rather a dark and pulpy instrumental Setzer wrote while messing around with an old Fender reverb unit. “I was writing kind of Spaghetti Western songs,” Setzer says. “Which funnily enough is also coincides with surf music. It’s almost the same thing. It had that great sound. The boys really liked that one, so we went ahead with it.”

Given these new '60s-referencing songs and the band's past dalliances with doo-wop, country and blues, it would appear that an unspoken rule governs the creation of Stray Cats songs: Anything goes up until 1964.

"Like pre-'64 car shows," Setzer says with a laugh. "No, we don't have anything like that. I think we all like the same sounds in our head. It's funny, whenever we try something [new], like Lee in the past has tried playing an electric bass, it's like the whole bottom of the band drops out. We know where we live in that realm."

That musical connection has never disappeared, despite the on-again, off-again existence that's characterized the band for most of its run. Stray Cats originally split up in 1984 due to personality clashes, exhaustion, and all of the usual stuff that sinks touring rock bands. They regrouped a couple years later, then called it quits again in '93, just as Setzer was poised for a remarkable second act with the Brian Setzer Orchestra.

After playing a key role in instigating the late-'90s swing revival, Setzer reconvened Stray Cats for tours in 2004 and 2008. The latter trek was billed as the band's farewell, but then in 2018, the Cats headlined the Viva Las Vegas Rockabilly Weekend and played a handful of shows. A year later they're back with a new album and an accompanying summer tour.

"A lot of people were clamoring for us, underneath, on the Internet," Setzer says, explaining why the Cats came out of retirement. "I suppose that creeps in now. 'Are you guys gonna play?' 'We'd love to see you in Germany.' 'Come to South America.' You get that worldwide clamoring you probably didn't get in the past. And there were no hard feelings [in the band]. Everyone does their own thing. And then with the 40th anniversary coming up, it's like, you want to hear rockabilly? Not everyone does. But if you want to hear it, we're the guys, right?"

Stray Cats recorded *40* in Nashville with producer Peter Collins, whose resume includes Bon Jovi and Rush, as well as the Brian Setzer Orchestra. Going into the sessions, Setzer had a clear vision: He wanted to record the band playing together in one room, side by side.

"It sounds simple, but we hadn't done it," Setzer says. "It's because of studio issues. The guitar, obviously, is very loud through an amp. The bass is acoustic, and also, the drums are loud. So those guys are in separate rooms usually. My only request was: We'll learn the songs, and then let's play them like we play on stage. That's how they did it in the '50s."

Collins and engineer Vance Powell (Jack White, Chris Stapleton) overcame the technical obstacles and made it happen, as the "Rock It Off" music video attests. They also helped Stray Cats make a record that's crisp but not scrubbed clean of character. "I don't like too much spice in the chili," Setzer says. "My favorite sounds in the world are tape delay, reverb and twang on the guitar. That's what I want to hear on the record. It's mostly about the performance. It's not about adding studio wizardry or gimmicks."

Looking beyond the 40th anniversary, Setzer says Stray Cats are likely to continue making records and hitting the road whenever the mood strikes. They still have the will and the ability, and the audience probably isn't going anywhere. Sixty years removed from the original rockabilly era, Setzer says his beloved genre stands zero chance of becoming museum music like ragtime or Dixieland jazz.

"It's because it's cool," he says. "It's like the blues or something. It's real. It will always be there. It's always bubbling under. I've seen it come and go quite a few times. It's always regenerating."