These strays finally returned

The Stray Cats are back with the sound that set them on the '80s

By Eleanor Reardon

G

etting back together after a long absence has been something of an ordeal for the band that once was synonymous with the punkabilly sound of the '80s. But after a long period of uncertainty, the Stray Cats are back with a new album and a tour that has already taken them to some of the most iconic venues in rock history.

The band's latest release, "Stray Cats 2019," is a celebration of their enduring popularity and a reminder that they are still capable of delivering the same high-energy performances that made them a hit in the '80s.

"We were inspired by the energy of the music and the way it made people feel," said Brian Setzer, the band's lead guitarist and co-founder. "We wanted to recapture that same excitement and bring it back to the people who love it the most."
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The Stray Cats strut back with the sound that let them own the '80s

BY GREG ROGERS

G etting back together may sound easy enough, but for decades, the Stray Cats usually drifted at reunion talk. Or at the idea of talking at all. In the aftermath of the band’s ill-fated split, in 1984, Brian Setzer hung up his Gretsch for a 12-string acoustic and tried to react himself as a Johnny Cougar-meets-Bruce roots rocker. Drummer Slim Jim Phantom married Swedish actress and former Bond girl Britt Ekland posed for People magazine and, eventually, delivered a chatty memoir that barely skated the fiction between the Cats.

As latin Lee Rocker started a family and released more than a dozen albums of his own. But now, with each of them publishing 60, the conflicts seemed ancient and downright silly. Their own projects could wait. The Stray Cats, who sold millions of records during Ronald Reagan’s first term by playing greased-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, ‘Yeah, it’s time.’”

But he didn’t want to just play old songs. Phantom agreed.


“They came from Maaspequa, 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.”

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The Cats picked Edmunds, a rockabilly lover best known for his top-10 cover of “I Hear You Knockin’” to produce them.

On their U.S. debut, 1983’s “Built for Speed,” the Cats are standing in front of Setzer’s ’57 Chevy at an auto body shop in Maaspequa. 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布鲁” also on the record, was an irresistible, slinky 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 Bradley, who today plays in Gary Clark Jr’s band and remembers seeing the Stray Cats on his TV as a kid in Texas. And Brian Setzer, he was kind of like a rockabilly prince. No one else played or looked like that dude.”

“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 gaiety reserved for celebrities who have learned, too many times, how a dramatic quote can be taken or repurposed 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 flat out states that Setzer and Rocker didn’t get along and described himself as the peacekeeper. In the decade after the original break, the Stray Cats would occasionally regroup to make a record, but the tensions remained.

“Put it in order,” Setzer says. “Youth, success, separation, alcohol, ego. That’s just not needed 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 lives it, and we have nothing left to prove.”

“I think the bigger picture really has come into focus,” says Phantom, who lives about an hour and a half hours from Rocker in Los Angeles. “If you scrutinize it, the why will become we love this music. We’re still the torchbearers for Eddie Cochran.”

That comes through on “90,” which includes plenty of rockabilly but also a driving handclapper (“Cry Danger”), written with longtime Tom Petty guitarist Mike Campbell, and a Setzer instrumental (“Desperate”) that could have been plucked from one of Clint Eastwood’s spaghetti westerns.

Rocker says the reunion got rolling last year when they decided to play four gigs. They had no way of knowing whether the fans would return. Their last hit was 26 years before, “Teenage Swingin’ Bopper” in 1986. They also didn’t know how it would feel to play together again.

In April 2019, 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 feels something as he stood in the wings.

“It was just me, Brian and Jim,” he says. “‘C’mon Everybody’ on the sound system and 20,000 people and the sound of that crowd. That was really something that I 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, ‘Wow.’”

setzerbooks.com
“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 1992. Next month, Setzer, Phan-
tom, drummer Paul Driska and bassist Mike Dirnt, a longtime fan, 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.)

Drinka, bassist Mike Dirnt, a longtime fan, saw the band play a show late last year meant to test the waters. He talked to Rocker afterward and couldn’t believe the Cats had practiced so little before the gig.

“They really knocked it out,” Dirnt says. “I would love to see how great they’ll be after they get a couple of shows under their belt.”

Unlikely rock stars

One way to start explaining the Stray Cats is with a photo. It was snapped as they played their hit “(She’s) Sexy & 17” at the huge Rockpalast Festival in Germany in 1983. The image, black-and-white and blurry in spots, features Setzer, the singer and leader, swinging his Gretsch, eyes closed, air between his white shoes and the crowd below. Rocker isn’t wearing a shirt and has his back to camera, suspended in the air as he balances one boot on a stand-up bass adorned with the word “Dangerous.” Phantom is out of the frame but we know what he’s up to. He’s standing — the drummer always stood — pounding his snare like Joe Frazier on the heavy bag.

The look, the chops, the total package. It’s why Rocker, now 58, can reasonably declare, without pause, “We are the best band that has ever played this music.”

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 Pomade-sprayed time machine packed with hot rods, tattoos and Eddie Cochran licks. That a rockabilly trio could top the MTV stable in 1982, the same year stuffed with leg warmers, Members Only jackets and synthesizers, would seem not merely unlikely, but impossible.

“I wasn’t prepared,” says Jeff Beck, the British guitarist 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 then Brian. I’m not putting down other rockabilly bands, but so many of them sounded great, but the lead guitarist isn’t really special. Brian was. Right in the

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 ‘50s rocker Johnny Burnette’s “Train Kept a Rollin’” and that the Beatles played a killer version of Carl Perkins’s “Honey, Don’t.” Humble Pie did Cochran’s “C’mon Everybody.”

“Lee and I had always played,” Phantom says. “We had some older 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 8. 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.

“I knew what I liked and it wasn’t anything around me,” he says.

Sometime in the mid-’70s, Setzer heard Gene Vincent’s “Be-Bop-a-Lula” playing on a jukebox at CBGB, a punk rock club in New York. That got him hooked on the music that had emerged in the 1950s by loosely combining R&B and the raw energy of hillbilly music. He would play local bar gigs with his younger brother, Gary, on drums. One night, they had a fight and Gary stomped out. Setzer noticed Phantom standing there.

“He’s leaning on a post with his sticks and a cowboy hat,” Setzer says. “Nobody looks like that. He looked like Johnny Cash. I go, ‘You play drums?’ He had his kit in the trunk of his car.”

They were the Tom Cats and then the Stray Cats, and then, in 1980, they decided to go overseas after seeing how the British music magazines pushed rockabilly when American club managers seemed confused by it. They slept on benches in Hyde Park and squatted in crowded flats, but soon created a buzz. Beck, Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, the Clash’s Joe Strummer and the Pretenders’ Chrissie Hynde saw them. So did Dave Edmunds, the Welsh guitarist and singer and Rockpile member.

“They were so young, looked so good, and it wasn’t just a revival band,” Edmunds recalls. “It was new. They made it new again. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.”

Record labels began to hover.

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