



**B**rian Setzer is no mere rockabilly retread. While he is best known for having revived the dormant style with the Stray Cats, the Gretsch-wielding guitarist has

always been much more than a video-friendly reincarnation of rockabilly originals Cliff Gallup, Carl Perkins, and Scotty Moore. Sure, Brian speaks their language with almost unrivaled fluency, but his vocabulary boasts countless new turns of phrase, delivered with a fluidity, pacing, and irreverent sense of humor that are his own.

Unlike so many other musicians with eyes fixed on the past, Setzer never plays the predictable. From the wildman fills on his early singles (remember the goofball augmented and diminished fills on "Stray Cat Strut"?) through his often inspired solo work, Brian has blurred the lines between swing, pop, blues, and rock. Nowhere is this more evident than on the Stray Cats' JRS release, *Choo Choo Hot Fish*. Suave blue-jazz comping ("Beautiful Blues"), tiki-torch kitsch ("Jade Idol"), apoc-



# BRIAN SETZER'S

## Rockabilly Jazz

modern harmonies update his vintage riffs

BY JOE GORE

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# BRIAN SETZER

alyptic fretmelt ("Mystery Train")—Setzer mixes it up like never before.

Perched behind an old Gibson archtop in his San Francisco hotel room, Brian agrees that he's become increasingly adept at integrating his influences: "To me that's the whole key—mixing up all those sounds and having a sense of humor. It's almost funny to throw those licks in where they don't belong."

Brian credits his growth to a rigorous practice regimen, heavy on chord-melody jazz: "I got all the old jazz charts I could find, and I listened to lots of Wes Montgomery, Kenny Burrell, and big band stuff like Count Basie. I love the sheet music that Van Moretti does for *20th Century Guitar* magazine—jazz guitar arrangements of tunes like 'Lullaby Of Birdland.' I'm an average reader—it takes me a little while to get through complicated charts like those."

For Brian, old-school jazz guitar is no recent infatuation. "I grew up with all the old Italian guys on Long Island," he recalls, "and

that's what my teachers played. Guys like that are a lost generation of players, the ones who think in *E♭* and *B♭* on the guitar. I took a few lessons with Al Viola. He'd say, 'Let's hear something in *B♭*,' and I'd say, 'Can't we at least go up to *C*?'"

Setzer explains how jazz harmonies might work their way into a rockabilly context: "I might start out with standard fingerpicking, palming the pick, but then go into some single-note stuff. I might make it jazzy by throwing in, say, some diminished runs or a jazz-chord turnaround." He demonstrates, setting up a "Mystery Train"-style groove and running it through blues changes (**Ex. 1**).

The first eight bars are orthodox rockabilly, which Brian plays with his right-hand thumb, index, and middle fingers, using his ring finger to hold his pick against his palm. But at bar 9, Brian slips the pick between his thumb and index finger, launching into a speedy two-bar line peppered with surprising chromaticism. He reverts to finger-

picking for the turnaround, a string of jazzy chord substitutions. On the fingerpicked passages, Brian subtly accents the off-beat eighth-notes, goosing the groove with an implied backbeat, while the flatpicked line in bars 9 and 10 is more bop-flavored, spurred by accents on the last sixteenth-note of each beat. The turnaround blends both flavors.

Brian sails into a second chorus, returning to the simple rockabilly rhythm, but with subtle embellishments. For the final four bars of his second chorus (**Ex. 2**), Brian follows a slippery 9th-chord change with a bluesy twelfth-position lick. "By this point," he explains, "it sounds good to jump up into a simpler pedal part, something more straight rock and roll."

"I get bored if I stay in the same spot too long. I just know when it's time to go for straight, simple feel as opposed to fancy runs. One note can be as effective as doing all that stuff."

Asked about the descending chain of diminished-seventh arpeggios in bar 10 of

Ex. 1

Ex. 1 shows two systems of guitar music. The first system is for E7 and the second is for A7. Each system includes a standard staff with a treble clef and a guitar staff with tablature. The notation includes various musical symbols like notes, rests, and fingerings, as well as guitar-specific symbols like 'p' for palm mute and 'sim.' for simultaneous.

Ex. 1, Brian notes: "Those diminished harmonies are full of passing tones that really tie progressions together. They add suspense, whether you're using chords or single notes." Setzer most often uses diminished-7th chords to reinforce the tonic, a concept he demonstrates with **Examples 3a and 3b**, switching to the key of A.

The diminished harmonies in bar 2 of Ex. 3a recall those in Ex. 1, though here Brian uses chords instead of single-note arpeggios and adds a high-A pedal tone. Ex. 3b shows how diminished harmonies can be used to return from the IV chord to the

I, perfect for bar 4 of a 12-bar blues. "That's one great thing about a three-piece band," grins Brian. "You can throw in all those funny scales and diminished things whenever you want." Brian underlines his point by quoting the famous chromatic breaks from "Stray Cat Strut" (**Ex. 4**). The last two bars outline a diminished (half-step/whole-step) scale.

The augmented fill in the second bar of **Ex. 5** shows how liberally you can alter the V7 chord in minor keys. Notice how the raised fifth of the dominant (notated here as  $E_b$ ) anticipates the third of the tonic,  $Cm$

Setzer offers another example of how rootsy music and slick chromaticism can interact. "For years," he notes, "the Stray Cats have been playing 'Drink That Bottle Down.' We used to do it as a straight blues thing, with the guitar licks from Bill Doggett's 'Honky Tonk' and everything. But I decided to spice up the basic blues changes with some jazz chords." (**Ex. 6**.)

"For me," insists Setzer, "studying jazz stuff is the way to play better rock and roll. When you learn things like that, they stick in your head and eventually pop out in places you wouldn't expect." ■

Example 3a (bars 7-9) is in E7 and (B7) with a "with pick" instruction. Example 3b (bars 10-12) shows a progression through (A7), E, G13, Cmaj7, C9, B9, and E, with various playing techniques like "p" (palm mute) and "sim." (simultaneous) indicated.

## Ex. 2

Example 2 shows a sequence of chords: B9, B $\flat$ 9, B9, B $\flat$ 9, B9, B $\flat$ 9, B9, A9, A $\flat$ 9, A9, A $\flat$ 9, A9, A $\flat$ 9, A9. It includes a "with pick" instruction and detailed fretboard diagrams for the guitar.

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### Ex. 3a

### Ex. 3b

### Ex. 4

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