

StarTribune.com



Music: Noir guitar

Rockabilly hero Brian Setzer takes a cinematic stroll down Lonely Avenue - with a Minneapolis soundtrack and back story.

By **JON BREAM**, Star Tribune

Last update: November 25, 2009 - 7:21 AM

Everyone called the joint the Monte. The bartender poured a stiff drink and shared his gift of gab at no extra charge. He loved chatting with one of the regulars -- a guy with a pompadour as high as the IDS Center and as slick as a Minnesota sidewalk on Super Bowl Sunday morning.

The barkeep knew the pompadour played guitar. "You should check out my basement," he said.

One night, the guitarist found himself shuffling down a flight of rickety steps into what looked like a New Orleans bordello. The bartender lifted a hook on a door, and there it was: a cozy cavern like Tut's tomb, but with some of the coolest vintage recording gear east of the Sunset Strip.

The axman's eyes lit up. "Do you know any

drummers?" he asked.

"Of course," said the bartender. "A bass player, too."

True story, more or less: Those nights at the Monte Carlo in Minneapolis led to "Songs From Lonely Avenue," a new album by former Stray Cat Brian Setzer that swings, stomps and seduces like a long-legged dame who walks into a detective's office with a request he can't refuse.

The album grew out of jams with local drummer Noah Levy and bassist Tommy Vee in bartender-turned-producer Mark Stockert's Underwood Studios. Inspired by the hard-boiled, film noir thrillers of the 1940s and '50s, the songs are fashioned like vignettes from old movies, with pulp-fiction titles such as "Kiss Me Deadly," "Love Partners in Crime" and "Dead Man Incorporated."

"I'd love to give the album to Quentin Tarantino and go, 'Can you write a film around this?'" Setzer said.

On the cover, there's Setzer, big avocado green Gretsch guitar in hand, posed atop his high-rise condo near the Monte Carlo against the Minneapolis skyline, his blond

Advertisement

TARGET WEB COUPON
EXPIRES 2/27/10

25¢ each

with purchase of twenty-five
4x6" Kodak instant prints







9856-0113-1882-4674-0306-4005-84

This coupon is intended for use by the original recipient only and is void if copied, scanned, transferred, purchased, sold or prohibited by law. Limit one offer per transaction. GiftCards and tax will not be included in determining purchase total. No cash value. Offer available at Target One Hour Photo Labs. Go to Target.com/photo for the location nearest you. One Hour service limited to machine capacity.

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

StarTribune.com



pompadour towering above it all.

Plugging into Minneapolis

The New York-born, California-based rock star moved to Minneapolis nearly six years ago after regular visits to see his new wife's family. (The former Julie Reiten, a singer from Hopkins, implores "Gimme Some Rhythm, Daddy" on "Lonely Avenue.")

"Moving to Minnesota was a breath of fresh air," Setzer said this month in his Minneapolis condo. "We were in Palm Springs [Calif.]. Julie didn't want to feel like she was making me come back here. But I was making friends and going places here and I said, 'I really like it here.' I can walk down to the bar and I can talk to people. I found more often than not that we were coming here. We've been happy here."

And he has plugged into the music community.

"The best thing about Minneapolis -- these guys are just as good as any players anywhere in the world. The difference is they'd be in the middle of dinner and they'd be over in 20 minutes. You would never get that in New York or L.A. You'd get his answering machine and a call back in a

couple of days and 'I'm available in a week or two.' I've never been so plugged in with local guys. You don't get that kind of camaraderie in big cities."

Drummer Levy had never met Setzer but the first concert he ever saw was Setzer's Stray Cats in the mid-1980s.

"It sounded very organic right away," Levy said of that night in Stockert's Uptown Minneapolis studio. "The energy going around the room was amazing. Who would have thought you could sound like that in somebody's basement? I knew Brian was a great guitar player, but he's a great all-around musician. He has very keen ears."

What those ears heard that night was: the soundtrack to an old crime movie.

"When I get that focus, that's when the floodgates kind of open," Setzer explained. "It takes two or three songs that sound similar: 'It's a '50s crime drama.' Now I write about the guy sneaking down the alley."

Inspired by those sessions, Setzer penned and then recorded the rest of "Lonely Avenue" in Minneapolis before heading to Hollywood to overdub strings and horns with legendary arranger Frank Comstock, 87,

Advertisement

TARGET WEB COUPON
EXPIRES 2/27/10

25¢ each

with purchase of twenty-five
4x6" Kodak instant prints



This coupon is intended for use by the original recipient only and is void if copied, scanned, transferred, purchased, sold or prohibited by law. Limit one offer per transaction. GiftCards and tax will not be included in determining purchase total. No cash value. Offer available at Target One Hour Photo Labs. Go to Target.com/photo for the location nearest you. One Hour service limited to machine capacity.



9856-0113-1882-4674-0306-4005-84

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

StarTribune.com



who'd worked on "Dragnet" and "Rocky & Bullwinkle" as well as with Judy Garland, Les Brown and Stan Kenton.

"He's the last one," Setzer said of Comstock. "All those big, old arrangers are gone -- Billy May, Neal Hefti. Besides my last album, the last thing Frank did was 40 years ago. He wrote 'Adam 12.'

"He loves to talk. He says, 'I wrote some stuff in the Army for Christmas big bands.' So he goes in the garage -- 'Little Town of Bethel,' 'Little Drummer Boy.' I go, 'So this has been sitting in your garage since World War II?' The scores are 4 inches thick. We're going to try them [next year]. It's like finding a diamond."

A rockin' Christmas

His 18-piece Brian Setzer Orchestra (featuring mostly California musicians) hit the road earlier this month for their seventh annual Christmas tour. The guitarist returns home Sunday for a gig at Mystic Lake Casino that has been sold out for weeks. Setzer will pile on the swingin' Yule favorites and toss in a couple of stocking stuffers from "Lonely Avenue" and some Stray Cats struts.

Strip away the leopard dinner jackets, the

giant nutcrackers and all the tinsel, and you'll appreciate Setzer's flair for mashing up musical styles.

"My style of guitar playing mixes, obviously, rockabilly and rock 'n' roll, jazz, a little country. I just pick the sounds I like from each genre and it comes through some kind of filter system of my head and just comes out of my hands. Kind of out of boredom, really."

If it seems like this guy with the '50s pompadour and 1932 hot rod lives his life in black and white -- well, he does.

"I didn't like the music when I was growing up in the '70s. I much preferred '50s rockabilly to '70s progressive rock," he said. "Same thing with the style. In the '70s, the style was long hair and Earth Shoes. I liked cool cars, I liked to have a cool haircut. It probably came from my parents. My dad was a greaser guy with sideburns and the pompadour even into the '70s.

"I love new stuff, too," Setzer, himself a father with a 22-year-old son and daughters ages 8 and 13, hastened to add. "But I definitely have a love of the '40s and '50s stuff. It's been a consistent theme in my life. Maybe I should talk to somebody about that."

Advertisement

TARGET WEB COUPON
EXPIRES 2/27/10

25¢ each

with purchase of twenty-five
4x6" Kodak instant prints



This coupon is intended for use by the original recipient only and is void if copied, scanned, transferred, purchased, sold or prohibited by law. Limit one offer per transaction. GiftCards and tax will not be included in determining purchase total. No cash value. Offer available at Target One Hour Photo Labs. Go to Target.com/photo for the location nearest you. One Hour service limited to machine capacity.



9856-0113-1882-4674-0306-4005-84

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

StarTribune.com



Jon Bream • 612-673-1719

Advertisement

TARGET WEB COUPON **EXPIRES 2/27/10**

25¢ each
with purchase of twenty-five
4x6" Kodak instant prints



This coupon is intended for use by the original recipient only and is void if copied, scanned, transferred, purchased, sold or prohibited by law. Limit one offer per transaction. GiftCards and tax will not be included in determining purchase total. No cash value. Offer available at Target One Hour Photo Labs. Go to Target.com/photo for the location nearest you. One Hour service limited to machine capacity.



9856-0113-1882-4674-0306-4005-84

Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™