

Moscow Bands Are Rockin' Around the Clock

By [Peter Beck](#)

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Raw Cats '88 may have grown up in the Soviet Union, but they sound as if they spent their lives in Memphis.

There is only a sparse audience upstairs at the Rhythm & Blues Cafe on this Tuesday night, but Valery Setkin is not holding back as he launches into a rollicking version of “Devil In Disguise.” Along with Dmitry Smagin on guitar and Denis Ovchinnikov on bass, Setkin is on a mission to keep the rock 'n' roll flame lit by Elvis Presley alive and burning in Moscow, and he is doing it with passion.

“Rock 'n' roll and rockabilly is the music I was raised on,” says Setkin, and though that may sound odd coming from someone from Moscow rather than Memphis or Mississippi, he goes on to explain that he first heard rock 'n' roll as child in the 1980s when his father brought home the likes of Elvis, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Ray Charles records from Japan after his visits there as a cinematographer.

It was about that time that rock 'n' roll came to the Soviet Union officially. "Mister Twister were the first rock 'n' roll band signed to the state Melodiya label," Setkin recounts. "They sold a million and a half copies of their first record and sold out a concert at the Olympic Stadium."

That may have been a case of better late than never, but Setkin says the audience for the music has been constant since that time.

"They were originals, the navigators," he says, "but interest in the style goes from the older generation to someone like the 16-year-old kid who came up to me after a recent concert to ask me about the Stray Cats and other rockabilly bands."

By the time he was 16 himself, Setkin had already been learning the piano for a decade. Then, after graduating from high school and music college, he began playing with blues bands in clubs around Moscow. Ultimately, when it came time to form a band of his own in 2003, it was his love of rock 'n' roll that came to the forefront. Raw Cats '88 was the result, and it is that band, minus the drummer, who are working their way through Elvis's back catalogue with some authority.

Their good grounding in the genre shows as they give "Baby, Let's Play House" a full workout, Setkin pounding his keyboard with a fierceness to match "The Killer" himself.

Three nights later and the Radio City Bar at Triumfalnaya Ploshchad is getting crowded early in anticipation of a rock 'n' roll marathon to celebrate Chuck Berry's 87th birthday. The birthday boy himself is not present, though he did play in Moscow on his recent European tour, but Setkin and the full lineup of Raw Cats '88, including drummer Stas Mikosho, are there to headline the show.

The night begins with a set from the Marshmallows, an all-girl trio who seem to have been transported directly from a 1950's sock hop and gathered a lot of extra style and sparkle somewhere along the way.

"We were inspired by groups like the Andrews Sisters," says founder Yulia Chuguyeva, "but the songs we do are more rock 'n' roll. That is the music we really love."

In current times, they would fit well on any bill with Imelda May or The Puppini Sisters. Dressed in matching flared pink skirts with a cupcake print, Chuguyeva and bandmates Nadya Kunareva and Maria Nosova sing, harmonize and sashay their way through a repertoire that includes standards such as "Please Mister Postman," and "King Creole."

Their clean bright vocals and retro look clearly have appeal. By the time they get to "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" — "Nancy Sinatra is one of our favorites," says Nosova — the dance floor is packed and swaying along to their captivating performance.

When the Raw Cats take to the stage, the energy in the room is ramped up to another level. They start with a scorching run through of "Folsom Prison Blues," then, in a nod to the theme of the night, rip through versions of "Johnny B. Goode" and "You Never Can Tell." Chuck Berry may be elsewhere, but the party is definitely in Moscow.

Setkin sums it up for the Raw Cats, the Marshmallows, and the Moscow rock 'n' roll scene

when he says: “We play this music in the original spirit, and we play it live in the way it should be done.”

“That’s my credo. I don’t sing in Russian. I only sing in the native language of the music. I think that if Americans tried to sing our Russian songs in English, it wouldn’t sound right. We perform American music in the way it was created.”

In an age of manufactured pop, it sometimes seems as if music with an authentic voice is in danger of extinction everywhere. With the Raw Cats on stage, however, it is fully evident that real roots music still has an international appeal and is very much alive and well in Moscow.

Raw Cats '88 will play Saturday at John Gilroy's Pub, 6 Bratislavskaya Ulitsa, and Sunday at DeFAQto, 30/2 Ulitsa Bolshaya Lubyanka, Bldg 1.

“Elvis: That’s the Way It Is,” is every Tuesday night at Rhythm & Blues Cafe, 19 Starovagankovsky Pereulok, Bldg 2.

Marshmallows will play Friday at Strazek, 8 Ulitsa Masterkova.

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