



Rockabilly rhythms

The rocking sound of yesteryear is at the heart of an underground scene in Budapest. **Aniko Fenyvesi** finds big hair and a boogie-woogie beat slapped out on the double bass.

The sharply-dressed young man, sporting a stylised 1950s-look suit and white leather shoes, swaggers onto the stage, an old blues guitar strung over his shoulder. He speaks politely, and looks uncannily like Jerry Lee Lewis or Carl Perkins. 'Good evening, ladies and gentleman,' he says coyly in Hungarian. But when he sings, it's loud, and always in English – with a southern US accent to boot. You wouldn't know this show was happening in 2010, let alone Hungary, and Long Tall Sonny and his Wild Cows prefer it that way. As he launches into an upbeat rhythm-and-blues number, a double bassist slapping by his side, Sonny's slicked-back pompadour begins to fray around the edges. In front

of the small, crammed stage, a room full of fans that look like extras from the TV show 'Happy Days' goes mad. The dance floor fills with young and old, doing their own interpretations of the jitterbug. This is rockabilly Budapest style.

With its peculiar blend of rhythm-and-blues, hillbilly and country boogie, rockabilly first surfaced in the American South of the early '50s, and artists like Carl Perkins and Elvis Presley brought it into the mainstream causing a big stir along the way. Nearly 60 years later, this once revolutionary sound still has an international following, including here in Hungary.

The Budapest rockabilly scene has been going strong for nearly two decades, with



Amigos at Amigo From left, Iván, Zsolt Szalay, Bencze Jalics; below: style by Stefánia Ágoston

more than a dozen live shows happening every month.

At venues such as Amigo (see ‘Where to find the scene’), the fans come out dressed for the part: girls in ponytails and polka-dot dresses, guys in greased up hair, rockabilly windbreakers and bowling shirts. And when they dance, it’s full-blown rock ‘n’ roll couples dances – the fellas tossing the girls around, their fancy footwork occasionally taking the focus away from the stage.

Although it may look like rockabilly from anywhere else, the Hungarian scene has its own unique history. Despite the impenetrable barrier of the Iron Curtain, rock ‘n’ roll filtered into Hungary through records smuggled across its borders. In the ‘80s, while the rest of the world was experiencing a rockabilly revival, many Hungarians were hearing the music for the first time.



Local ‘genius’

Bencze Jalics, a long-time rockabilly aficionado who’s big on the local scene remembers very clearly when he first heard the Stray Cats in Hungary. ‘I was watching this show on our black and white Russian Yunost TV. I didn’t even know this music existed,’ he explains. ‘There were only three of them in the band but that was enough to produce such an amazing and dense sound.’

‘I was still in primary school when my parents listened to this kind of music. I rarely saw them in action, but I heard they were serious dancefloor fanatics cutting a rug at all the house parties around town,’ says Jalics.

In the early ‘80s, Jalics’s parents, like so many others in Hungary, were tuning into one of the hottest local rock ‘n’ roll acts, Hungária Kft, fronted by Miklós Fenyő, who still performs today. Even though Hungária’s sound is more

like oldies rock ‘n’ roll, many local fans credit that band for getting them hooked on rockabilly.

‘One of the reasons Miklós Fenyő became such a big star was because a lot of Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee’s music didn’t reach Hungary’s mainstream before the fall of communism,’ says Stefánia Ágoston, the fashion designer behind Fenyő’s retro look and a creator of outfits for everyday fans of ‘50s era chic. ‘He went to America and brought home all these records and rewrote the songs with Hungarian lyrics. Everyone thought he was a genius.’

After Fenyő came Mystery Gang. Formed more than a decade ago, they were the first rockabilly group to make it big on the Hungarian scene and beyond. The band’s founder remembers belonging to a sort of greaser crew. ‘When I was 13, I was part of an Óbuda rockabilly gang. We all wore black coats and written on the back in white corrector fluid were the words ‘Rockabilly’ and ‘Stray Cats’ with an image of the Stray Cats cat head wearing a crown,’ explains Mystery Gang’s singer Péter Egri. ‘When all 20 of us got on the HÉV train, people were scared. We were just like those gangs from “Grease” or “Cry-Baby.”’

ROCKABILLYEVENTS THIS MONTH

FRIDAY OCTOBER 1
Prison Band Vadvirág Táncház (XIV. Kerepesi út 26, 06 30 894 8487). 9pm.

SATURDAY OCTOBER 2
Voodoo Allen, Yellow Spots Brutal Quartett Delirium Pub (VII. Kertész utca 33, 06 70 310 6517). 8pm.

SATURDAY OCTOBER 9
Nitus and the Rollin’ Dice Roham Kávészó (VIII. Vas utca 16, no phone). 9pm.



PIN-UP GIRL MYSTIC CAT



NITUS AND THE ROLLIN' DICE

Got rhythm and style Local rockabilly bands have presence



VOODOO ALLEN



LONGTALL SONNY WITH RHYTHM SOPHIE TRIO

Like most Hungarian rockabilly bands, Mystery Gang sings in English. This has helped them spread their message and their success abroad, and they're one of the few bands in the local scene to tour extensively in Europe and make it over to America, most recently New York City. They released their first album in Japan in 2001. In 2003 they played with the Comets, the band of rock 'n' roll legend Bill Haley. And just last year they performed at the massive classical music venue, the Palace of Arts.

'Our New York concert happened because 15,000 people in the city downloaded our record,' beams Egri, who attributes much of the band's success to the free downloadable versions of their albums at www.mysterygang.com.

'When 20 of us got on the HÉV train, people were scared. We were like those gangs from "Grease" or "Cry-Baby"'

According to Egri, the band's sound is not confined to rockabilly. 'We also borrow from primitive and traditional forms, from blues to garage, early '50s rockabilly, old hillbilly and rhythm-and-blues – all the way to surf rock,' says Egri. 'This has led to us playing in the kinds of places where rockabilly bands have never played before.'

Musical purists

By comparison, local singer-guitarist Long Tall Sonny is more of a purist, working in a traditional and less eclectic rhythm-and-blues vein. He retains much of the authenticity of the era, right down to his dress, mannerisms and playing style, which make him look as though he just stepped onto the set of the 'Ed Sullivan Show'. He plays more obscure rhythm-and-blues and rockabilly numbers with all his heart – and body: when he holds his guitar like a shotgun and falls to his knees, strumming ecstatically, the crowd goes wild. Though he's usually seen playing with his band Sonny and his Wild Cows, he also performs with Miss

SATURDAY OCTOBER 9
Wild Cat Night with Gorilla, The Flip Flop Flyers, Miss Rhythm Sophie, Rockin' Rock Cats, Jerry

Lee's Rock&Roll Service, New Village Gang, B'15 Hatvan, DALI (Mészáros Lázár utca 4-6). 7pm; Ft2,500. www.wildcatnight.hu.

TUESDAY OCTOBER 12
Mystery Gang Morrisons 2 (V. Szent István körút 11, 374 3329). 8.30pm.

FRIDAY OCTOBER 15
Jerry Lee's Rock'n'Roll Service Amigo Bar (VII. Hársfa utca 1, 352 1424). 10pm; Ft1,000.



Mystery Gang From left, Zoltán Paszinger, Péter Egri, László Tamási

Rhythm Sophie and as a guest of the more upbeat rockabilly group, Tom Stormy Trio.

'Rockabilly and rock 'n' roll are actually progressions of rhythm-and-blues but with a more uptempo beat,' says Sonny, who got a good taste of the stuff through the massive blues collection of his cousin from Vienna. Sonny is quick to point out the musical differences between rhythm-and-blues and rockabilly. 'The reason why the two genres are confused in Hungary is because rockabilly has the slapping double bass. This isn't so common in rhythm-and-blues, but people here often perform these songs with a slapping bass,' says Sonny.

Rising star Nitus is proud to lead the Rollin' Dice, the only rockabilly band in

Hungary fronted by a woman. But Nitus has several role models to look up to: 'Those who inspire my work the most are artists like Janice Martin and of course Wanda Jackson, who was a seminal female artist in the genre. Also Lorrie Collins of Collins Kids – what these women did was amazing and is still unrivalled.'

For Nitus this music is timeless. She notes that local rockabilly gigs bring in the older generation, seeking nostalgia, and a younger group who enjoy a fun scene. 'This is the sort of music that moves everyone, regardless of their age. Rock 'n' roll has always existed and always will,' she says.

The scene continues to evolve in Budapest, where there is a growing appre-

ciation of rockabilly's younger and angrier cousin, psychobilly – a punk-influenced sound that spread from the UK underground in the early '80s. Hungarian bands who play psychobilly include Gorilla, The Silver Shine and Voodoo Allen, whose frontman Iván fondly recalls the origins of his band. 'We first formed in high school during a serious bender,' he says. 'This was nearly 20 years ago. Unlike rockabilly, which takes on some pretty innocuous themes, from chequered suits to pink cadillacs – no one's interested in that shit 40 years after the fact – psychobilly was actually a rebellion against rockabilly. It's a similar style of music but the message is completely different.'

So 40 years later, the new bands are rebelling. It may be 2010 Hungary, but it could be Memphis in 1957.

WHERE TO FIND THE SCENE

The heart of Budapest's rockabilly scene has to be the **Amigo Bar** (VII. Hársfa utca 1, 352 1424/amigo.uu.hu).

This venue hosts live rock 'n' roll and rockabilly concerts at weekends, and the rest of the time rockabilly fans feel right at home in a bar playing the old tunes and boasting retro decor. On show nights many guests dress in full rockabilly gear.

Owner Zsolt Szalay opened the Amigo with his two brothers nearly 20 years ago, and his wife helps see to its smooth operation. In general it's a family affair.

'My mum and dad had a huge rock 'n' roll collection. They had parties and danced at home. My dad was a so-called *jampec*, a rebel of sorts, who used to go to concerts and listen to this kind of music,' explains Szalay. 'We inherited our admiration for Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley from him.'

'Several bands debuted here,' Szalay says, 'such as Mystery Gang, Gorilla and lots more.' The scene still thrives, though it remains largely underground. 'The crowds here are really tight and everyone knows each other. It's not the same as in Germany, where they have gangs and lots of rivalry between them,' according to Szalay.

Though not dedicated venues, the **Delirium Pub** (VII. Kertész utca 33, 06 70 310 6517 mobile/www.deliriumpub.hu) and **Vadvirág Táncház** (XIV. Kerepesi út 26, 06 30 894 8487/www.vadvirag.eu) also often host rockabilly bands.

Meanwhile, a handful of festivals cater to rockabilly enthusiasts. On October 9, rockabilly veterans Rockin' Rock Cats will hosts the 11th **Wild Cat Night** (www.wildcat-night.hu), a festival in Hatvan, 60km east of Budapest. The line-up includes local bands such as Gorilla, The Flip Flop Flyers, Miss Rhythm Sophie, Jerry Lee's Rock&Roll Service, New Village Gang, B'15 and, of course, the Rockin' Rock Cats.

SATURDAY OCTOBER 16

Rockin' Rock Cats Amigo Bar (VII. Hársfa utca 1, 352 1424). 10pm.

THURSDAY OCTOBER 28

Long Tall Sonny with guest Big Fat Chubby Lámpás (VII. Dob utca 15 cellar, no phone). 9pm.

Mystery Gang & Voodoo Allen

Corvintető (VIII. Blaha Lujza tér 1-2, 4th floor, 06 20 772 2984). 9pm.

SUNDAY OCTOBER 31

Jerry Lee Lewis Papp László Arena (XIV. Ifjúság útja 5, www.eventim.hu). 8pm. Ft5,900-Ft25,000.