

# Billboard

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### Making The Brand

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## Christmas Cat

Brian Setzer Becomes The New King Of Jingle Bell Rock

For Surfdog Records artist Brian Setzer, it all began with the 1996 comedy "Jingle All the Way" starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sinbad. But make no mistake: "I didn't pursue it. It pursued me," Setzer says with a laugh.

"I was asked to create a new version of 'Sleigh Ride' and I had Darlene Love sing on it," the three-time Grammy Award winner says. While in the studio, Setzer says he pictured a hyped-up sleigh ride through the Bronx. "I scuffed up the song a bit and they loved it."

So much so that Setzer ended up creating a handful of holiday songs for the original motion picture soundtrack, including "So They Say It's Christmas," by Lou Rawls with the Brian Setzer Orchestra.

Ten years later, Setzer has become the unofficial face of contemporary Christmas music. This season alone, his mistletoe jams are heard in such big-screen vehicles as "The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause" and "Unaccompanied Minors." Fans of TV shows like "My Name Is Earl" and "ER" are also familiar with Setzer's holiday music.

The Brian Setzer Orchestra delivered its first holiday album, "Boogie Woogie Christmas," in 2002. "Dig That Crazy Christmas" followed last year. A live DVD, "Christmas Extravaganza!," was also released in 2005. The WEA-distributed discs, which are marketed via direct-response TV campaigns and retail programs with the major big boxes, have collectively sold more than 500,000 units, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

According to Surfdog owner/president Dave Kaplan, the licensing of Setzer's Christmas music to films and TV shows "brings in a great chunk of change. It's been a significant revenue source to Brian and the label."

To be sure, Setzer is having the time of his life being—as

Kaplan jokingly calls him—"the king of Christmas."

"I couldn't put the breaks on this even if I tried," Setzer says of his seasonal music, which complements his full-time gig as a rocker. "Now, it's become this big big-band spectacle."

Indeed, Setzer and his 18-piece orchestra kicked off their fifth annual Christmas Extravaganza tour Nov. 20 in Milwaukee.

For this four-week, 24-date trek, fans will hear, in addition to "Jingle Bell Rock," classic Stray Cats songs as well as new tracks from the recently released "13," Setzer's 13th album of original material. Dave Kaplan Management oversees Setzer's career and Guy Richard of the William Morris Agency handles his bookings.)

The color scheme for this year's tour is blue and gold, Setzer says. White Christmas trees with blue lights, for example. "And I'll have a blue sparkle guitar that Gretsch made me."

Coinciding with the live trek are several TV appearances, including NBC's "Today Show, Weekend Edition" Nov. 25 and "Late Night With Conan O'Brien" Nov. 28.

"Brian has this way of bringing the guitar out of the big-band background to become a lead instrument—not just to imitate jazz horns but to add a bit of rock'n'roll to the mix," says Andrea D'Ambrosio, a producer on "Today Show, Weekend Edition." Take this concept into Santa Claus season and his music goes beyond "your regular holiday album," she adds. "It becomes "a great party album, with Brian's bad-boy swing attitude and fun" leading the way.

"It's funny," Setzer says, "what started out as fans saying, 'Let's go see what this show could be about' five years ago has become more like, 'We can't wait, let's get our tickets early.' It's become an event that people want to see every year."

