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## Bob Seger, Once the Voice of Detroit, Is the Newest Star in Nashville

By ALAN LIGHT

BOB SEGER has not released a new album in 11 years, but he never went away. His first “Greatest Hits” compilation has been camped out near the top of Billboard magazine’s catalog charts the whole time. His songs have been recorded by acts as far-flung as Metallica, [Garth Brooks](#) and Rod Stewart.

Chevrolet trucks used Mr. Seger’s “Like a Rock” as the basis for one of the longest-running ad campaigns ever, and his recording of “Old Time Rock & Roll” has been a staple at wedding receptions ever since [Tom Cruise](#) cavorted to the song in his underwear in the movie “Risky Business.”

Perhaps most impressive, though, is the force that Mr. Seger has remained on the radio in all those years, across numerous formats — pop, classic rock, adult contemporary, even country stations have continued to play his songs. His brand of lunch-bucket rock ‘n’ roll has struck a universal chord, arguably even more than the music of peers like [Bruce Springsteen](#), Tom Petty and John Mellencamp.

With the new “Face the Promise” (Capitol), Mr. Seger gets back in the game and sounds as if he hasn’t lost a step. The first single, “Wait for Me,” is a sweeping ballad, but much of the album — produced, for the first time, by Mr. Seger himself — is a surprisingly hard-rocking effort from the 61-year-old singer. Duets with Kid Rock (on a rave-up version of Vince Gill’s “Real Mean Bottle”) and with Patty Loveless also reveal Mr. Seger’s growing relationship with Nashville, where much of the album was recorded.

Despite the decade out of the spotlight, Mr. Seger never stopped working. “I kept writing, but I just wanted to be around my kids,” he said by telephone from his home in the Detroit suburbs. “I had my first kid when I was 47, and I just wanted to watch him grow up. You get addicted to being around them, and you want to be there when they need you. Now they’re 11 and 13, and they’re excited to see me play.”

Mr. Seger’s father was a onetime big-band leader who quit music to work in a factory. When Mr. Seger was 12, his father left the family. Within a few years Mr. Seger began performing in a series of bands around the Detroit area. His local following started growing in the late 1960’s, but it wasn’t until 1976, when the “Live Bullet” double album captured his powerhouse band in ace form onstage, that he really came to national attention.

“Growing up, I was pretty much ignored,” he said. “When I was 7, 8 years old, my parents would let me walk around Ann Arbor until midnight. Dad was always working, and I guess my brother was a little higher maintenance, so they’d say I was the good one and let me go. My wife was one of five kids, and her parents worked too. At night we talk about how to be better parents, how to raise our kids with a sense of self-worth and self-confidence.”

Mr. Seger said that he had recorded a full album with his longtime backing group, the Silver Bullet Band, in 1997 and 1998, but that as technology improved, “it just didn’t sound good enough.” The new album’s hard-charging title song was written during those sessions, though this version was rerecorded with session players. He said its restless urgency (“I’ve got fevered dreams, mighty plans/I need a blacktop road, I need a wheel in my hand”) reminds him of the ominous challenge posed on a seemingly unlikely record: “The Future,” by [Leonard Cohen](#), which he said is one of his favorite albums.

On songs like “Simplicity” and “No More” Mr. Seger expresses his concerns about the environment and consumerism, themes that might be surprising coming from a songwriter so closely associated with the automotive industry that he had a 1982 hit titled “Makin’ Thunderbirds.” He admitted to including “a little bit of advice-giving” aimed at his children, whom he recently took to see the global-warming documentary “An Inconvenient Truth.”

“We’re inundated day and night with commercialism,” he said, pointing out that another song, “Are You,” was inspired by the sight of his wife, Nita, shopping for children’s shoes over the Internet. “She didn’t have time to take them to the shoe store,” he said with a chuckle. “That was such a sign of how the world has changed.”

Further evidence of Mr. Seger’s desire to keep things manageable came with his decision to record “Face the Promise” in Nashville rather than California, where he recorded most of his previous albums. “I feel more comfortable there than in L.A.,” he said. “It’s like a college town, all green, the people are real pleasant. It’s real familiar to me.”

He said that he didn’t know many of the country music elite, but he expressed admiration and affinity for Nashville’s songwriting tradition. Though the song that propelled Mr. Seger to multiplatinum success 30 years ago was “Night Moves,” a meditation on budding sexuality, his songs are generally marked by an adult sensibility, more aligned with country’s maturity than with the adolescent thrust of most pop.

“One of the young singers — I think it was Brad Paisley — said that country music is what happens Monday through Friday, and rock ’n’ roll is what happens on the weekend,” he said.

The link between Mr. Seger’s work and traditional country songwriting lies in his focus on narrative, said Vince Gill (who first met Mr. Seger at the annual charity golf tournament that he runs in Nashville). “He has a great way of telling a story,” Mr. Gill said. “His songs have always been about that.”

Singling out compositions like “Against the Wind” and “Turn the Page,” Mr. Gill said that he considers Mr. Seger the equal of [Paul Simon](#), Bruce Springsteen or [John Lennon](#) and [Paul McCartney](#). “For a writer of his caliber to think enough of one of my songs to record it is the highest praise you could hope to get,” he said.

Capitol has attempted to take advantage of Mr. Seger’s country-music following by working “Wait for Me” on country radio; it has been climbing the charts slowly but has not yet cracked the format’s Top 50. (The single is the first of Mr. Seger’s music to be sold digitally. “Face the Promise” and “Night Moves” are both being made available on iTunes, ending his hold-out against digital distribution, which was due to both contractual concerns and an old-school belief that albums are meant to be heard in their entirety.)

Mr. Seger's own exposure to country music, he said, came primarily from his friends and sometime collaborators in the Eagles (whose co-leader Glenn Frey was also a product of the 60's Detroit rock 'n' roll scene). But, he added, country was part of the mix of sounds he discovered on the radio. "In Michigan you could hear a lot of the Nashville stations, both country and the hard R&B — James Brown, Wilson Pickett, Sam and Dave," he said. "That really developed my vocal style. Little Richard and Fats Domino were more influences on me than [Elvis](#) and Jerry Lee."

The softer side of his writing, he said, stemmed from being able to pick up folk music on a radio signal from Boston. "That came from hearing [Joni Mitchell](#) and Tom Rush on a 50,000-watt station when I drove home after playing a bar in Pontiac," he said.

In recent years Detroit has become a key location on the rock 'n' roll map, much as it was in Mr. Seger's early days, when he played a circuit that included bands like the Stooges, the MC5 and Alice Cooper. He said he is a fan of the local boys Jack White — whose spontaneity in the studio he admires — and [Eminem](#). But he has a special fondness for Kid Rock (who is himself such a Seger fan that he signed up with Mr. Seger's longtime manager, Punch Andrews, after he made it big).

"Kid Rock reminds me so much of me," said Mr. Seger. "He's got the same drive, he loves creating, loves the process. I don't need to perform as much as he does, though. He's high profile, and that works for him, and I'm more low profile, and that works for me."

Mr. Seger became a star through relentless touring in the 70's, and he plans to get back on the road this fall, he said, adding that "Face the Promise" only improved during its long gestation in the shadows. "I think the songs are better because I kept pushing myself to be a better writer," he said. "I had a tendency to use too much metaphor, but this writing is clearer, less vague, more matter-of-fact."

His final push to finish the album came with his induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2004. "That was a big spike, I've got to admit," he said. "I wanted to deserve it with this album, so I started working harder. I thought, 'If they're gonna put me in the Hall of Fame, I better at least make a decent record.' I wanted to make sure to leave some blood on the page."

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