

Bob Seeger

By Gary Graff

HE SINGS THAT ROCK & ROLL NEVER FORGETS – SO, appropriately, Bob Seeger has a clear memory of his first inkling that music might be his life's pursuit. "My dad made a big deal when I was, like, four years old about the fact that I sang 'I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover' in the back of his '49 Buick," Seeger recalls. "He just went nuts over that. I think that was maybe the very first inclination for me."

Fifty-four years later, that's proved to be a sage revelation. Seeger has carved out a nearly four-decade recording career in which he's sold almost fifty million albums and launched enduring hits such as "Ramblin' Gamblin' Man," "Night Moves," "Turn the Page," "Hollywood Nights," "Against the Wind" and "Like a Rock." And not only is 1978's "Old Time Rock & Roll" the Number Two jukebox selection of all time, but it has virtually replaced Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Proud Mary" as the celebratory anthem for weddings, bar mitzvahs and similar such occasions.

Moreover, Seeger is largely responsible for creating a model for and voice of the midwestern singer/songwriter, a breed of rock & roll animal different from its East and West Coast counterparts. Seeger and those who followed

drawed the same kind of inspiration from Hank Williams, Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan but applied their own regional aesthetic to it – a more narrative form built on earth parables about maintaining everyday ideals amid all manner of adversity and temptation. No plaintive troubadours these folk, Seeger and company also showed that you could deliver these contemplative paens with the same kind of furious energy that you'd have singing about cars and girls.



In his work, Seeger celebrates the nobility of the "Beautiful Loser" and the assembly-line workers "Makin' Thunderbirds," as well as the metaphoric struggle of running "Against the Wind." The subject of his "Hollywood Nights" grapples with a dual-edged sword as he lives life in a too-fast lane, while the exuberant freedoms of his "Ramblin' Gamblin' Man" and "Travelin' Man" are not as unfettered as they initially seem but, rather, tempered by a desire for more dependable relationships. And the warm nostalgia of "Night Moves," "Mainstreet" and "Brave Strangers" reveals the wisdom of remembering but not necessarily wallowing in the past in a pursuit to make sure "The Fire Inside" still burns hot.

Seeger is not the first of rock's songwriters to espouse these values, nor are these principles the exclusive property of the heartland. But he's filled the songs on



Two guys on top: Bob Seger and Bruce Springsteen in 1978



"Being in Detroit, I can keep things in perspective"

his fifteen studio albums with a richly interwoven set of place and beliefs that surely speak to a life spent – excepting a couple of years in Los Angeles – soaking up inspiration from the Detroit environs where he still lives.

"I don't think it was really a choice; it was where I lived and where I felt comfortable," Seger explains. "By being in Detroit, I can keep things in perspective and just work as much as I can but also have a life outside of it, where I'm grounded and where people put me in my place. Everybody there treats me just like a guy and not a rock star, and that's good. It's a more calm and grounded atmosphere to work in."

Seger's earliest influences came from his parents. His father, Stewart, was an autoworker who played a variety of instruments – clarinet was his best – and on weekends performed with bands in the Ann Arbor, Michigan, area. Seger describes his mother, Charlotte, as the kind of music lover to whom "you name a song and they'll tell you not only the singer but the writer and when it was recorded. She was like



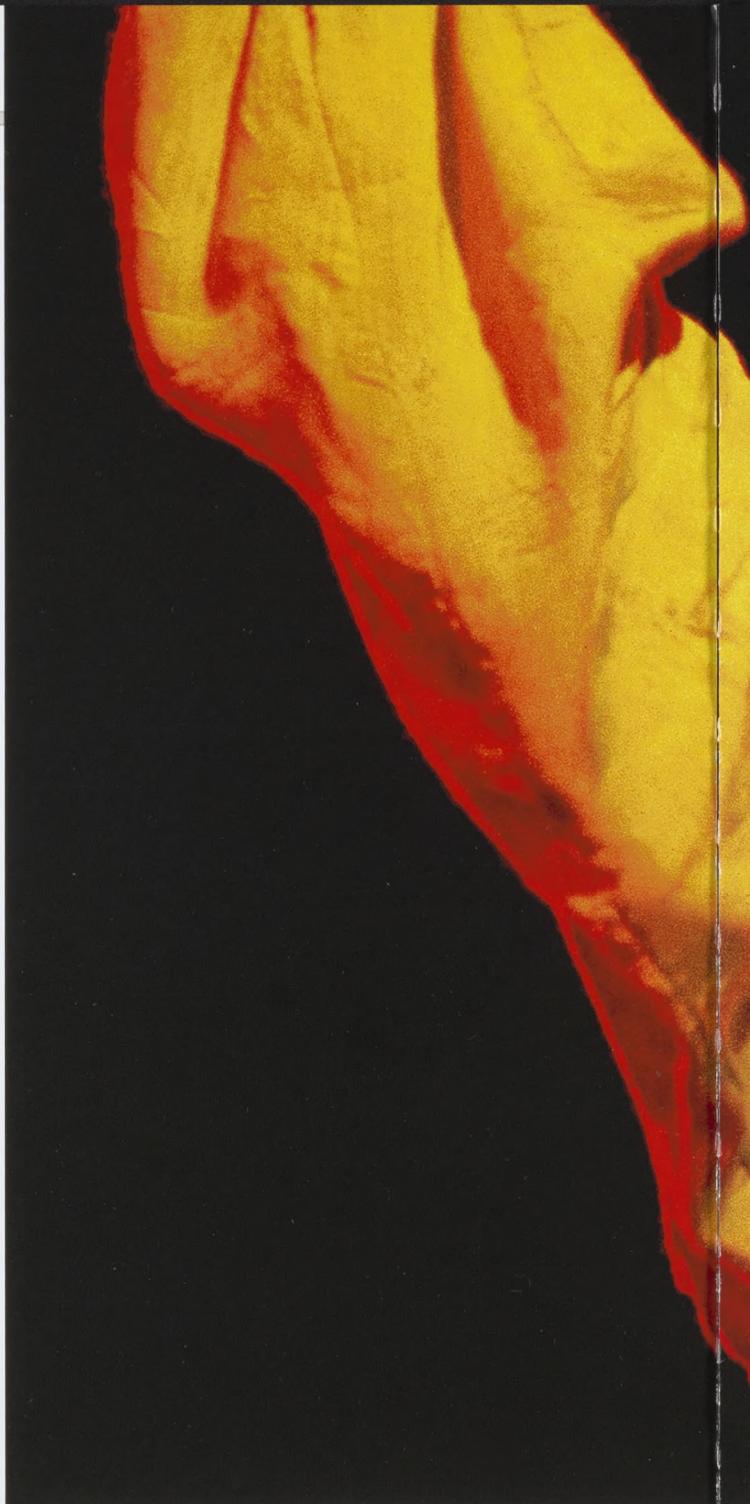
Seger and the Silver Bullet Band, which he formed in the mid-seventies: Drew Abbott, Robyn Robbins, Alto Reed, Seger, Chris Campbell and Charlie Allen Martin (from left), in 1977

a music encyclopedia."

Seger's father gave him his start when he was about nine, teaching him some chords on the bass ukulele, which led the fledgling musician to learn songs by Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly and Little Richard that he heard on a transistor radio late at night via stations such as WLAC-AM out of Nashville. Music remained important in the house even after Stewart left the family, when the boy was ten, thereby sending them into poverty. Seger was able to live what he calls a "totally free-spirited life" while his mother and elder brother, George, worked, but his contribution to the family was musical even before music became his livelihood.

"I brought the music back into the family," Seger explains. "I always sat there and played ukulele and sang . . . and kind of quelled all the anger and disturbance because of the fact that my father left."

Few around him thought ill of Seger's musical dreams; in





fact, he notes, “all my friends when I was growing up and going through junior high and high school would always envy me. They would say, ‘You know exactly what you want to do; you want to be a musician.’ There was never any doubt.”

By the early sixties, Seger was a fixture in the Ann Arbor and Detroit club scenes where he met future Eagle Glenn Frey (who sang backup on “Ramblin’ Gamblin’ Man”). He cut his teeth in Doug Brown and the Omens before starting his solo career, working with teen-club operator Eddie “Punch” Andrews, a former member of Seger’s band the Decibels, who became his manager and coproducer.

Seeger’s regional acclaim – if all the people who say they saw him perform at their school really did, he could have

retired by the time he was old enough to vote – helped sell more than fifty thousand copies of his first single, a knockoff of Them’s

“Gloria” called “East Side Story.” He kept his local-hero status with “Persecution Smith” and the primal “Heavy Music,” and 1968’s “Ramblin’ Gamblin’ Man” gave him his first visit to the *Billboard* Top Twenty.

The fallow period that followed has become the stuff of legend. Seger toured hard and kept recording, but nothing seemed to click. He tried different band configurations and changed labels; he even contemplated quitting music and going to college after

recording his 1969 album, *Noah*. The Michigan fan base was always there; the rest of the world, though, was oblivious.

Above: Night moves, 1976.
Left: In 1980.





Right: Seger, at home, circa 1981. Above: Seger plays to a hometown crowd at the Goose Lake Festival, 1970.

"We killed every night, so I knew I had something"

Seeger never doubted himself, however. "In that seven-year period . . . even though we were playing, like, 250 nights a year . . . we killed every night," Seeger says. "The audiences wanted me back . . . so I knew I had something." In hindsight, though, Seeger is willing to guess that the music just wasn't good enough.

"I played too many nights," he says, "and I really didn't have enough time to write."

That changed in the mid-seventies, when he formed his Silver Bullet Band and polished his craft for albums such as *Seven* and especially *Beautiful Loser*, a more carefully crafted and diverse set of material that formed a clear bridge to the greater fortunes that followed. "Glenn Frey . . . heard the *Beautiful Loser* stuff and said, 'This is great, Bob. You're on your way. You've got it now; you're a songwriter,'" Seeger remembers.

The songwriter quickly became a superstar. Following the definitive 1976 concert document, *Live Bullet*, "Night Moves" – with its Top Five title track about a teenage love affair ("My first broken heart!" he says) – took Seeger into the multiplatinum realm in 1976, where he stayed for his next four albums. For 1980's *Against the Wind*, he acknowledges, he "really wanted to have a Number One album; that's what we went for." And he got it, spending six weeks atop the *Billboard* chart.

The past two decades have found Seeger on a different sort of path, however. He's put together four studio albums and two volumes of greatest hits. And while some of his writing has taken on more detailed, cinematic qualities, Seeger will tell you his greatest satisfactions have happened outside of music – in his ten years of marriage to his third wife, Nita, and in being a father to his ten-year-

old son, Cole, and eight-year-old daughter, Samantha.

Not surprisingly, the man who was abandoned by his father is driven to give his children "what I didn't feel when I was a kid, which is a great sense of affection and stability. It's just nice to focus on trying to do a good job." He's also become a championship sailor on the Great Lakes.

But the creative fire still burns inside. His *Greatest Hits, Vol. 2* features two fresh songs, and he promises a new studio album – his first since 1995's *It's a Mystery* – in 2004.

"I think I'm writing a little simpler, a little more direct and a little more out-front," he says. "I think I'm coming into my own kind of groove. You just want to get up there and sing, ya know? You think about how old I thought I was when I was writing 'Rock and Roll Never Forgets' – 'sweet 16 turned 31!' But back then, the career arc for most people in entertainment was three good years, five tops, and you were gone. I mean, who'd ever thought we'd be seeing McCartney at sixty onstage, Jagger? Nobody. And here I am – still. It's just . . . interesting. But really gratifying." □



The ever-ebullient Seger (left) with the Town Criers, 1963: Pep Perrine (drums), John Fils (bass) and Larry Mason (lead guitar)





Motor City Shakedown!

They may have never shaken up the charts, but from 1966 to 1971, rough 'n' rowdy bands tore up the stages all over Detroit

By Andy Schwartz

IN THE YEARS FROM 1966 TO 1971, THE CITY OF DETROIT AND THE surrounding region of southeast Michigan produced one of the most exciting and high-energy local scenes in rock & roll history. At its creative peak, Detroit rock emitted an array of impassioned, boundary-breaking electric music—precious little of which was ever captured effectively on record. For a feverish few years, Detroit rock thrived despite rising crime, police harassment, media neglect and the tragic decline of Detroit itself. (Between 1960 and 2000, the city's population shrank from 1,670,144 to 951,270.) In addition to

such artists as the MC5, Iggy Pop and the Stooges, Mitch Ryder, Bob Seger and Ted Nugent, Detroit rock gave rise to a legendary venue, the Grande Ballroom; to a visionary rock magazine, *Creem*; and to such larger-than-life counterculture figures as John Sinclair, the founder of the White Panther Party and the scene's leading propagandist.

Detroit rock has long been characterized by its blue-collar work ethic, its relative isolation from the East and West Coast music-industry centers and the bonds between bands and audiences that this isolation seems to reinforce.



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Left: The MC5: Wayne Kramer, Dennis Thompson, Michael Davis, Fred Smith, Rob Tyner (from left), '69

"Detroit audiences are fiercely loyal and really demonstrative," says singer/songwriter Marshall Crenshaw, who grew up in suburban Berkly, Michigan. "They will go all out for you if they dig you."

When the Beatles arrived in America in February 1964, they ignited a nationwide explosion of white teen garage bands. Detroit was no exception to the outbreak: Many of the scene's future stars cut their professional teeth in this pre-hippie era of teen clubs, fraternity parties and church dances. Among them was Al Jacquez, who, at age fourteen, became the lead singer for an Ann Arbor band called the Hideaways.

"We worked at least three gigs per week," Jacquez recalls. "The Hideaways were playing all over the Detroit suburbs and central Michigan before I could even drive." On this bustling circuit, friendly rivals included the Rationals, Chosen Few, Fugitives, Dick Wagner and the Bossmen and the MC5.

Crenshaw still marvels at "how many local records were major hits in Detroit. The Unrelated Segments, for example, had two hit singles on our Top Forty station, WKNR. The raw garage-type rock records were also very big - 'You're Gonna



The Amboy Dukes, including future Motor City Madman Ted Nugent (far left)

Below: Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels



The Midwest work ethic is what the Detroit bands had

Miss Me' by the 13th Floor Elevators was a Number Three record in Detroit!"

In October 1966, promoter Russ Gibb transformed a Depression-era downtown movie palace - the 1,500-capacity Grande Ballroom - into Detroit's very own psychedelic rock palace. In this new era, bands changed their names, wardrobes and musical styles almost overnight. When the R&B-oriented Hideaways split up after its members finished high school, Jacquez became the lead singer of the progressive-rock quartet Savage Grace. Meanwhile, MC5 manager John Sinclair had installed his charges as the Grande house band. With "Kick out the jams, motherfucker!" as their battle cry, the MC5 opened for - and often blew away - visiting national headliners on a weekly basis.

Hiawatha Bailey, one of the Grande's few African-American regulars, vividly recalls his first visit to the venue, in early 1967. "We walked in, and there was Uncle Russ [Gibb], sitting in a barber's chair under ultraviolet lights - and all these people just tripping their gourds off! Walking up and giving you peace signs, giving you kisses. . . I was like, *This is Detroit? What is going on here?*"

Recruited into the White Panther Party, Hiawatha became a political and cultural activist, the Grande's house sound mixer and a cofounder of the People's Light & Power Company light show. Along with members of the Up, who succeeded the MC5 as the White Panther house band, he built and sold custom speaker cabinets to help support the WPP's three Ann Arbor Hill communes.

"That Midwest work ethic is what all the Detroit bands had in common," says Jacquez. "They honed their craft on the gig, not sequestered away in rehearsal rooms. A performer like Iggy worked out all that insanity in front of people - that's how he made the impact he did."

The Grande Ballroom wasn't the only place to hear local rock & roll. The Detroit Pop Festival (April 1969), the First Annual Rock & Roll Revival (May 1969) and the Goose Lake Pop Festival (August 1970) were wild, weekend-long celebrations that brought together dozens of Michigan rock combos like SRC, Brownsville Station, the



Amboy Dukes, the Bob Seger System, Third Power, and Teagarden & Van Winkle. True, many of the Detroit bands "were overly derivative of those that inspired them," Crenshaw admits. "But the reason the MC5 and the Stooges are remembered and revered today is because they really were the best – the ones that had something truly unique and undeniable."

After the red-hot summer of 1969, Detroit rock went into a long, hard slide. The MC5's *Kick Out the Jams* (released in March) stalled at Number Thirty on the *Billboard* chart when the Hudson's department-store chain dropped the record from its racks because of that naughty word *motherfucker*. Two other albums – *Back in the USA* and *High Time* – fared even worse. The Stooges' two LPs – *The Stooges* (1969) and *Fun House* (1970) – were instant classics beloved of a fervent but minuscule cult.

After his Number Seventeen hit single of 1968, "Ramblin' Gamblin' Man," Bob Seger issued seven LPs – but not one cracked the Top Forty. Major-label releases by SRC, the Frost,

**Worshipping
the Igster**



The Up: White Panther house band and Michigan's "militia," 1970

Third Power and Mitch Ryder's Detroit all bubbled briefly near the bottom of the Top 200 before vanishing into the cut-out bins. Two Reprise discs by Jacquez's band Savage Grace met a similar fate, and the group split up in 1971 after an ill-fated move to Los Angeles. (Today the singer leads the Ann Arbor blues band Measured Chaos.)

Crenshaw calls Detroit rock's demise "a case of failed expectations and failed aspirations. There were outside forces at work, too. The MC5 were seriously harassed by the Detroit police for years and were almost certainly being watched by the FBI. When they failed, it seemed like everything else started to fail, too."

By the end of 1971, the big rock festivals were over and the White Panther communes had begun to splinter. The Grande Ballroom closed for good after the MC5 played its last-ever show there on New Year's Eve, 1972. "Everybody



MC5 provocateur and White Panther Party founder John Sinclair

started going in different directions," Hiawatha Bailey recalls, "so I went back to doing the things I did for money before my political and musical work." Convicted for the possession and sale of cocaine, he was confined to the Lexington Narcotics Hospital in Kentucky – the same federal facility where Wayne Kramer and Michael Davis of the MC5 served time on similar charges. The sun had set on the golden age of Detroit rock.

In the late seventies, the Detroit scene enjoyed a modest revival. At the postpunk club Bookie's, the Police, the Damned and Johnny Thunders' Heartbreakers shared bills with Detroit acts like the Sillies, the Cult Heroes (with Bailey on lead vocals), Sonic's Rendezvous (led by MC5 guitarist Fred Smith) and Destroy All Monsters (which included Stooges guitarist Ron Asheton, among other vets). Most of these local bands issued self-produced singles – "City Slang" by Sonic's Rendezvous remains a lost classic – but none were ever signed to a major label save for the Romantics, of "What I Like About You" fame. In 1980, former Berkly High classmates Don Fagenson and David Weiss formed Was (Not Was), setting old-school soul voices (Sweet Pea Atkinson and Harry Bowens) against hard-rock guitars and funky drums in a classic Detroit mélange. Years later, the group scored an unlikely Top Ten pop hit with "Walk the Dinosaur."

At the dawn of the new century, a few Detroit performers began to achieve levels of commercial success unimaginable to their Grande Ballroom predecessors. The Top Five, eleven-times-platinum success of *Devil Without a Cause* (1998) by rap-rocker Kid Rock surprised a music industry that had largely ignored his previous three releases. Two years later, Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* became the fastest-selling rap album of all time, moving nearly two million units in its first week of release. Eminem's big-screen debut, *8 Mile* – a quasi-autobiographical saga shot on grim locations throughout Detroit – broke U.S. box-office records in 2002.

Savage Grace, one of Detroit's hot bands that never made it nationally



"Detroit rock & roll – it's yours if you make it yours"

The White Stripes play blues, country, punk and pure pop rock – all with characteristic Detroit intensity. In 2003, *Elephant* lofted Jack and Meg White into the Top Ten, MTV stardom and (for Jack) a supporting, singing role in the film *Cold Mountain*. Coming up fast behind the White Stripes is the next wave of the city's street-level rock bands, like the Von Bondies, the Detroit Cobras, Soledad Brothers and Five Horse Johnson.

It's all good. But 1966 to 1971... now, that was a whole 'nother thing. In the history of Detroit rock, says Bailey, "there's a sinew that holds everything together. It's like this purity and accuracy. It's about being dedicated to something – to anything that's true and real. That's what Detroit taught me about rock & roll – it's yours if you make it yours." □



Mitch Ryder (second from left), formerly of the Detroit Wheels, with his band Detroit, which he formed in the early seventies