

Dec. 3, 1995---

Bob Seger is still the same.

He looks the same. He laughs the same.

The only thing that's a little different is the way he sounds.

"It's a Mystery," his first studio record in four years, is one of Seger's most mature pieces of work. But then, how long can a 50-year-old, four-to-the-floor rocker sing about night moves and ramblin, gamblin' men?

Seger addresses ecology, family, feel-good wars and the tabloid media on his new release from Capitol Records - the same label he signed with in 1967. Some of the material sounds more like Pete Seeger fodder than Bob Seger. Yet, it's a surprisingly solid and soulful record, especially when compared to the overpolished "The Fire Inside," Seger's last studio effort. Last year Seger released a "Greatest Hits" package that sold more than 2 million copies.

Seger began writing songs for "It's a Mystery" in March, 1992. That November, his wife, Nita, gave birth to son Cole, their first child. A daughter, Samantha, was born on Easter of this year.

It's no mystery that Seger has been preoccupied.

"Having kids changed my outlook on a lot of things," Seger said from his home in suburban Detroit, where he has lived all his life. "When my kid has to go to the doctor - and he's petrified of the doctor - well, I can't practice that day. The future also became more important. It wasn't my future anymore. It was theirs. Now I have to start thinking about things I read - like 135,000 kids go to school every day with a gun.

"I got more topical. Relationships have always been the main core of my writing. I tried to refine that. When you have kids, things in newspapers start to take on greater importance. Sending your kids off to war is what (the searing kickoff track) 'Right of Passage' is about. 'Lock and Load' is about, 'Let's do it right this time. You've had your two practice marriages (as Seger has had), now this is the real one.' "

With swirling guitar rhythms that pick up where Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days" left off, "Lock and Load" is one of the most compelling of the dozen tracks that make up "It's a Mystery." Seger sings: "I can sit here, in the back half of my life; And wonder where the other shoe will fall; Or I can stand up, point myself home; And see if I've learned anything at all."

Much of Seger's grounded ethic is shaped by loyalty.

He toyed with relocating to Los Angeles, but has remained in his native Michigan. Today, he lives 25 miles northwest of Detroit in Bloomfield Township. Seger has been steadfast in not turning over his tunes to advertising agencies, but he relented on "Like a Rock" because it helped the Detroit area automobile industry.

"I've spent tons of time in L.A. because I've made my records there since '76," Seger said. "So I've rented on and off in L.A. to work there. At the end of the '87 tour I started looking at houses in L.A., but then my mother fell ill. The next couple of years she was in and out of hospitals, and there was no point in being in L.A."

"Looking back now, I'm glad I didn't do it. I've got a lot of friends in L.A., but everyone's caught up in the business. You only see your friends in L.A. occasionally. They're out making a movie, or they're out doing a tour. Here, there's permanence. Your family and friends are always around. I remember talking to lots of people who moved to L.A. They always say the loneliest year of their life was the first year they lived in L.A."

Seger's heartland faith is the catalyst for "Revisionism Street," a hard-edged rocker that defends pop culture icons like Elvis Presley and Alfred Hitchcock.

"I read a lot of biographies," Seger said. "I come across something like the Albert Goldman Elvis (Presley) or the Kitty Kelly Sinatra book. I hate the dark slant just to sell books. There was a real nasty book on Jackie Gleason, 'The Great One.' Actually, that's what did it. Here's a guy that myself and Bruce (Springsteen) adore - I mean, Bruce is a member of RALPH (the 'Honeymooners' fan club) - and geez, does everyone have to get ripped?"

But as a calming point of contrast, Seger delivers "I Wonder," a tender tiki-bar ballad about the mystery of distant harbor lights and moons across the bay. Seger said it was written "under the influence" of Tom Petty's subtle "Wildflowers" record.

"I was near the end of recording my album and I read an interview Tom did on 'Wildflowers,' " Seger said. "He said he didn't rewrite himself on that album. There was something I really liked about those songs, they seemed very unaffected. So I wrote the last three songs of the album ('I Wonder,' 'Manhattan' and 'By the River') real fast and left them alone. The first or second draft was it. They have a natural feeling; they're not overdone."

Overproduction was the problem with "The Fire Inside," one of the few misfires from fellow Michigan producer Don Was. Although the record featured accomplished guests like John Mellencamp drummer Kenny Aronoff (who likely will join Seger's Silver Bullet Band for his '96 tour), violinist Lisa Germano and keyboardist Bruce

Hornsby, it was left in the oven too long.

Seger produced "It's a Mystery," the first time he has self-produced a record in his 30-year career. "I've always been too meticulous," Seger said. "So I told my engineer (of 15 years), David Cole, 'Let's just go for excitement and not for perfect.' It's been my experience that when you play more and more, people subtract. They get a little more careful because they think they're messing up. So if you can get it early, when they're still very free about what they're doing, you get a better performance."

Seger admits that he was a production geek in the middle of his career. During the "Against the Wind" era of the early '80s, Seger would go into the studio first with only his bass player and drummer and then overdub the other instruments. He wanted the crux of the song to be exactly the way he heard it.

"I like the idea of having everybody in the room now," he said. "It's a lot more exciting. It's like playing in a club as opposed to playing in a stadium. You hear everybody and you feed off of them. At the (Rosemont) Horizon or someplace, you're lucky if you can hear the guitar player three amps down."

Seger has warm memories of playing in clubs, in the Detroit area as well as Chicago. Just before the landmark "Live Bullet" double album broke in 1976, Seger was still playing places like the now defunct B'Ginnings in Schaumburg.

Seger and other rockers breaking out of the Detroit circuit divided their time between teen clubs and bars, as they did in Chicago. "In Detroit there were the Mushrooms, which was Glenn Frey's group; Iggy Pop; the MC5; Ted (Nugent). Mitch (Ryder) had already broken out," he recalled. "There were a lot of places to play. You were constantly moving around the state.

"It was a fun time. You were playing to your peers, not some bar where some guy who just got booted out by his wife was singing 'I Can't Stop Loving You.' We worked about five 45s (45-minute sets) a night, six nights a week.

"I remember coming to Chicago was really murder because it was open so late. I played with (the late Minnie Riperton's psychedelic-soul group) Rotary Connection, across from the Moustache Cafe. We played eight 45-minute sets. It was like the Beatles in Hamburg. By 4 in the morning, we were toast."

And never to be the same.