

Bob Seger, Champion of Misfits

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Blog post published December 6, 2010 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/etqvr-0dr39>

Abstract

Bob Seger and the sort of classic rock he performs, embodies and represents, for me (and apparently many others), the relentlessly uncool. Youth, drugs and nonconformity have long been my standards of “rock,” and within this triad, Bob Seger’s formal, cinematic songs, have always come across as a little tired.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Article, Film/Movies/Cinema, Identity, Listening



Recommended citation

Trammell, A. (2010, December 6). Bob Seger, Champion of Misfits. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/etqvr-0dr39>

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Bob Seger and the sort of classic rock he performs, embodies and represents, for me (and apparently many others), the relentlessly uncool. Youth, drugs and nonconformity have long been my standards of “rock,” and within this triad, Bob Seger’s formal, cinematic songs, have always come across as a little tired. [Osvaldo Oyola wrote specifically last week](#) about these foibles: the stilted piano and canned Chuck Berry riffs sound more like parody than gospel, while the parade of effects on Seger’s voice, also quite derivative, could have also fit on a [Bruce Springsteen](#) album (although you could replace the influence of Chuck Berry with that of the quintessentially less cool [Phil Spector](#)). Problematically, even though I loathe Seger’s catalog, I love Springsteen’s, this of course has made for some very popular conversations at the bar. In fact, it was last July at a local New Brunswick haunt that I had this conversation last. My friend, who will remain nameless, completely disagreed: Seger was cool, I just couldn’t hear it, in fact I had to see it to believe it.

In order to understand Bob Seger, I needed to watch [Mask](#), a 1985 retelling of *The Elephant Man* starring Eric Stoltz as the deformed Rocky Dennis and Cher as his mother Rusty Dennis. *Mask* was released two years after *Risky Business*, and featured a number of Bob Seger songs predominantly in the soundtrack. These songs uniformly mixed to the foreground, often serving as Rocky’s theme, juxtaposed against an ambient soundtrack of songs by black musicians like Little Richard and Gary US Bonds. These black oldies, “Tutti Frutti” and “Quarter to Three,” are used thematically when Rusty’s friends, a bunch of guys in a motorcycle gang, are partying. Not only is Rocky othered from the kids at school because he is ugly, he is poor, raised by a single mother with a drug addiction. Although whiteness takes center stage in this film, it holds a complex relationship to blackness. Rocky and Rusty are atypically white, finding community only with each other and a super-masculine network of bikers; they are misfits, doing their best to pass in a mainstream and affluent white society.

<https://youtu.be/DkJs6Y1QJrE>

Bob Seger’s “Katmandu,” is the song which introduces Rocky in the opening credits. It is guilty of the trademark Bob Seger whiteness: more refurbished Chuck Berry and piano so droll it could have been played by a metronome. In the context of Rocky and his struggle to identify with white

society however, it paints Seger in a different light. Bob Seger's uncoolness can be read as a failed attempt to pay homage to black musicians like the aforementioned Little Richard and Gary US Bonds. Instead of suggesting a totalizing narrative of white appropriation, I argue that Bob Seger can be understood as a musician who would never be completely accepted by his heroes or critics. Reflected in the posters on Rocky's wall and Universal's contract negotiations with Columbia Records ([Bruce Springsteen had been first choice for the soundtrack](#)), Seger was not even cool to the director of the film, Peter Bogdanovich, who referred to his music as "inappropriate."

Toward the end of the movie, Rocky holds his blind girlfriend for the last time. Her parents, disgusted by his face (but probably also by his shabby clothing), keep the two separate. Contradicting the escape narrative of Springsteen's "Born to Run," Rocky evinces the power of fantasy toward coping with discrimination: "We can't run away Diana. But we can sort of run away in our minds. We can remember camp, the mountains and the Ocean...especially New Year's Eve" ([Mask Part 11 4:40](#)). Like Rocky, Seger can't run away from his whiteness, even though he may not relate to it, or fully embrace it, it is ever present in his recordings. Songs like "Old Time Rock and Roll," "Katmandu," and even "Night Moves" are celebrations of music as a forum of imagination – one where identity, be it black or white, can be reimaged as something else. Though "Old Time Rock and Roll," will sound forever white, it relates the experience of otherness. Try as he might, Seger has no idea how to sound authentically black, and this is evident through both its celebratory lyrics and contrived arrangement.



Growing up in a bi-racial household, where, depending on the holiday, my Jewishness could be as visible as my blackness, I feel a strong kinship to figures like Rocky, not completely belonging to any ethnic community. Perhaps this led to a juvenile obsession with Springsteen, who, according to my father, everyone could relate to, regardless of color (he worked at an all-night Jersey Shore diner, [the Inkwell](#), in the early 1970s). Bruce though, was never really misfit, mulatto or poor; [whether discussing his working class freehold roots, or his first guitar](#), his music epitomizes white privilege. Even his stage shows feature [Clarence Clemons](#), The Big (Black) Man, notably subordinate to Bruce, or "The Boss." Although now, my Bruce phase seems laughable, I wonder if it was also a fantasy of fitting in, of recovering a fantastic and invisible whiteness deep within myself. When he wrote "Old Time Rock and Roll," was Bob Seger

trying to do the same and recover a font of blackness deep within himself? I now see a complex web of identity politics informed by an economic and social history of Rock and Roll, but this holds an uneasy and complex relationship with the part of me that still believes in rock and roll. I was, am, and forever will be the misfit who found an identity in the church of rock and roll. Though the sermons have changed, in high school, Springsteen was the pastor, and I suspect that for my friend at the bar, Seger also conducted service. Even though I could never completely fit in to the rich white world of these artists, I wonder if this speaks to a fundamental affinity. Did Springsteen and Seger ever feel like outcasts, later to find solace in the black cool of Little Richard, Chuck Berry and Fats Domino? In the context of these figures and their music, how could whiteness seem anything but contrived, misfit and ugly – or in truth, is this dialectic really the beat which pushes rock and roll forward?

AT



<https://youtu.be/ZvbqGubZmgo>

