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STEELY DAN

...jazz on the coast

DONALD FAGEN

Passaic, NJ

10 January 1948

WALTER BECKER

Queens, NY

20 February 1950 - 3 September 2017



"We play rock & roll, but we swing when we play. We want that ongoing flow, that lightness, that forward rush of jazz."

- Walter Becker, 1974

Rolling Stone

NOTES FROM THE CUSTERDOME: A JAZZ APPRECIATION OF STEELY DAN

The death of Walter Becker - the bespectacled and bearded guitarist, bassist, composer, lyricist, and one-half of the legendary duo Steely Dan - on September 3, 2017, ended a fifty-year friendship and a four-decade-old partnership with his co-collaborator, pianist, vocalist, and composer Donald Fagen. They were, to borrow a phrase used by Duke Ellington, "beyond category." Simply put, from their debut LP, *Can't Buy a Thrill* (1972), to their last studio CD, *Everything Must Go* (2003), Becker and Fagen existed as their own genre and played by their own rules. After a less-than-satisfying touring experience early in their career, they quit the road and focused on the studio until the '90s. They were famous (or infamous) for their penchant for retakes until they achieved perfection. They named themselves after a steam-powered marital aid from William Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch*, and wrote cynical, and dystopian songs about L.A. drug dealers ("Glamour Profession"), prophylactics ("The Fez"), class and immigration ("The Royal Scam"), mid-life identity crisis ("Deacon Blues"), incest ("Cousin Dupree"), middle-age lust ("Hey Nineteen"), and relationships ("Rikki Don't Lose that Number"), along with hippie-fied, spaghetti-western ditties ("Here at the Western World").

They proved that pop music could be harmonically complex and quirky in the early to mid-'70s, when the then-new FM format allowed for longer cuts, and more expansive playlists, genre-wise. In my hometown of Wilmington, Delaware - about 30 miles south of Philadelphia, where almost all of our television and radio stations broadcasted from - I heard black artists such as Howard University's BlackByrds, Barry White, Isaac Hayes, and Billy Preston on WAMS-AM, a white station, and the powerhouse black station WDAS-FM played Elton John, David Bowie, Chicago, Rare Earth, Seals and Crofts, and Steely Dan. It was on WDAS that I heard their early hits like "Rikki..." and "Do It Again."

Then, in 1977, they dropped their masterpiece LP, *Aja*. I completely and utterly lost my sixteen-year-old mind when I heard the first track from that LP, "Black Cow," on WDAS.

Friday, 2.28.20, 6-9pm *"HGCB - Hot Glass Cold Brew: Roaring 20's"* **Joe Occhipinti & the Jazzabouts**, First City Art Center, 100 N. Guillemard St., Pensacola, FL

Tuesdays, 6:30-9:30pm *Jazz Night* Lili Marlene's, Seville Quarter, 140 E. Government St., Pensacola, FL

Wednesdays, 6pm *Way Back Wednesday* **Cedric Brooks & Friends** Kazoola, 558 Dauphin St., Mobile, AL

Wednesdays, 6-9pm **Jones & Company** Ruth's Chris, 15000 Emerald Coast Pkwy., Destin, FL

Thursdays, 7-10pm *Thirsty Thursday Jazz Jam Session* Kazoola, 558 Dauphin St., Mobile, AL

Fridays, 8-11pm **Jones & Company** Bric á Brac, 824 US 98, Destin, FL

Sundays, 10am-3pm *Sunday Jazz Brunch* John Cochran + 1 FIVE Mobile, 609 Dauphin St., Mobile, AL

Sundays, 11am **Jazz Brunch** **Al Alvarado** McGuire's Irish Pub, 600 E. Gregory St., Pensacola, FL

Sundays, 11am-3pm **Sunday Jazz Brunch** Five Sisters Blues Café, 421 W. Belmont St., Pensacola, FL

Sundays, 11am-4pm **Jazz Brunch** Satchmo's, 10206 Seymour Ave., D'Iberville, MS

Sunday, 12pm (2nd) *Sunday Jazz Brunch* **Jimmy Roebuck & Friends (Larry Carter, Josh Titford, Buddy Duborg)** Corpus Christi Parish Hall, 6200 McKenna Ave., Mobile, AL \$15

Sundays, 5pm *Sunday Jazz* Room 158, 1444C Industrial Pkwy., Saraland, AL

Sundays, 4-8pm **Jones & Company** AJ's Seafood & Oyster Bar, 116 Harbor Blvd., Destin, FL



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The track swung, with a lean, finessed funk I had never heard from them before. Who could make a song about a malt drink sound so funky? The music had “swagger,” with its perfect, in-the-pocket bass line, rock-steady drumming, laced with pithy, yet powerful horn lines, Becker’s twangy guitar chords and Fagen’s gravelly and unmistakably Brooklynesque, ‘New Yawk’/North NJ vocals. That station played other dynamic cuts from *Aja*, from the mid-tempo, Muscle Shoals-Motown-Beale Street beats of “Home at Last,” a paean to Homer’s *The Odyssey*, and “Josie,” a shout to a woman who “prays like a Roman with her eyes on fire,” to the cunningly lingual “I Got the News.”

In addition to the way the music sounded, thanks to Gary Katz’s excellent production, I wondered why this album spoke to me in the way that their earlier LPs did not. I got my



answer on the title track: seven minutes and thirty-seven seconds of pure, musical nirvana. It wasn’t a cut or a tune, but a true composition of poetry, passion, and propulsion about some far away, Eastern exotic locale located on “a continent of the mind,” as the voice of Eartha Kitt purred on the TV commercial promoting the LP, where “angular banjos” sounded good to them.

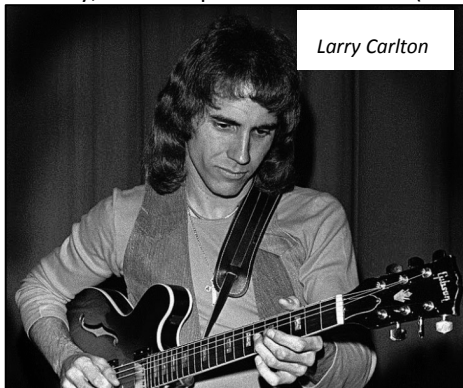
Then, after Becker’s snaky arpeggios at four minutes and forty seconds into the song, “Galactus” a.k.a. Wayne Shorter, unfurls one of the most unforgettable tenor saxophone solos in rock history. Packed with the density of a white-hot dwarf star, Shorter writes his sonic signature on the epidermis of Becker and Fagen’s exquisite musical canvas with his concentrated, Coltranesque solo, which is powerfully pulsated by Steve Gadd’s vivid and volcanic drumming, paralleling Billy Cobham’s thunderous drum work with the Mahavishnu Orchestra. This was jazz fusion in its finest form.

“We had this piece [*Aja*], which had this long modal section,” Fagen proudly told me in my interview with him in 2013 for Wax Poetics magazine. “And we thought, ‘who would be the ideal person for the track?’ And we said, ‘Wayne Shorter.’ On the first try, he said no. But we knew someone who knew him, and he asked him, because he didn’t know who we were. So we sent him the track, and he liked it and decided to come in. And he nailed it on the first take. That was one of the best moments for us.”



This is the same Wayne Shorter who co-founded the jazz fusion group Weather Report, and the same Wayne Shorter who played with Miles Davis and Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers. And there was also the keyboardist/vibraphonist Victor Feldman, who delivered a gorgeous, stop-time solo on “Black Cow.” He also played with Miles in the ‘60s. And there were other jazz stars on *Aja*: keyboardists Don Grolnick and Joe Sample of the Crusaders; guitarists Larry Carlton, Dean Parks, and Steve Khan;

drummer Bernard “Pretty” Purdie (who hailed from nearby Elkton, MD), bassist Chuck Rainey, and saxophonists Tom Scott (on lyricon) and Pete Christlieb, (who delivered an



impassioned, one-take, swinging solo on “Deacon Blues”) to name a select few.

This is the source of Steely Dan’s signature sound: their incorporation of the jazz aesthetic in every aspect of their already broad musical conception, from the time they met at Bard College in 1967. With this realization, I dug into the crates of their early hits with a new divining rod that could detect their jazzy nuggets. I heard their perfect, note-for-note take on Duke Ellington’s 1927 classic “East St. Louis Toodle-oo” from

Pretzel Logic (1974). I learned that the intro of “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number” was inspired by pianist oracle Silver’s “Song for My Father.” I dug Phil Woods’ Charlie Parker-sweetened, alto saxophone solo on “Doctor Wu” from (1975). I loved Khan’s aquiline guitar lines on “Glamour Profession” from their *Aja* follow-up, *Gaucha* (1980), after which they disbanded for two decades. (Becker moved to Hawaii and Fagen stayed in New York, with both releasing solo projects.)

I was also astonished by Chris Potter’s blistering, nearly four-minute tenor sax solo on “West of Hollywood” from their comeback CD, *Two Against Nature* (2000), which was released twenty years after *Gaucha*.



Their love of jazz extended far back into their childhoods, as Becker and Fagen grew up in New York and New Jersey. Again, from my *Wax Poetics* interview with Fagen:

“Well, my mother was a professional singer when she was young, from the age of five to fifteen. She used to sing from a club in the Catskills. She was a swing singer, although she didn’t stick with it. She sang around the house. So I heard a lot of standards as a kid, which is essentially the life force, the *lingua franca* of jazz - aside from original jazz tunes. So I was familiar with most of those tunes. And when I started playing the piano, I picked out those tunes on the piano. And then I had a cousin named Barbara, who was older than I - she was a good-lookin’ chick! She used to go into the Village and go to clubs. She actually became friendly with Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, and so on. And she had a great record collection. When we’d go over her house, she’d bring us down to her basement and play those great records: Thelonious Monk and Johnny Griffin live, and so on. I was nine or ten. I loved it, and I listened to a lot of radio broadcasts out of New York. That’s how I got into jazz.”

And through the years, jazz musicians got into them, as evidenced by Ahmad Jamal’s bumpin’ version of “Black Cow,” from his album *One* (1978), Woody Herman’s big), and band take on the song “Aja” on his LP *Chick, Donald, Walter & Woodrow* (1978), and bassist Christian McBride’s ebullient rendition of the same song for his CD *Sci-Fi* (2000),

as well as the long out-of-print LP *Hoops McCann Plays the Music of Steely Dan* (1988). Today, to paraphrase Bud Powell, the scene has changed: a generation of young musicians, some of whom weren’t even born when *Aja* was released, play with the same, jazz-centric fluency that made Steely Dan unique, including the sidemen who played on their live gigs which resumed in the ’90s. I reviewed their performance in October 2016 at New York’s Beacon Theatre, where they perform effortlessly blending Grant Green, T-Bone Walker, and Johnny ‘Guitar’ Watson into his own silken sound. At one point in their greatest hits segment, during Becker’s banter on “Hey Nineteen,” he said, motioning toward Fagen, “Can you believe I’ve known this guy for fifty years?”

The answer is an emphatic yes. And their music is all here - just like the song says - all done up, in blueprint blue.

- Eugene Holley Jr.
September 2017
newmusicusa.org

...time out



Like many of you, Neil and Susan Sass enjoyed the popcorn at Jazz Jambalayas. They want it back and have agreed to spearhead a fundraising campaign. Their goal is \$200. MOJO recently received an anonymous donation from Network for Good (*thank you, whoever you are!*) that will match their fundraising effort.

Consider making a tax-deductible donation to the MOJO POPCORN CHALLENGE. Contact Neil or Susan by phone (251.861.2313) or email Neil (ns7277@gmail.com) | Susan (sbruchis@gmail.com) for more information and to make your commitment.

