

ROY HARGROVE with D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, Q-Tip & Common

# DOWNBEAT

Jazz, Blues &

Dave  
Brubeck

Bill Frisell

DRUMMERS:  
The Musical  
Side of the Beat

Arto Lindsay

## Steely DAN

*The Ironic Renegades*

[www.downbeat.com](http://www.downbeat.com)



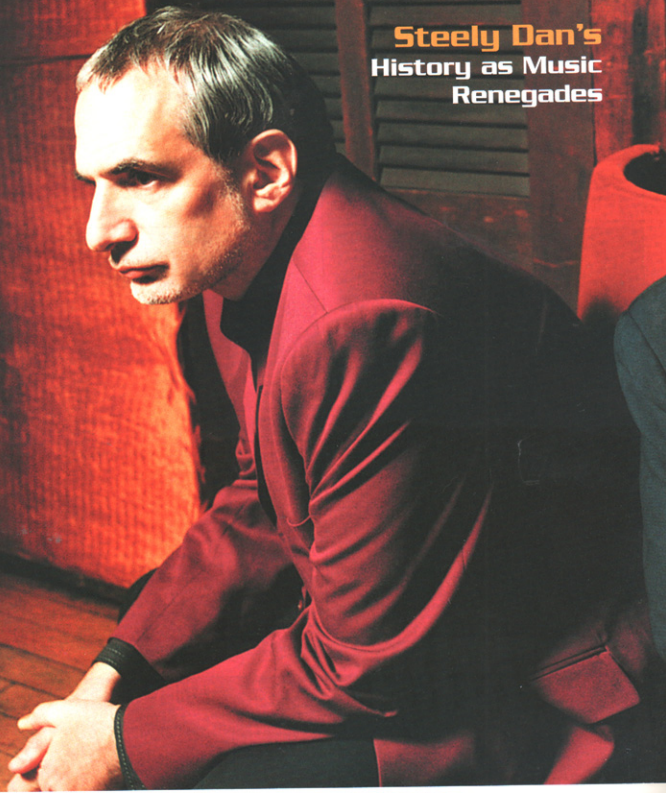
June 2003

U.K. £3.50

26th Annual  
**Student**  
*Music Awards*

# ***REELIN' In The Ears***

**Steely Dan's**  
History as Music  
Renegades





By Josef Woodard ■ Photo by Danny Clinch

Call it one of those triple-take moments, when a jarring moment of disorientation quickly yields to the warm glow of self-assurance. There they were, sneaky pop sophisticates Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, from the venerable musical experiment called Steely Dan, keeping company and time with Marian McPartland on her "Piano Jazz" radio program. What are pop musicians doing on this show? Quickly, the thought is amended: The Fagen-Becker braintrust has, more successfully than anyone else in the past 30-plus years, brought back to life pop's close kinship to jazz.

Fagen and McPartland have a low-key tête-à-tête on "Mood Indigo," and McPartland is invited to play, says Fagen, an E "or notes of your choosing" on the ode to stock market meltdown "Black Friday" to close the show. And all is right with the world. It's part of the peculiar pretzel logic by which this strangely successful American band has operated.

Paradoxes come freely in the Steely Dan saga, starting with the fact that the group is not a group, per se, but a partnership at the center of an ever-shifting constellation of ace musicians, on stage and in the studio. Market-wise, they don't really belong, spiritually and idiomatically, to such radio formats as "smooth jazz," "classic rock" and "soft rock." Yet, there they are. They also aren't a product of the late-'60s counter-culture implosion, but rather a reaction against it, a throwback to the pre-rock & roll dumbing-down, to the era when popular music was about Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, clever, innuendo-laden lyrics and 32-bar song forms expanded to allow ample room for improvisation.

Forget about their long-standing commercial success or their sneak attack 2000 Album of the Year Grammy for *Two*

*Against Nature*. Basically, Fagen and Becker, enlightened musical misfits, have pulled off a palace coup on pop music history. And they're in full swing again. Two years ago, they broke off the retirement they announced after 1979's *Gauche* with *Two Against Nature*, showing them to be in top form, picking up where they left off. Ditto the brilliant new album, *Everything Must Go* (Reprise).

Dressed in shades of basic black and lounging on the sofa of a Santa Monica, Calif., hotel suite this spring, Fagen and Becker look relaxed, ready to talk about their latest "product." Before the interview, Becker shows off a plastic figurine of a howling coyote on the end table, procured in a trip to Las Vegas the prior weekend. "He's going to be a mascot for a new fusion label," Becker smirks.

This hotel, a stone's throw from the ocean, could be accessible to those following the directions of the opening line from their tune "Babylon Sisters": "Drive west on Sunset to the sea." Of course, that was a metaphor for escape, or desire thereof. This is business. Show business, as unusual.

Talking to the pair, pals since the '60s, in the same room at the same time can be an entertaining and slippery process. They ricochet off each other's comments and, as has long been their wont, bask in the ironic. I suggest that their fiendishly clever blend of art and commerciality has enabled them to get away with murder.

**Becker:** Well, it all depends on what we get away with this next time. We're waiting to see.

**Fagen:** They judge you by your last murder around here.

**Becker:** That's right. We're more interested in the next killing than the last one.

**Fagen:** We haven't experienced any real backlash yet for all this, so who knows? It could pop up at any time.

I mention that their new album has effectively infected my mind.

**Becker:** That's a good sign. Not for you, but for us.

**Fagen:** We only have sympathy for you. We've already lived with it for a couple of years.

**Becker:** Yes, we've already succumbed to that horrible state, and, as they say, misery loves agony, so welcome to the club.

Returning to Los Angeles, even now, is a bit akin to returning to the scene of a crime and a whirlwind period in the '70s when the two East Coasters lived here, and saw their star rise and explode. They returned to New York in 1978 and recorded *Gauche*. Fagen

remained there; Becker has been living in Hawaii since the mid '80s. L.A. is just a geographical halfway point.

Back in 1978, Becker says, "We'd exhausted most of the possibilities out here for people like ourselves, so we figured maybe we'd go back where the grass was greener. When we moved out to L.A., we immediately started writing about all these New York-y, Damon Runyon-esque era characters. When we moved back to New York, we immediately started writing songs



about L.A. types of Damon Runyon-esque characters."

The pair has long relished their roles as men at least slightly out of time and place, with an outsider status that lubed their creative machinery. Literature, jazz, r&b and science fiction were among their obsessions when they met at Bard College in the '60s and teamed up to indulge their strange ideas about songsmithing.

By the time they headed West to pursue a life as songwriters, they were aliens in the strange land of Los Angeles. "It was a cold winter right before we moved here," Fagen says. "We'd never been out of the New York area. It was before there was a punk movement and before there was even a dance movement. There was just nothing going on. So we were glad to get out here."

They arrived in L.A. as staff writers for

ABC/Dunhill, hired by Gary Katz. "That was the du jour reason we were here, but we knew we weren't any good at that before we got here," Fagen explains. "Once in awhile, we came up with some surefire music for a hit song and then would just destroy it with these lyrics that no one would ever do."

Steely Dan was formed, its name swiped from William Burroughs' reference to a marital aid in *Naked Lunch*, and quickly hit the hit parade with unusually smart pop tunes like "Reeling In The Years" and "My Old School," but also slipping in jazz tracks like a circus-y take on Duke Ellington's "East St. Louis Toodle-oo."

After their '70s run, an extended "retirement" from the studio saw the release of only three solo albums—Fagen's *The Nightfly* (1982) and *Kamakiriad* (1993), and Becker's *11 Tracks Of Whack* (1994). After laboring and fretting over *Two Against Nature*, the pair seem to have relaxed their way back into action with *Everything Must Go*, much of which was recorded live with a consistent rhythm section. With the last album, they had the cachet of it being "the first in 20 years." As for the latest, Becker grins, "I wish we had a spiel or a song-and-dance that was as catchy as that." Fagen says, "To call this our 'second one in 22 years' just doesn't have much of a ring to it."

If the album title seems like a zen reference to the value of letting go of material things, à la George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass* or George Benson's "Everything Must Change," think again. Songs like the opener, "The Last Mall," "Godwhacker" (about an assassination attempt on God), and the gospel-tinged "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy"-like title track contain a satirically apocalyptic resonance, albeit with upbeat, even life-affirming musical trappings.

"We didn't have to go too far out of our way to get to that, by the way," Fagen admits. Becker says, "We could make a compilation right now of apocalyptic songs from all of our albums."

September 11, which came in the midst of the album's working process in Manhattan, had its impact, as well. "We were reminded anew of the impermanence of certain, seemingly permanent things, the erosion of order into chaos, and so on," Becker says.

As with most of their work, the songs firmly dodge pop clichés and play out like slinky, Cubist short stories, full of nefarious liaisons and suggestions of dark deeds. The songs are peopled with rogues, perverts and romantics. Both Fagen and Becker get in tasty solos—Fagen with two hot, smart synth solos and Becker in his slinky jazz-

blues style guitar.

One of the album's more deliciously devious treats is "Pixeleen," a song about virtual sex, among other things, which has an infectious three-syllable hook reminiscent of standards like "Tangerine" and Cole Porter's "I Love You." This track also has the album's loosest ending, with the band seeming to dissolve rather than end in any declarative way. "Bill Charlap played piano on that track," Becker says, "and as I recall, he played something surprising."

"It freaked everyone out so much, they stopped playing," Fagen says. Becker finishes the story: "[Bill] sort of dictated an ending, and everyone just sat with it. For most of our charts, there's no charted ending. They're intended to fade out in some way. Every once in awhile, we get something that falls apart in a nice way. That was one of them."

They called the jazz pianist in for late-breaking additions to the recording project when regular pianist Ted Baker couldn't make it. Fagen says that Charlap was "over-qualified. We went to see him play once, and he said, 'If you guys ever need a piano player, I'd love to play with you.' So there we were, months later."

I played Charlap the ending in question over the phone. At the tail end of the coda, he plays a lavish upward keyboard flourish that seems to disarm the rhythm section. After hearing it, Charlap says, "the Kramer etudes," and plays the exercise on his piano. "I remember that now. I'm glad I had that in my fingers at the time."

Charlap has been a longtime Steely Dan admirer. "One of the things that makes them so appealing is the clarity," he says. "Everything is in its place. The music has space to breathe. You can hear all of the things going on at once. Every part is like the movement of a Swiss watch. You'll hear that, too, in Miles' great groups, and in the Ellington orchestra. You can hear the whole band playing. It's not muddy. It's not just clarity, but little details."

The track "Everything Must Go" is also distinguished by the open, Coltrane-ish introduction led by saxist Walt Weiskopf, nicely showcased on this album. Once again, jazz rules on the album's finale.

Studio chops rank high on the list of attributes in this "band." At some point in the band's history, the "band" part of the equation outlined its usefulness. Touring had lost its charm, not to mention profitability. More importantly, Fagen and Becker made the miraculous discovery that they could tap the existing resources of studio musicians just down the hall. Studio

musicians and star guest soloists were increasingly part of Steely Dan's musical fabric, and the studio itself was a new creative hang zone. The live forum would have to wait for almost two decades, when they rediscovered the joys of live playing in 1993.

Fagen remembers the epiphany in the mid '70s, while observing sessions in their label home, ABC/Dunhill's in-house studio. "We got to see other records being made, which were super-commercial pop tracks," he says. "We'd seen a little of that



in New York when we worked in the Brill Building, but they did it in a kind of assembly line way. To do that, though, they needed good bands, so they had these great studio musicians. They seemed to come more out of folk, country and guitar-pop music, except that they were great.

"We saw them and thought, these guys could do whatever we told them to do, and they could do it really well."

"I remember going into the studio they had there," Becker adds. "Donald would ask, 'How come they've got a better drummer than we have?' We used to see cases in the hall and saw Victor Feldman's name. I said, 'Wow, Victor Feldman's in there, from Miles Davis and Cannonball Adderley.' We went in there and Victor Feldman was the tambourine player sitting

there with headphones doing something silly." Under their watch, Feldman's session line included playing on hip Steely Dan tunes like "Everyone's Gone To The Movies," "Home At Last" and "Hey Nineteen."

They honed this new studio-intensive process on the albums *Katy Lied* and *Royal Scam*, but reached an artistic zenith with the album *Aja*, released in 1976 to great critical kudos and commercial sizzle. Of that album's new heights, Becker explains that, "We just had really good bands then, for one thing, and the guys were good at making up good parts."

"That record benefited by a change of style and a base style that studio musicians played in," Fagen remembers. "More jazz chords were coming into it, and there was a little bit more of that other trail I was talking about. There was much more delicate playing, like with Steve Gadd, with stuff from jazz, but it wasn't really jazz. It had a different rhythmic feel."

Without a doubt, jazz has been part of Fagen and Becker's artistic agenda from the beginning, even if not stated in any manifesto-style way. Along the way, they've borrowed from the best, too, expertly referencing touches from Horace Silver's "Song For My Father" in the intro to "Ricky, Don't Lose That Number" to Keith Jarrett, circa his *My Song* album, for the intro to the intricate "Gaucho." It was more than just an empty gesture that the pair was given honorary doctorates from the Berklee College of Music last year.

"We were both jazz fans coming out of our childhoods," Becker says. "Even before we met, we were listening to jazz radio and buying jazz records."

Among other little cultural coups, Steely Dan has pulled off a veritable esthetic Trojan Horse effect, in terms of slipping jazz elements into the public ear. Apart from the harmonic language and melodic twists, they've insisted on creating key spaces for jazz solos. The list of great solos in the Dan discography has to include Phil Woods' boppish grace on "Doctor Wu" (*Katy Lied*); Larry Carlton's classic guitar solo on "Kid Charlemagne" (*Royal Scam*), which guitarists learn note-for-note; Wayne Shorter's elliptical sax, alongside Gadd's poetic drum solo on "Aja"; and Pete Christlieb's definitive tenor bravura on "Dear Old Blues" (also from *Aja*).

Fast forward 20 years to *Two Against Nature*, and we find two more compelling solos, both by saxist Chris Potter, framing the album's program. Potter packs neatly

formed expressivity into his solo on "Gaslighting Abbie," and then pulls off an extended, exploratory solo on "West Of Hollywood" over a looping, swerving set of chords. It literally takes the song, and the album, "out."

Potter first worked with the band during its mid-'90s tours, and bowed out to pursue his own growing career, with Dave Holland and on his own. He got the call to do the *Two Against Nature* sessions years later, and put in his day's work, not knowing what would make the cut. (Potter also appears in the horn section of *Everything Must Go*.)

Potter was shocked upon hearing the album to find so much of his work intact, especially on "West Of Hollywood." "I had no idea it would continue that long," he said. "I was just messing around. You figure, after a certain point, they're going to fade it out."

Potter explains that the solo is actually "a composite of a bunch of different things. After doing a whole bunch of passes, we started messing around. I remember one of them said, 'Why don't you think about Ben Webster on this next pass?' I tried to make something up. On the next pass, they said, 'Why don't you think about Coltrane's sheets of sound.' And that's a lot of what they put on there.

"When I hear it back, it seems that I'm playing many more notes than I might have chosen to do if I was just going to do a crafted kind of pop solo. That's why I quote 'Giant Steps' at the end."

Potter recalls those sessions involving "a process in the studio that I dug. They made sure that I heard the tune first and also that I saw the lyrics, so I had in my head an idea of what it was about. It was just back-and-forth in a constructive way. They have a reputation for being picky in the studio, but in my experience, that pickiness had a point, which I appreciated."

Somehow, all these years later, Steely Dan is now continuing its saga. The entity Becker and Fagen created has impacted mainstream culture while staying true to its stubborn and idiosyncratic self.

"That is an admirable thing," Becker says. "We've been lucky to have both of those things. We were naïve enough to think that what we wanted to do was some sort of shoe-in. Luckily, things worked out as well as they have. From the context of the music business as it exists now, think of how impossible it would be for us to slip through the cracks the way we did back then. Nobody was paying much attention."

Fagen confesses, with his naturally sly grin, "our scheme worked much better than we intended. I'll say that. We thought it was going to be very brief, at best." **DB**

**mike marshall & chris thile**  
**INTO THE CAULDRON**

Mike Marshall is best known for his work in David Grisman's Quintet and the critically acclaimed Edgar Meyer/Sony Classical super-group releases *SHORT TRIP HOME* and *UNCOMMON RITUAL*. Chris Thile is best known as one of the best mandolin players on the planet and a major creative force in the progressive acoustic band NICKEL CREEK. This all-instrumental disc runs the gamut from Bach to Charlie Parker to Brazilian Choro to a mandolin interpretation of an 200+ year-old British fiddle tune—in a nutshell, this music falls under the moniker of INNOVATIVE ACOUSTIC INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC.

mikemarshall.net  
nickelcreek.com

Available at fine record stores everywhere.  
For a free catalog or to order by mail, call 1-800-999-1455,  
or visit us at [sugarhillrecords.com](http://sugarhillrecords.com).

**ARBORS RECORDS** **WHERE CLASSIC JAZZ LIVES ON**

**The Ruby Braff Quartet**  
with Dick Hyman, Howard Alden, and Jake Hanna  
*watch what happens...*

**John Bunch: A Special Alliance**  
with Dave Green (bass) and Steve Brown (drums). This is part of the Arbors Piano Series. "John Bunch is a man who was once dubbed the Fred Astaire of the piano... Few pianists possess a surer grasp of rhythm... The result is a devastating performance, full of wit, power and grace. And there are constant surprises in the programming." Give Davis, who writes on arts for The London Times.

**The Ruby Braff Quartet with Dick Hyman, Howard Alden and Jake Hanna: Watch What Happens**  
— Ruby Braff shines again as he reunites with Dick Hyman for another swinging session ably abetted by Howard Alden and Jake Hanna with a vocal appearance by Daryl Sherran  
ARCD 19259

**John Bunch: A Special Alliance**  
ARCD 19272

Price for CD is \$17 postpaid. VISA, MasterCard, Discover accepted.  
Free catalog: Arbors Records – 2189 Cleveland Street,  
Suite 225, Clearwater, FL 33765  
Phone: (800) 299-1930 Fax: (727) 466-0432  
E-mail: [mrd@gate.net](mailto:mrd@gate.net) Internet: [www.arborsrecords.com](http://www.arborsrecords.com)  
U.S. and Canada distribution by Allegro.  
Arbors Records are available at leading record stores. **ALLEGRO**