

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Scene

YOUR ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

MUSIC

Jazz
singer-guitarist
John Pizzarelli
brings his bossa
nova beat to the
Lobero Theatre

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MARCH 31-APRIL 6, 2006



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STEELY DON

Pop's reluctant star, Donald Fagen,
tickles the airwaves once again

MOVIES OPENING THIS WEEK: "Ice Age: The Meltdown" • "Basic Instinct 2" • "ATL" • "Slither" BEGINNING ON PAGE 22

One with nature

By Josef Woodard
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

Many an important pop artist is more complicated than their neatly crafted public persona lets on, in terms of being either shallower or more pocked with dark corners than the public image suggests. In the case of Donald Fagen, who plays the Arlington tonight with his band — part of his very first solo tour — the plot was thick from the outset.

A reluctant pop star who crafted the fiendishly intelligent band Steely Dan with his college pal Walter Becker, Fagen has always loved confounding pop traditions, while still getting quirky-catchy songs into the American living room. Fagen fills songs with literary left turns, Cubist-style storylines, wordplay and inventive innuendos, jazz chords and solos, and other sophisticated touches one might have expected would keep the band under the radar.

They should have been a brainy cult band. But no: the public love affair continues to this day. Fagen's current single

HALF OF THE DYNAMIC DUO BEHIND STEELY DAN, RELUCTANT FAGEN TALKS ABOUT HIS NEW SOLO ALBUM, HIS MUCH-DISCUSSED AND HOW THE PHRASE 'SEVERED HEADS' FITS INTO A ROM



AR DONALD
ATER'S BLOCK.
SONG



"H Gang," from his new solo album "Morph the Cat," tickles the airwaves, and past work can be heard daily on such disparate radio formats as classic radio and smooth jazz.

Steely Dan took a break from the record shelves for about 20 years, following 1980's "Gaucho." They re-emerged with an inspired bang in the 21st century, with the Grammy-winning "Two Against Nature," followed by another jewel, "Everything Must Go." Part of the pleasure in hearing Steely Dan again was the band's sense of high cerebral adventure at a time when the musical art form of pop had grown fairly artless.

When last we saw Fagen in Santa Barbara, it was at the Santa Barbara Bowl late in 2003 with Steely Dan. When he appears tonight, it will be on his first tour ever without Becker, his soul mate (if that's not too twee a term for them) and partner in song crime. "Morph the Cat," Fagen's third solo album in about 25 years, bears many classic Steely Dan qualities, and many of the same musicians.

By now, Fagen has settled on his musical language and he's sticking to it, to the continuing delight of his multitudes of rabid fans (present company included). Fagen, normally of the let-the-music-speak-for-itself disposition, recently spoke on the phone from Denver, warming up to the interview process more than in the past.

QUESTION: Your solo albums have been more thematic and "conceptual" than Steely Dan albums. To what can we attribute that?

ANSWER: Well, it's intentional, I think. The first one, "The Nightly," in a bunch of songs I had, I noticed that two or three that I had were about growing up in the '30s and early '40s, so I just continued writing on that theme and ended up with this autobiographical type of album.

I had this idea for this kind of science fiction album, "Kamakiriad." I noticed, when I started doing it, it was working out like a lot of science-fiction does: In writing about the future, I was actually writing about the present, which was a sort of midlife period I was in at the time. By then, I realized I had to write a third one to cap it off. That's what this new one is essentially about—whatever is left of life when you're 58.

Q: Well, I hope plenty...

A: Yeah, me, too. Although it's not just a "personal endings" type of things. Being a New Yorker and being there through 9/11 and the experi-



IN CONCERT

DONALD FAGEN

When: 7:30 tonight
Where: Arlington Theatre, 1317 State St.
Cost: \$39.50 to \$76.50
Tickets: 563-8700

ence of all that, and just the general state of things in the country, that had a lot to do with it, too.

Q: Do you see the solo

albums as a trilogy, per se?
A: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I talked to Warner Brothers about releasing a box set of all three in the summer.

Q: There has been much discussed about your writer's block for much of the '80s and '90s, as if it verged on the tragic. Could it also be viewed as a sign that you take songwriting seriously?

A: What happened was that I made "The Nightly" record (in 1982), and after that, I was working every day, but just not liking what I was doing. I was in my 30s. "The Nightly," although it may seem like I wasn't really exposing that much because there was a persona involved, was quite autobiographical for me. I pulled back and, on a conscious level, I had a weird reaction to that.

I went to a shrink for a couple of years and had some therapy. Also, I just ran out of that kind of youthful energy that was driving things. I had this suspended adolescence, because I was in a band and nothing happened to me except being in the studio and touring around. There's the old joke about musicians not maturing. I was essentially still 17.

So I actually just had to live for a few more years before I had anything else to write about. That was essentially what the writer's block was. It wasn't so much a writer's block, but more that the person who had written that earlier stuff had just died (laughs). That's really what it was.

Q: On "Morph the Cat," elements of fiction and storytelling are especially noticeable.

Narratives and characters jump out of the songs. Has the inner storyteller surfaced more this time?

A: Maybe it's a little more linear. I think all three albums have little stories, but maybe this one has more development. Maybe I'm getting better at it or something.

Q: You studied literature. Would you have gone into writing if songwriting hadn't consumed you?

A: Waller and I have done some writing for Web sites and things, mainly humorous type stuff. I've done some short humor things. I don't know if I've got the novelist thing happening. I think I have some deficiencies in that regard, but I do like writing pieces and stuff like that—short story type things. I don't know if I even have that much discipline.

What I always liked was those Baudelaire prose poems, those little impressionistic pieces. Probably I could do something like that. I'm not good on plot. In fact, there's something offensive about plot.

Q: And yet we get strong hints of plots in these songs like in "H Gang." That's the most plot-driven pop song on the radio right now.

A: Yeah, that almost has a beginning, middle and an end to it. Maybe I can have that erased from my record. I'm having that recalled, actually.

Q: It's too late now. Once you have a hit, it's a matter of public record. You just have to collect the royalties and grin and bear it.

A: If you can find them. In the music business, the way they operate is that if you can find the money, then you can have it.

Q: Another new one, "The Great Pagoda of Funn" is a romantic love song, but maybe the first ever to include the phrase "severed heads."

A: I would imagine it's the first. Although I think all love songs from now on should have the phrase "severed heads." I remember a headline in the New York Post which read "Headless Man Found in Topless Bar." So it's not like it never occurs.

Q: Is that a good example of how the dark humorist in you blends with the romantic?

A: Right. When I was a kid, you'd go to the movies and there were always these big epic movies advertised as some love story set against an epic historical moment, like

the Russian Revolution or the Peloponnesian War or something like that. Maybe it's in that tradition, like Spartacus. Think of it like that.

Q: In "Brite Nightgown," you have updated the grim reaper concept, while nodding to W.C. Fields, right?

A: Exactly. I remember reading this biography of W.C. Fields, and, around the house, in conversation, he used to say, "Until the fellow with the bright nightgown comes around, I'll be OK." That sounded like a great idea for a song. Each of the verses is based on something I heard about or happened to someone I knew, involving a near-death experience.

Q: That song, like many you've put out, has an extended coda. You latch onto the groove and let it ride into the sunset.

A: Yeah, I like a nice dance

“ I'd like to hear something on the radio that people can listen to that doesn't keep making them dumber and dumber.”

Donald Fagen

groove. If there's something good happening, I let it go. It might be self-indulgent on my part. Actually, that's been mentioned to me in the studio by people.

What happened was that (guitarist) Wayne Krantz started playing over this tag, and he was playing great. I was just loath to cut out a lot of the good stuff he was playing. I listened to it quite a bit while we were mixing and it just didn't seem boring to me, so I left a lot of it in. My wife thinks it's boring.

Q: This does point to a kind of miraculous ability you have to

reach or appease different factions and audience types, and radio formats.

A: I'm not looking to appease anyone. It happens the way it happens. On the other hand, they won't play me on whatever the equivalent is of what Top 40 is now. I'm not appeasing everyone. I'm too old and too something-or-other.

Q: Would you like to make your presence known in that world?

A: At this point, it doesn't matter that much. But it seems to me that there's such bad music

around, even if it isn't me, I'd like to hear something on the radio that people can listen to that doesn't keep making them dumber and dumber. But that's not going to happen anytime soon.

Q: You're blissfully detached from that popular culture scene, and just go about your business, kept alive by a strong following. Is that fair to say?

A: I am detached, but I don't know if it's that blissfully. I'm resigned (laughs).

Q: You have managed to sneak more jazz elements into the public's face than any other pop musician. Was that a mission from the beginning?

A: No. Walter and I, just by intuition, just put into the songs all the stuff we liked, which was having fun with the language and jazz chords and some improvisation. We had some fun with jazz arranging, because we were both big Duke Ellington fans,

and we like some elements of rhythm and blues and some elements, even, of '60s rock 'n' roll.

We like certain kinds of humor and also things that have some connection with the time we live in, because without that, it wouldn't have much meaning. That was important, too, I'd say. We listened to Bob Dylan, who showed that pop music could be connected to something real. All the stuff we liked, we would put in the songs.

I don't think we ever said, "Hey, we're going to do this" or had any kind of manifesto. We just did it because it was fun.

Q: Well, you've built a pretty substantial body of work for just having fun.

A: It just worked out that way. When we got inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Walter, being the wit that he is, said it wasn't for a body of work, but for our bodies that work after all these years. ■