

# steely dan

By  
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## performers

### THE STEELY DAN ADVANCED PLACEMENT EXAM

*Explain the importance of each of the following in the far-reaching and fractured worldview of Steely Dan:*  
(ANSWERS APPEAR AT END OF ESSAY.)

1. Beat writer William S. Burroughs.
2. A root-beer float.
3. Annandale, New York.
4. Sixties LSD wizard Owsley.
5. Precious-metal dentures.
6. Early jazz trumpeter Bubber Miley.
7. The University of Alabama football team.
8. Nineteenth-century French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans.
9. Legendary saxophonist Wayne Shorter.
10. October 25, 1929.

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HAPSODICALLY, and revealingly, Walter Becker, Steely Dan's cofounder, recently described paradise: "It's the club where all the jazz greats who are dead still play. Ellington and Monk and Coltrane and Parker, and it's the original music and the old arrangements and the original styles, and there are beautiful waitresses and cheap beer." Virtual as Becker's venue of choice may be, it houses the stuff that Steely Dan are made of.

Steely Dan: Donald Fagen (left) and Walter Becker







**D**URING THE SEVENTIES, an era given to outrageous gestures and 4/4 thunder, Steely Dan taught rock to swing. With pointed wit, intelligence and saber-toothed sarcasm, they delivered shrewd, jazz-infused hits, rife with smooth, sophisticated harmony and syncopated, finger-popping rhythms. "We want that ongoing flow, that lightness, that forward rush of jazz," Becker announced in 1974. "I'm attracted to music that frightens me - like Coltrane's tone on the saxophone," echoed cofounder Donald Fagen.

When Steely Dan arrived in 1972, horn-fronted bands (Blood, Sweat & Tears, Chicago) and fusion's first wave (Miles Davis, Weather Report) had already prospected the territorial overlap of rock and jazz. But none did it like the Dan. No other outfit sifted a wider range of influences nor elevated the music to a more literate level. They seemed to speak in code, coming on as rock's English majors gone beatnik, penning dark, street-real songs of dislocation ("Daddy Don't Live in That New York City No More") and condemnation ("Show Biz Kids"). Their lyrics bounced from Bukowski realism ("Your black cards can make you money/So you hide them when you're able") to biblical parable ("In the land of milk and honey/You must put them on the table"). Their very name referenced a dynasty of dildos in that mystic bohemian bible, *Naked Lunch*.

Irreverent, ironic rockers humbled before the saints of jazz, Steely Dan have always embraced paradox. They were cynical New York natives whose well-crafted sound symbolized Seventies California. Studio craftsmen who forsook the stage yet sought the improvised charge of live performance. Songwriters who aspired to the pop tradition of Leiber and Stoller and Phil Spector yet glorified social misfits and desperate malcontents, faded hipsters and disposable messiahs. (Jerry Leiber once said their music reminded him of German art music.)

"Our music scares me more than anybody else's," declared Fagen. "The combination of the words with the music - like a cheerful lyric and a sad or menacing melody, or vice versa - I find that irony frightening."

Keyboardist/singer Fagen and guitarist Becker are the double helix that defined Steely Dan. "When they're in the same room at the same time," noted longtime Dan guitarist Denny Dias, "it's like one person with two brains. They usually finish each other's sentences."

Becker and Fagen shared much from the outset, growing up in New York City's expansive suburbs (Westchester, New York, and Passaic, New Jersey, respectively). They first crossed paths at Bard College in upstate New York, where they became the core of a small group of musicians (including a young



Chevy Chase on drums) and recognized a kindred spirit in each other. "We clicked on every level," Fagen recalled. "We listened to the same jazz stations. We liked the same books . . . the way we defined ourselves." A lasting partnership was born.

Following school - Fagen graduated (senior thesis: Herman Hesse) while Becker was asked to leave ("I was on an accelerated program") - the pair stumbled into the Brill

Building office of Jay and the Americans while searching for songwriting work. They were hired, first to compose songs (Barbra Streisand's "I Mean to Shine" was a rare early sale) and then to perform with Jay and his oldies group. Becker and Fagen fit uncomfortably with the group; they insisted on being introduced onstage as "Gus Mahler and Tristan Fabiani." Salary renegotiations hastened their departure.

Determined to be part of a group performing its own songs, the duo responded to a *Village Voice* ad (reading, "Must have jazz chops - no hang-ups," Fagen recollected) placed by Denny Dias. In short order, they consumed the band, with Fagen taking over vocal duties. All the original members but Dias fled as Fagen and Becker's original material proved too demanding. Rehearsals, songwriting sessions and anonymity ensued.

Then the phone rang. Gary Katz, a producer they'd worked with in New York, had recently been hired by ABC Records in Los Angeles. Were they interested in heading west and joining the company as songwriters? (The fact that jazz legend John Coltrane had recorded for ABC could not have been lost on the two.) Katz's plan was to use the staff positions to allow Becker and Fagen to form a band, and they did. Dias followed, Katz hooked up the trio with guitarist Jeff "Skunk" Baxter and drummer Jim Hodder; the first incarnation of Steely Dan was born.

In the waning months of 1972, Steely Dan's debut single, "Do It Again," began to scale the charts. ABC excitedly rushed the band onto the road to open for the Beach Boys, Chuck Berry and Frank Zappa (Zappa hailed their "downer surrealism"). Hit followed Top Forty hit: "Reeling in the Years" in 1973. "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" in 1974. On their third platter - *Pretzel Logic* - the Dan made their knowledge of and reverence for jazz explicit. "Parker's Band" was their homage to Charlie Parker, the alto-sax pio-

neer who sired bebop; "East St. Louis Toodle-oo" was their faithful re-creation of Duke Ellington's early theme song. Years before sampling and other digital recycling techniques, they kicked off "Rikki" with a suave vamp borrowed wholesale from hard-bop piano man Horace Silver.

But the more success - and their management and record companies - pushed Becker and Fagen to tour, the more they resisted. In



1974, weary of constant travel and inconsistent live-sound systems, they stepped on-stage for the last time (that is, until 1993). Steely Dan became a full-time studio project.

Over their next two albums – *Katy Lied* and *The Royal Scam* – their perfectionist reputation began to build. They booked weeks in the studio, experimenting for days on just one track. Trying and retrying each tune with different blends of talent, they juggled L.A.'s best soloists and sessionmen: guitarists Larry Carlton and Rick Derringer, vibraphonist Victor Feldman, vocalist Michael McDonald, saxophonist Phil Woods, bassist Chuck Rainey, drummers Hal Blaine and Jeff Porcaro. Creating behind the studio glass suited them. "It wouldn't bother me at all not to play on my own album," commented Becker in 1977. "We just keep the quality up for ourselves," Fagen added.

Their isolation proved their success. *Aja* was Steely Dan's next, long-awaited release, a yearlong project that "was the best example of what we were trying to do using studio bands," remarked Becker. It hit in late 1977, as Debby Boone, the Bee Gees and Fleetwood Mac sat atop the charts, and sounded like nothing else: a sophisticated fusion of R&B, jazz and funk, boasting intricate vocal harmonies and songs about rebel wannabe's, Hollywood starlets and girls on the run.

Steely Dan's best-selling effort – widely imitated and career defining – *Aja* eventually spent sixty weeks on the charts and yielded three hit singles ("Peg," "Deacon Blues" and "Josie"), reached Number Three and was nominated for a Grammy. Looking back, Fagen notes, "When we first started, we were more writing pop songs of the time . . . but by the time we did *Aja*, we knew more of what we enjoyed doing – our stuff improved."

As the Seventies ended, so did Steely Dan's relationship with ABC and L.A. They released "FM," a soundtrack single, then relocated to the East Coast and signed with MCA, just as their songwriting had begun to orient itself in L.A. "By the time we moved back to New York . . . we immediately started writing lyrics about California," Becker remarked. In 1980, Steely Dan recorded what seemed for many years to be their swan song: *Gauche*, with its Top Ten ode to middle age, "Hey Nineteen." One more hit arrived in 1981 ("Time Out of Mind") and it appeared that the Dan saga had reached its end.

More than a decade of solo projects followed. Fagen recorded the well-received *The Nightfly*, tackled soundtrack projects and wrote about them in a tongue-in-cheek column for *Premiere* magazine. Becker recovered from a debilitating accident and moved to Hawaii. During their long separation, Fagen stayed in touch by sending Becker cocktail napkins signed by their jazz heroes.

In 1992 the pair reunited to work on the New York Rock and Soul Revue (an all-star group performing classic rock and R&B numbers) and Fagen's *Kamakiriad* album. The next year, swept up by the undying demand for Steely Dan, the two assembled the Citizen Steely Dan Orchestra and uncharacteristically returned to the stage amid universal



hoopla and welcome. This time, it made sense and sounded right. They spent the next two years touring, after which Becker's first solo disc, *11 Tracks of Whack*, and the group's first concert recording, *Alive in America*, were released.

In 1998 Steely Dan finally returned to the comfort of the studio. "Barely eighteen years go by," quipped *Rolling Stone* when *Two Against Nature* was released last year. To Dan fans new and old, the long-awaited return proved the group's enduring appeal and sound. The music featured the familiar Steely Dan signature: precise arrangements, swinging, jazz-inflected rhythms, fluid solos and biting lyrics. The album brought Becker and Fagen three Grammys, including best album.

The tally so far: Since 1972, Steely Dan have logged eleven Top Forty singles and ten consecutive Top Forty albums (twelve including Fagen's solo efforts), their songs remain fixtures on most FM formats. Their timeless grooves have been sampled – and continue to inspire party anthems – by hip-hop artists from De La Soul, 3rd Bass and Ice Cube to Lord Tariq and Peter Gunz.

More than thirty years of masterful music making. More than thirty years of accolades, recognition and awards. Yet Steely Dan remain modest before the music and lifestyle that first inspired them. "I'll learn to work the saxophone," Fagen still sings, identifying with the aspiring hepcat of "Deacon Blues," "I'll play just what I feel. . . ." For the caustic song-slingers from the suburbs, a romantic life of improvisation and one-nighters continues to call.

"Drink Scotch whisky all night long  
And die behind the wheel. . . ."

Opposite, top: Fagen (at piano) and Becker; bottom, L to R: Jim Hodder; Becker; Denny Dias, Jeff "Skunk" Baxter and Fagen; Above: Fagen and Becker

#### ANSWERS:

1. Author of *Naked Lunch*, from which Fagen and Becker drew the name Steely Dan.
2. A.k.a. "Black Cow" in many diners, and the title of a song on the album *Aja*.
3. Location of Bard College, attended by – among others – Becker, Fagen, Chevy Chase and Libby Titus (now Mrs. Fagen), and of which Steely Dan sang in "My Old School": "California tumbles into the sea/That'll be the day I go back to Annandale."
4. Protagonist in the song "Kid Charlemagne."
5. A.k.a. gold teeth, as in "Your Gold Teeth," a song appearing on both *Countdown to Ecstasy* and *Katy Lied*.
6. Co-composer with Duke Ellington of "East St. Louis Toodle-Oo," whose solo on the original 1926 recording is replayed note for note by Denny Dias on *Pretzel Logic*.
7. A.k.a. the Crimson Tide, as in the lyric from "Deacon Blues": "They call Alabama the Crimson Tide/Call me Deacon Blues."
8. Author of the novel *Against Nature*, from whence came the album title *Two Against Nature*.
9. Famed for his years with Miles Davis and Weather Report, but in this context, star soloist on the title track to the album *Aja*.
10. A.k.a. Black Friday, the day after the stock market collapsed, leading to the Great Depression. Also the title of Steely Dan's fourth Top Forty hit.