

Live in Amsterdam, 1972





PERFORMERS

Steve Miller

His guitar acumen and songwriting skills
have resulted in a plethora of timeless rock hits.

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

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Admittedly, it's not as dramatic as selling your soul to the devil at the crossroads, but having Les Paul teach you your first chords and learning how to play electric guitar from T-Bone Walker are perhaps even more certain means of attaining musical prowess. That's the route singer-songwriter-guitarist Steve Miller took, starting with the good fortune of being born into an enthusiastically musical family.

"My mother was a very good singer," Miller recalled. "She sang a little bit like Ella Fitzgerald." Her brothers were also musicians – one played violin in the Paul Whiteman Orchestra – but when the Depression hit and the opportunities dried up, they became doctors instead. Yet his uncles only left music behind as a profession: Uncle Dale actually gave Miller his first guitar, "a beautiful little Gibson Archtop, almost like a kid-size, laptop guitar," as he recounted. Miller took to it instantly.

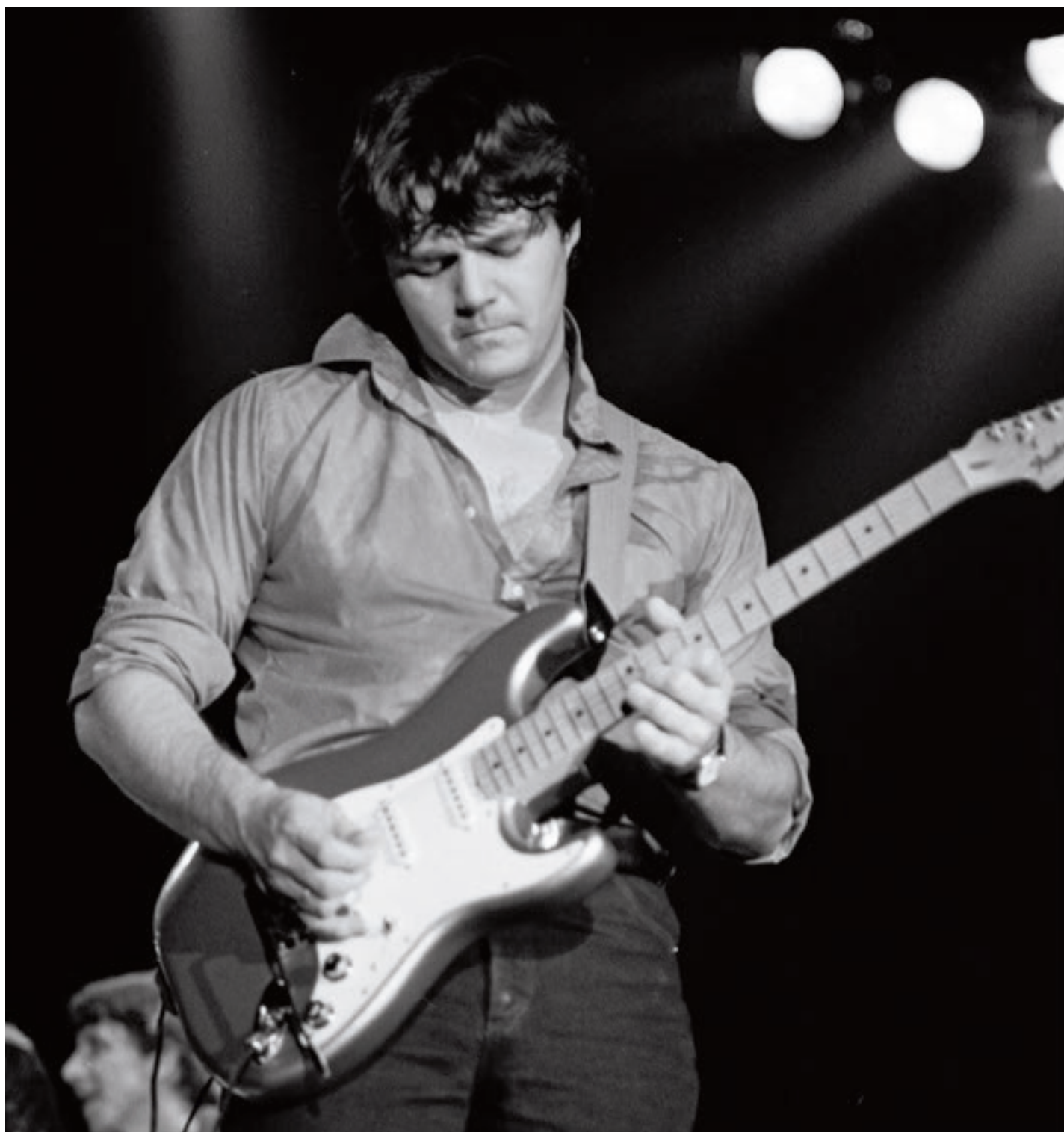
Miller's father, also a doctor, "was very much into electronics," Miller explained. "He loved jazz and gospel and blues. Right at the end of World War II, he had a Magnacorder, which was the professional tape recorder they used at television and radio stations and recording studios. He wanted to record everything." And he had the access to do it. While the family was living in Milwaukee, Miller's father met Les Paul and Mary Ford, who became family friends. "Les and Mary got married at my house," Miller noted. "They spent their honeymoon in my parents' bedroom. He was my godfather."

Miller's family eventually moved to Texas, and a whole new world of music opened up to the boy. "We would go to the Baptist church to see Sister Rosetta Tharpe," he





Clockwise from top:
Steve Miller Band just after signing with Capitol: Jim Peterman, Lonnie Turner, Boz Scaggs, Steve Miller, and Tim Davis (from left), 1967; backstage in 1972; the Goldberg-Miller Blues Band on *Hullabaloo*, 1965.



said. “Then, when I was 9, T-Bone Walker came to our house to play a party. I sat right next to T-Bone all night and watched him play. He taught me how to play the guitar behind my head and do splits. He became a regular at our house, and that’s how I learned to play lead guitar.”

By the time he was a teenager, attending a boys-only private school in Dallas, Miller was a bandleader of significant local repute. Inspired by seeing Ricky Nelson – and, especially, Nelson’s guitarist James Burton – entertain every week on *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, Miller rounded up a group of young players including schoolmate Boz Scaggs and formed a band. Then he made his move. “I thought, ‘Why don’t we mimeograph a letter and just send it to all the local fraternities, sororities, schools, boys clubs, and country clubs saying we have a rock & roll band

and we’re looking for gigs?’” Miller said. “The phone rang off the wall. This was 1956. I was 13. There were no rock & roll bands at the time. Of course, we never said how old we were. I had this band booked every Friday and Saturday night for the entire school year. I eventually taught my older brother how to play bass so that he could drive us. We were so young, but we were really good, and we were making a living. We worked all over Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, but especially around Dallas, where we’d back up Jimmy Reed. I was making three hundred dollars a month, which is like three thousand dollars now. It was crazy!”

Miller applied the same principles of musical quality and acute business sense when he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. “When I got there, they didn’t have any rock bands,” Miller recounted. Scaggs came to



Opposite page: Live in 1982.
This page, from top:
 Performing on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, 1993;
 with first guitar teacher,
 Les Paul, 2005.



Madison as well, and they met keyboardist Ben Sidran and assembled another killer group. After college, Miller heard about the success of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band in Chicago, telling his parents he planned to move there to play blues. “My father wanted to kill me,” Miller recalled. “But my mother said, ‘Here’s a hundred bucks. Go see if you can make it.’” In Chicago, he met keyboardist Barry Goldberg, with whom he formed the Goldberg-Miller Blues Band, soon signed to Epic. They recorded a couple of singles, and in 1965, performed on the TV variety show *Hullabaloo* with the Supremes and the Four Tops.

Although the collaboration with Goldberg didn’t ultimately work out, Miller got an extraordinary education in Chicago. “I must have seen Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf a hundred times in a room the size of my living room,”

he said. He picked up a gig as rhythm guitarist in Buddy Guy’s band but didn’t have the stamina to see it through. “We played from nine at night until four in the morning six days a week,” Miller said. “And Buddy’s rule was that we had to have one shot of bourbon before each set. After about three weeks, I just said, ‘Buddy, I can’t do this.’”

Instead, he moved to San Francisco, where by virtue of his chops and reliability, Miller became a force on the scene, playing the Fillmore more than a hundred times. He pulled a band together and, partly because record companies had become so enamored of San Francisco, he landed a five-album deal with Capitol for nearly a million dollars, a massive figure at the time. The Steve Miller Band released two LPs in 1968: *Children of the Future* and *Sailor*. The latter rose to the Top Forty and included “Living in the

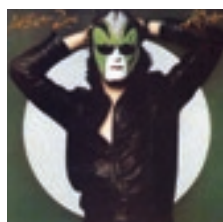
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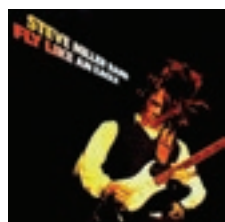
CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE
Capitol 1968



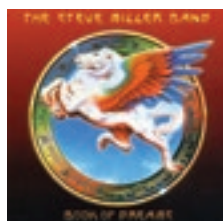
SAILOR
Capitol 1968



THE JOKER
Capitol 1973



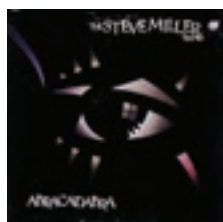
FLY LIKE AN EAGLE
Capitol 1976



BOOK OF DREAMS
Capitol 1977



GREATEST HITS 1974-78
Capitol 1978



ABRACADABRA
Capitol 1982



BINGO!
Space Cowboy/
Roadrunner 2010

U.S.A.,” which became a staple on the album-oriented format of FM radio. *Brave New World*, the band’s third album, rose to Number 22, and included “Space Cowboy,” another FM favorite, and “My Dark Hour,” which Miller recorded in London with Paul McCartney, who is credited as Paul Ramon on the sleeve.

The band’s next two albums, *Your Saving Grace* (1969) and *Number 5* (1970), both cracked the Top Forty, but it seemed as if the band had peaked. Miller was regarded as a credible figure, but none of the first five albums had gone gold. He had to make a decision.

“We had recorded five albums in something like eighteen months,” Miller said. “We had been playing two hundred gigs a year. The band was going through changes. I wasn’t hearing anything from Capitol about a new contract. So I

thought, I’ll get some musicians, go down to L.A. on my own, and produce my own record. I finished it in about nineteen days.” That album was *The Joker*. Suddenly, Capitol was interested again, and the title track became a Number One single. The song is such a curiosity – audiences identified with the easygoing singer of the song and his hazy, lazy self-portrait. “My little secret formula is that a hit single has to have five hooks,” Miller explained. “I made it as cleverly as I could. In the car, driving, people love to sing harmony. There was the slide solo, the whistle, the chorus, the ‘midnight toker’ – a secret language that kids’ parents don’t understand. It had a little bit of everything. And it caught on.”

The song brought Miller a whole new audience that he soon expanded even further. His next two albums, *Fly Like an Eagle* (1976) and *Book of Dreams* (1977), both went multiplatinum, and the hits they generated are among the most recognizable songs in pop music history. Miller’s collaboration with Paul McCartney on “My Dark Hour” might not have taken off, but when Miller repurposed that song’s catchy guitar riff for the title track to “Fly Like an Eagle,” he scored a Number Two single. That was preceded by “Take the Money and Run” and “Rock’n Me,” and followed by “Jet Airliner,” “Jungle Love,” and “Swingtown,” all Top Forty singles. In 1978, Capitol released *Greatest Hits 1974–78*, which has sold more than thirteen million copies. Miller’s last big hit was “Abracadabra,” the title track of his 1982 album. “That song was Number One all over the world,” Miller said, delighting in the fact that Capitol had initially refused to release it as a single in America.

Miller’s string of hits ran out at that point. The eighties were a confusing time for many veteran artists, Miller among them. “I never had a manager,” he explained. “I didn’t take advantage of all my opportunities. If I could do it over again, I would have worked harder to find someone who could have helped grow my business during that time.” In addition, he was exhausted. “That run from 1967 to 1983 was nonstop,” he recalled. “With *Fly Like an Eagle*, we started out in three-thousand-seat theaters, and nine months later we’re playing in football stadiums. Staying on top of all that – writing songs, releasing records, running the band – it was a lot of work. I was pretty much burned.” Consequently, Miller said, “‘Fuck it.’ I bought a fifty-three-foot cruiser, named it *Abracadabra*, and went cruising the Inside Passage for six years.”

When Miller returned to music, he returned to the styles he loved from the very start: blues and jazz standards. “When I was a kid, I didn’t want to be Elvis Presley or any of the pop stars of the time, like Frankie Avalon,” he said. “I wanted to be a musician. I wanted to be like Miles Davis. I wanted to be like Muddy Waters. I wanted to be like T-Bone Walker. I wanted to play real music.”

At this stage of his life, Miller feels more fulfilled than ever. He recently moved to New York, where he is on the Board of Jazz at Lincoln Center and on the Board for the Metropolitan Museum’s Musical Instruments collection. And, of course, he continues to record and perform. “I just had the greatest musical year of my life since the early seventies,” he said. “I’m always excited about my next gig. I just moved to New York, and I get so inspired by the theater and museums and musical performances and readings. That stuff speaks to me and wakes me up. If I can spend the next twenty years of my life striving and working and grinding until that last day, then you get every drop out of life.”

