

“Aja”—Steely Dan (1977)

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Essay by: Brian Sweet (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Becker and Fagen

Steely Dan is the creation of two musicians—Walter Becker and Donald Fagen. “Aja,” Steely Dan’s sixth album in five years, was released in September 1977. It was the culmination of more than a year’s extremely intense work in six different studios in Los Angeles and New York. The numbers and cast of characters involved was astounding: 30 different musicians and singers on only seven songs and less than 40 minutes of music.

The list of session musicians was a veritable “Who’s Who” of top Los Angeles players at that time: drummers Bernard Purdie, Rick Marotta and Steve Gadd; guitarists Larry Carlton, Dean Parks, and Jay Graydon; bassist Chuck Rainey and keyboard players Paul Griffin, Don Grolnick and Victor Feldman. The latter--British born jazzer Victor Feldman--was a hero of Becker and Fagen's, especially for his work on Miles Davis's “Seven Steps to Heaven” album from 1963 and indeed Feldman played on every song on “Aja.”

Time and budget constraints were of no consequence whatsoever; Becker and Fagen just kept working, indulged by the record company, ABC, their producer, Gary Katz, and engineer Roger Nichols. As Fagen had once said, “We want every bar of the thing to be good.” All the basic tracks for “Aja” were recorded in Los Angeles, except “Peg” which was the last song to be recorded and was cut at A&R Studios in New York, where they recorded their previous album, “The Royal Scam,” and developed a rapport with engineer Elliot Scheiner. Nearly all of “Aja” was mixed at A&R by Scheiner. “It’s a real old studio, great echo,” Fagen said.

By this time, when writing the songs for a project, Becker and Fagen often already had some crack session players in mind for a particular part, but sometimes even these expert hired guns couldn’t satisfy their lofty expectations. Each of the songs was recorded countless times with at least six or seven different drummers and/or bands and configurations, the seemingly only constant being Chuck Rainey on bass. Even then, Walter Becker wound up playing bass on “Deacon Blues.” This led to all sorts of rumors about Steely Dan’s difficult personas and legendary studio perfectionism; but, in the Classic Album documentary “Steely Dan: The Making of ‘Aja,’” Dean Parks said their recording methods went “beyond perfection.”

Becker, Fagen and Katz managed to elicit some incredible performances on this album: Steve Gadd’s first take drum solo on the title track; Wayne Shorter’s masterful tenor solo on the same song; Pete Christlieb’s wilting sax solo on “Deacon Blues” and Jay Graydon’s searing guitar solo on “Peg.”

As usual with Becker and Fagen, the lyrics of the seven songs offer a wide and perplexing range of subject matter...from a soft drink reminder of a tortuous relationship breakdown (“Black Cow”) to their own individual take on Homer’s “Odyssey” (“Home at Last”), to their evocation of their adolescent dream life of playing the saxophone in a bebop group that was also an

inspired musical version of Norman Mailer's "The White Negro" ("Deacon Blues"), to the out and out sexual frenzy of "I Got the News"--which Fagen described in a classic piece of understatement as: "basically erotic material, not heavy breathing or anything." And finally, bookending the album, came "Josie," the violent, beautiful and sex-crazed motorcycle gang queen who is just about to be released from prison.

But for all their highfalutin' ideas and intellectual snobbery, Becker and Fagen realized that the songs also had to just sound great to cater to the many thousands of record buyers who, as Becker himself admitted, couldn't "give a tinker's damn what you're singing about." And, of course, sound great they certainly did.

A great song which didn't make the final list for "Aja" was called "Were You Blind That Day," which Fagen described to one journalist at the time as a "third world fantasy." When they needed a song to complete their follow up album, "Gaucho," Becker and Fagen rewrote the lyrics somewhat later, basing the whole thing around Larry Carlton's gut-wrenching guitar solo and renaming it "Third World Man."

The title song of the album came from the wife of an older brother of one of Donald Fagen's high school friends. He had gone to Korea and married a girl called "Aja." In the subsequent 37 years, many people have told Fagen and/or Becker that they have called their child or even a family pet "Aja." For the cover, Becker and Fagen chose a superlatively enigmatic photograph of a Japanese model named Saeko Yamaguchi taken by Hideki Fujii and got permission from the record company to use an expensive process called "liquid lamb" which gave it more depth and gloss.

"Aja" was almost an instant success upon its release on September 23, 1977, and within three weeks was the third best-selling album in the country behind only Fleetwood Mac's "Rumors" and Linda Ronstadt's "Simple Dreams."

The critics were lavish in their praise for "Aja": "Billboard" called it the year's "most polished album" and, in the UK, the "New Musical Express" called it "simply the finest and most sophisticated and intelligent rock album to be released this year."

This came in spite of Becker and Fagen abruptly cancelling, without public explanation, their first tour in three years only days after the release of the album. Another tour was briefly mooted the following year, but did not go forward. Disagreement over a "sliding scale" of fees for the members of their touring band seems to have been the main reason, and Becker and Fagen didn't need another excuse to can the idea altogether.

Though tour support for albums was considered essential, it seemed not to matter as "Aja" kept proving. Three singles were released from the album: the first was "Peg/I Got the News" in November 1977. "Deacon Blues," in April 1978, and "Josie/Black Cow" in August 1978. Between "Deacon Blues" and "Josie," the group scored another hit single, "FM," written and recorded for the film of the same name. Between AM Top 40 plays of these four singles, and FM plays of all seven album tracks, Steely Dan was heard constantly in 1978. Sales were given a further boost that summer when ABC spent \$275,000 on television ads for "Aja."

In 1977, Fagen and Becker were 29 and 27, respectively, and "Aja" proved to be the album in which they unquestionably hit their creative peak. It was the apotheosis of a year's worth of disparate influences: Beat literature, jazz, blues and soul music, science fiction, poetry and a wide ranging interest in the movies.

With the benefit of hindsight, Becker later admitted that "Aja" was "dangerously ambitious." Fagen said he thought it was a "wide range of listening experience." But such success--and

excess--brings with it inevitable and innumerable problems and it took them three years to come up with its follow up, "Gaucho," their last album before a breakup that would last into the '90s.

Brian Sweet is the author of "Reelin' in the Years," the Steely Dan biography, and "The Complete Guide to the Music of Steely Dan." He is a noted Steely Dan archivist and collector.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.