

# The Fragile Virtuosity of Steely Dan

Research Paper for MUSC2342: Music in Action

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13th of October 2023

Since their inception in 1971, Steely Dan have been lauded for their nuanced harmony, sardonic lyrical style, and high-fidelity recordings. Their technical mastery, and attention to detail in the recording process has become something of rock music legend. Well known are stories about the dozens of studio musicians who would come through their studio to lay down a single solo, as recounted in their *Classic Albums* documentary<sup>1</sup>, or their purported invention of the drum machine for their 1980 album *Gaucha* due to their eventual dissatisfaction with all drummers<sup>2</sup>. It is suffice to say that Steely Dan exhibits a sort of virtuosity, at least in the studio. This virtuosity is confirmed by their influences.

Walter Everett links the harmonic and rhythmic structure of Steely Dan to those of the bop tradition citing their extensive use of dense triad extensions, altered chords, and substitutions<sup>3</sup>. Everett draws specific comparison between works of Steely Dan and those of Oscar Peterson and Thelonius Monk noting unusual attention to jazz sensibilities for rock music. This bop influence is confirmed by Fagen in his autobiography where he recounts frequent visits to jazz clubs in Greenwich Village to see jazz virtuosos or “gods” such as Count Basie, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Charles Mingus<sup>4</sup>. The Village would prove inspirational for Fagen on the literary front as well, being heavily influenced by the Beat Generation, even taking the band name “Steely Dan” from William S. Burroughs’ 1959 novel *Naked Lunch*<sup>5</sup>. Classic literature is also an influence, with their reference to Homer’s *Odyssey* in “Home at Last” being a notable example. Donald E. Lavigne extends this to an Odyssean voice that pervades the entirety of *Aja* musically and lyrically<sup>6</sup>. These jazz and

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<sup>1</sup>Steely Dan, *Aja: Classic Albums*, directed by Allen Lewens, interviews by Donald Fagen, Walter Becker, Michael McDonald, and Gary Katz (Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Tingen, “Donald Fagen Recording Morph the Cat,” *Sound on Sound*, Aug, 2006, <https://www.soundonsound.com/people/donald-fagen>.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Everett, “A Royal Scam: The Abstruse and Ironic Bop-Rock Harmony of Steely Dan,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 26, no. 2 (2004): 201-236.

<sup>4</sup>Donald Fagen, *Eminent Hipsters* (New York: Viking, 2013), 48-49.

<sup>5</sup>Arun Starkey, “William S. Burroughs and the Bizarre Sexual Origins of Steely Dan’s Name,” *Far Out Magazine*, Oct 16, 2021, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/william-s-burroughs-sexual-origins-steely-dan-name/>.

<sup>6</sup>Donald E. Lavigne, “The Odyssean Masculinities of Steely Dan’s *Aja*,” *Rock Music Studies* 9, no. 3 (2022): 287-308.

literary influences, as Fagen recounts, would become the pretense on which himself and Becker formed Steely Dan<sup>7</sup>. Fagen's background in the Village and veneration of his predecessors closely resembles virtuoso Chopin's Paris salon influence and preoccupation with his own predecessors<sup>8</sup>, implying a similar virtuosity is present for Fagen. The bulk of their virtuosity however, is derived from their expertise in the studio.

*Aja*<sup>9</sup> is widely regarded as the pinnacle of Steely Dan's career, with the title track specifically regarded as a masterpiece of record engineering. Members of the audiophile forum on *Reddit* profess that its pristine sonic qualities make it suitable for the calibration of their hi-fi systems<sup>10</sup>. The guitar, drum, and saxophone soli on this track alone are regularly cited as some of the best for their instrument. So much time and manpower go into the sheen of Steely Dan, that when their track "The Second Arrangement" was infamously erroneously erased by an apprentice engineer they preferred to abandon it than to rerecord<sup>11</sup>. This virtuosity however, begins to break down when they leave the comfort of the recording studio. Donald Fagen and Walter Becker's virtuosity only exists and is enabled by a mirage of studio trickery held together with state-of-the-art recording equipment and hundreds of recording hours. Becker and Fagen knew this, and quit touring early in their career to focus on studio work<sup>12</sup>, but when they resumed touring in the 1990s they struggled to garner the acclaim they were used to. Their 1994 performance of "Aja" at Irvine Meadows Amphitheatre, California is one such example of this<sup>13</sup>. Many of the elements that made the track on the *Aja* record virtuosic are notably absent, particularly in regards to the aforementioned soli. Greg Kot in a *Rolling Stone* review of *Alive in America*, the album in which this version was published, describes the musicians as "weigh[ing] down the bilious lyrics and snappy tunes with noodling fusion style vamps" even going as far to label the record as a "pointless document"<sup>14</sup>. It is apparent from this reception that though Steely Dan's virtuosity is immense in the studio, it is equally fragile.

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<sup>7</sup>Fagen, 82-83.

<sup>8</sup>Andreas Ballstaedt, "Chopin as 'Salon Composer' in Nineteenth-Century German Criticism" in *Chopin Studies 2*, ed. John Rink and Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 21.

<sup>9</sup>Steely Dan, "Aja," on *Aja*, ABC Records AB 1006, 1977, LP.

<sup>10</sup>"What's the fuss about Steely Dan?," *Reddit*, accessed September 16, 2023, [https://www.reddit.com/r/audiophile/comments/7yx72p/whats\\_the\\_fuss\\_about\\_steely\\_dan/](https://www.reddit.com/r/audiophile/comments/7yx72p/whats_the_fuss_about_steely_dan/).

<sup>11</sup>Elle Palmer, "The Steely Dan Song that was Almost Erased from History," *Far Out Magazine*, Jul 2, 2023, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/the-steely-dan-song-that-was-almost-erased-from-history/>.

<sup>12</sup>Pete Fogel, "F.A.Q.," *Official Steely Dan*, accessed Oct 2, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111227080833/http://steelydan.com/faq.html>.

<sup>13</sup>Steely Dan, "Aja," on *Alive in America*, Giant Records 9 24634-2, 1995, CD.

<sup>14</sup>Greg Kot, "Alive In America," *Rolling Stone*, Dec 14, 1995, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/alive-in-america-190473/>.

## Guitar Solo

By their 1974 album *Pretzel Logic*, Becker and Fagen had abandoned the traditional rock band lineup in favour of a continuously revolving door of session musicians to meet their perfectionist needs. Only Denny Dias of the original lineup remained for the odd reappearance, with his last studio work for the band being the guitar solo on “Aja”<sup>15</sup>. It is clear why Dias was brought in to solo on “Aja” as his unique, fluttering style stands out amongst his Steely Dan recording peers, and does well to capture the idyllic respite Fagen sings of. In the *Classic Albums* documentary, Dias asserts that the underlying rhythm guitar part is an amalgamation of takes from himself, Becker, and session guitarist Larry Carlton<sup>16</sup>. He refers to the parts very existence as a “contradiction”, citing the tight tonal clusters as well as open chord voicings that are difficult if not impossible for a guitarist to play by themselves.

On the *Alive in America* version, it is session guitarist Georg Wadenius and Walter Becker who exchange musical ideas in the solo<sup>17</sup>. Both trade Dias’ highly compressed, clean tone for a saccharine, distortion/chorus fusion affair, I speculate in an attempt to better suit a live environment. The result is heavy-handed and unpolished. Where Dias’ solo swells and contracts with the contour of the harmony, moving between sweeps and rakes on key centres, and drawn out triplets when a non-diatonic chord is settled upon<sup>18</sup>, the live solo resigns itself to stagnant noodling with little regard for the nuanced harmony. The splicing together of takes conducted by Becker and Fagen for the *Aja* solo allowed it to be meticulously crafted to their specifications. This is a luxury Becker and Wadenius did not have live and their version suffers accordingly, for studio virtuosity of Becker and Fagen is difficult if not possible to reproduce due to its nature.

## Drum and Saxophone Soli

Steve Gadd’s drum performance, and Wayner Shorter’s tenor saxophone solo on “Aja” both have legends attached that add to the weight of their respective virtuosities, and enhance the experience of hearing them. Steve Gadd, as Don Breithaupt reports, recorded the solo in two almost entirely improvised takes, having only seen the charts moments beforehand<sup>19</sup>. Becker and Fagen were reportedly so impressed with his work that he was done in 25 minutes. When they invited him to hear the finished track, Gadd asked “who’s on drums”, so trivial was the act of playing to

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<sup>15</sup>Fogel, “F.A.Q.”.

<sup>16</sup>Steely Dan, *Aja: Classic Albums*.

<sup>17</sup>Steely Dan, “Aja,” on *Alive in America*.

<sup>18</sup>Steely Dan, *The Best of Steely Dan* (Winona, MN: Hal Leonard, 1990), 61-73.

<sup>19</sup>Don Breithaupt, *Steely Dan’s Aja* (London: Continuum, 2007), 52.

him he had forgotten it was himself<sup>20</sup>. This stands in direct contradiction to the micromanaged recording process for which Steely Dan are known. Shorter, an established jazz virtuoso himself, similarly recounts recording his solo rather nonchalantly<sup>21</sup>. The result is an ineffable performance by Shorter ascending to the climax of the 8 minute track, the high point that the whole piece works towards reaching. This is bolstered by Gadd's virtuosic fills, including his signature "Gaddamacue", a sextuplet cycle of kick and toms that is notoriously difficult to execute<sup>22</sup>. Gadd punctuates each upwards movement by Shorter with increasingly complex fills culminating in an explosion of energy that quietly resolves into the final verse.

On *Alive in America*, we have Dennis Chambers on drums and Chris Potter on tenor saxophone<sup>23</sup>. Dennis Chambers, an established fusion drummer with a background in funk and hip-hop<sup>24</sup>, closely follows the structure of Gadd's original solo, however he neglects to include most of the "Gaddiments" that carried the energy of the original, instead relying heavily on his crash cymbal to punctuate each movement. Chambers also holds the song at a lethargic 115 BPM, contrasting the moderate 125 BPM of the studio version. The result is a performance that is hardly groundbreaking. Meanwhile Chris Potter, the youngest musician present at just 23, performs his solo<sup>25</sup>. Potter's solo suffers similarly to the previous guitar solo, meandering on the spot with little upwards motion, greatly hindering the climax so central to the song. The lack of myth surrounding these performances is also a factor. When one hears the studio recording of "Aja" aware of the sheer virtuosity that went into its creation, a new life is breathed into the track, and an energy is imbued that may not be present otherwise. This is necessarily absent in any live recording of Steely Dan, because of their ephemeral nature. Each new recording exists relative to its studio counterpart and consequentially suffers from its reputation.

Steely Dan exists in two worlds, the walled garden of the studio, and the stage. In the studio they accomplished quality and musicianship that is still discussed nearly 50 years later, a unique interplay between lyrics, music, and technology, bolstered by recounted legends. In concert they exist solely in contrast to that, a band struggling to convey their elusive vision; yet another dad-rock band.

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<sup>20</sup>Matt Wardlaw, "The Steely Dan Song Steve Gadd Didn't Remember Playing On," *Ultimate Classic Rock*, Feb 8, 2022, <https://ultimateclassicrock.com/gary-katz-steely-dan-aja-interview-2022/>.

<sup>21</sup>Steely Dan, *Aja: Classic Albums*.

<sup>22</sup>Steve Gadd, *Master Series - Steve Gadd*, directed by Rob Wallis (New York: Hudson Music, 2008), DVD.

<sup>23</sup>Steely Dan, "Aja," on *Alive in America*.

<sup>24</sup>Gareth Dylan Smith, "Chambers, Dennis," *Grove Music Online*, Oct 4, 2012  
<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002227957>.

<sup>25</sup>Gary W. Kennedy, "Potter, (Joseph) Chris(topher)," *Grove Music Online*, 2003,  
<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-2000669000>.

The live work of Steely Dan serves as a reminder of how dependent their virtuosity is on studio conditions, but it should not be cause for derision. Instead, it should be a point of appreciation for what they did achieve and the effort that went towards it. The virtuosity of Steely Dan is fragile, but it was not cheap. That in itself is worthy of recognition.

**Word Count: 1488**

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