

MUSICIAN

PLAYER & LISTENER

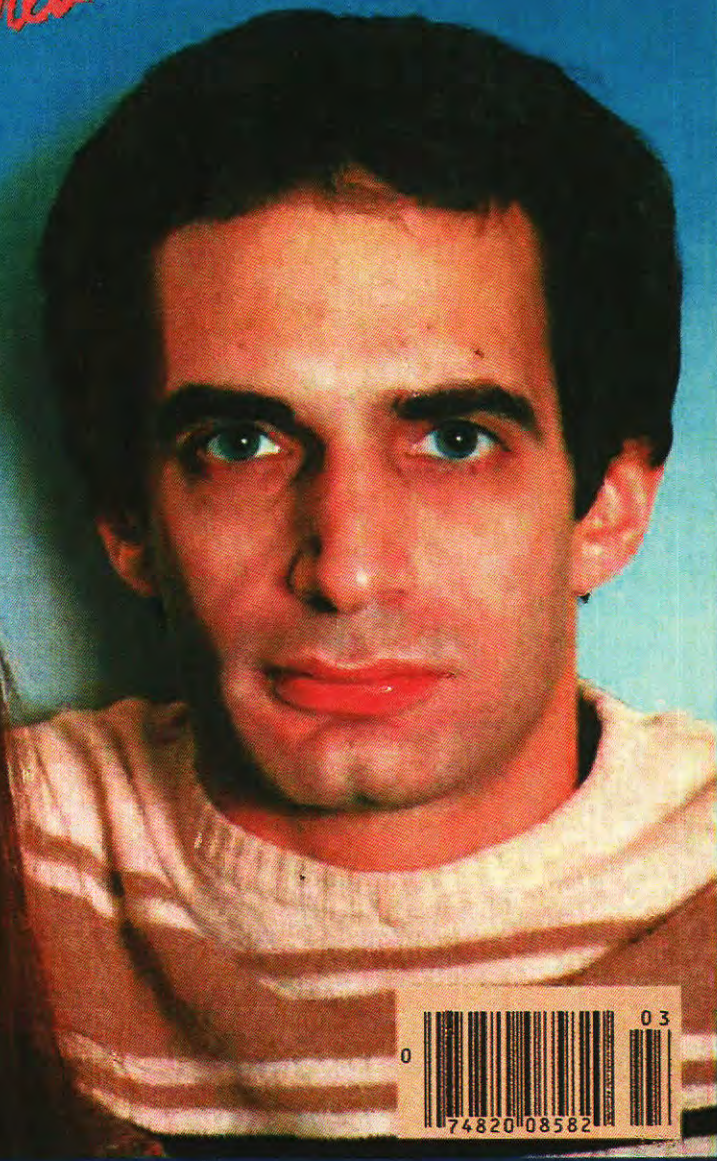
John Lennon Interview

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STEELY DAN

the interview



STEEELY DAN

Those consummate troublemakers, Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, are finally cornered, producing dangerously controversial observations on film, literature, *Free Jazz*, touring and the music of Steely Dan, undermining nearly every tenet of the music industry.

By David Breskin

Three years, two hundred out-takes, a few mistakenly erased tracks, and one shattered shank after *Aja*, Steely Dan has come sauntering out of hibernation with a ravishing new record, *Gaacho*. It's elegant, it's extravagant; it shows again why Walter Becker and Donald, the masters of Ellingtonian Backbeat Coolpop-Jazzrock, are the closest thing this generation has to pre-war sophistication of Porter and Berlin, Rodgers and Hart, Weill and Waller. If *Aja* convinced Woody Herman to let his big band loose on Steely Dan material (*Chick, Donald, Walter and Woodrow*, 1978), prompted a Berklee College of Music songwriting analysis course featuring their work, and elevated the taste of the frat-dance college crowd, one wonders what kind of a dent *Gaacho* might make. One thing it won't do is send Steely Dan back on the road, not even after Becker's car-crunched leg heals completely. Nor will they perform in their native New York. So we are left solely — and quite happily — with the music at hand.

Which is, as may be expected by now, sublime and fragrant and audaciously smooth. Steely Dan Inc.'s revolving door of studio sidemen hasn't stopped swinging yet — some 36 grace *Gaacho* — and I mean this in the musical sense as well: rarely have so many done so little spontaneous blowing for so much music that sounds so fresh. But it probably won't sound that way upon first or second listen; chances are it will sound soft and round, blandly pleasant, almost superficial. With further listening, each of the record's seven tunes opens and deepens, revealing the harmonic jewels and subtle understated solos. At first obscured by the dominant colors of the surface, background colors become apparent, much as they will in fine oil paintings as your eye moves closer and closer to them; rhythmic nuances make themselves felt; each piece eventually jumps out of bed with the others and goes its own way: the patina, a rather mundane orgy of highgloss sensuality, gives

way to the substance — seven different compositions in profound intercourse with their own partners, their indigenous lyrics.

As for the lyrics' subject matter, rest assured Steely Dan enters the '80s with some timely tales of tawdry high-life and desultory desperation. *Gaacho* overflows with mystics, coke dealers, sexual rivals, gosling girls ignorant of 'Retha Franklin, concupiscent Charlies out for "that cotton candy," playground hoopsters, Third World schemers mobilized on First World lawns, surprisingly gay friends and bodacious cowboys. The stories are rich, richer than *Aja*'s, the metaphors subversive and witty. For instance, the rival lover is introduced with the couplet, "The milk truck eased into my space/Somebody screamed somewhere." All in all, we may say this about Steely Dan: the more things strange, the more they stay the same.

I recently spoke with Messrs Becker and Fagen at an MCA rented suite of the Park Lane hotel on Central Park South in New York. As I entered the room, the two jokingly whined about the day's previous interviewers; every one, it seems, had grazed over the parched grass of basic bio material, asking, "So did you two really meet at Bard College?" With furious swipes of my pen, I mimed scratching that one off the top of my list of questions and mumbled something about my masterplan being destroyed.

MUSICIAN: It has been a considerable time since Steely Dan first started: how do you feel you've grown as artists, as musicians and lyricists, since that time?

FAGEN: [Long pause] It's a matter of maturing. Becoming more selective with material, knowing what to write about, being able to pick and choose — showing more discretion than in the earlier days. Musically, our harmonic vocabulary and so on has expanded a great deal...so I feel we've progressed a lot since our first records. They are plain embar-





rassing, if you listen to them.

MUSICIAN: When you look back at your older work — as all artists, regrettably or enthusiastically, must do — do you think, "Oh God, that just wasn't it at all"?

FAGEN: [Laughs] Well, yeah, you know I don't listen to our old records, but if I happen to hear one on the radio, my general feeling is humiliation. I don't really understand some of our earlier stuff.

BECKER: [Limping slowly back into the room] You mean: why would we do a thing like this or that?

FAGEN: In terms of why we would do certain things musically and also lyrically.

BECKER: Like, say "My Old School"? Gimme a for instance...

FAGEN: Not that one so much. That one has taken on a certain, well, it's improved with age. I'm trying to think of a really embarrassing one, but I can't off-hand.

MUSICIAN: At what point can you begin to stand yourself, listening back? 1974? 1975?

FAGEN: The next album I like pretty well. The one we haven't



PHOTOS BY DEBORAH FEINGOLD

done yet. The rest of them are fairly humiliating.

MUSICIAN: You don't feel *Gaucho* is what you want to sound like?

FAGEN: Well, on the humiliation scale each album gets lower and lower. I think starting with *Pretzel Logic*, I began to like a few cuts here and there as things I can really listen to.

MUSICIAN: How do you feel, Walter?

BECKER: Differently. But I don't listen to them either. I mean there were a lot of things that were very shoddily done, and a lot of things that were just bad, but probably different things for me than for Donald. We were doing the best we could, but fuck it, it wasn't very good. It's like looking at yourself in a mirror: it's not how you really look. Left-handed people look weird. I don't know whether it's ultimately good or not, I really don't.

MUSICIAN: It's good to the extent that you can see some growth in the mirror...

BECKER: Oh yeah, but whether it's *ultimately* has been playing on my mind since 1970.

FAGEN: It's like: have you ever seen a picture of yourself taken in 1969 or '70 with a group of girls in mini-skirts or something and you say...

BECKER: What is *that* asshole doing there, or why was I wearing that sweater or a shirt with a fake turtle-neck or something. It's just aged. But I don't think it's aged that much. The stuff that is lousy was lousy then.

FAGEN: Yeah, that's true... well, harmonically we were naive.

BECKER: And we were miming a lot of things, we were clowning around.

FAGEN: We started out imitating, as most people do...

BECKER: [Slyly] As we continue to, in a much subtler way. Nothing comes from nothing. But "Do It Again" is a good fucking record. "Reelin' In The Years" is a good record.

FAGEN: I agree with that.

BECKER: It's only fuckin' rock 'n' roll. It's for kids. It's not for Gustav Mahler, or even Kristin Fabriani. [Laughs.]

MUSICIAN: Come now, only for kids?

BECKER: Well you know what I mean...

FAGEN: Basically, we've always composed for ourselves, which is the same as composing for your peers.

BECKER: Oh c'mon, you wouldn't do a thing like this for your peers. Would you do this for John Banker? Would you do this for what's his name? You know he doesn't like this, you know he doesn't need this.

FAGEN: Well I don't consider him my peer.

BECKER: Who do you mean then?

FAGEN: Well, some people, some...uh, well: *us* basically.

BECKER: [Laughs] Oh, that's different. O.K.

FAGEN: I guess I assume that people our age are thinking the same way we are. I'm not thinking of any individuals.

BECKER: But that's all we have to go by. I can't think of any individual that this stuff — it's always amazed me that somehow I've felt we're good but I never knew if there was anybody that would think so. Not good in any ultimate sense, but good compared to the bullshit you hear. But I don't *feel* any older than my audience. I used to worry about getting old when I was 17. I couldn't imagine being 30 and being 17.

MUSICIAN: Did you ever feel like a part of mainstream culture — which I guess was mainstream counterculture — in the '60s. I mean: how many times does '68 go into 1981?

BECKER: Hell now, God, we were wallflowers. We were cranks. What do you say...

FAGEN: Aliens.

BECKER: Yeah, that's better, alienated. Aliens, freaks.

MUSICIAN: So how do you feel in the situation now, which I guess would make you more alien...

BECKER: Yeah, more alien...you got it. A lot of artists are aliens. They're really a bunch of geeks when you get right down to it.

MUSICIAN: And classical losers too, in the sense that they just don't fit it.

FAGEN: That's right, in the sense that New York is the depository for misfit Americans — there's a reason why we're here. And why we don't live in Cincinnati.

BECKER: You have misfit Americans and you also have perfect New Yorkers; the guy who doesn't know who lives down the hall. It's all a little strange.

MUSICIAN: You walk down the street and think: Hmmm, something about all these folks is just a little off-center.

BECKER: Yeah, everybody's weird here. I mean, everybody's normal everywhere else, that's the way it looks to me. I mean, after many years of living in Los Angeles I remember sitting in someone's house, and somebody made a reference to the fact that someone was a Jew. I realized: not everybody is Jewish here, not even nominally Jewish. Now this took me by surprise. I come from Forest Hills. I'm not Jewish, but what difference does it make?

FAGEN: You might as well be.

BECKER: I might as well be, you know: yish gdall, yish gdosh, baruch atah Adonoi. But what I mean is, I feel *safe* around Jews. Jews are not gonna drag me off to the gas chambers. Jews are smart. They're not gonna lynch anybody, they're civilized.

FAGEN: What we're talking about is, basically metropolitan...

BECKER: But New York City is the only one.

FAGEN: It's the only one in America, and maybe in the world, as far as truly being cosmopolitan.

BECKER: I mean L.A. is the biggest small town in the world. It's the stix.

MUSICIAN: If artists are geeks, they're also scavengers. Do you find you can feed off the flesh of the city, the raw material so to speak? Is it a stimulus that Los Angeles wasn't?

FAGEN: I think New York has revitalized our stuff. But L.A. did a lot for us as far as giving us a perspective on America.

BECKER: It gave us something to complain about.

FAGEN: It gave us something to really complain about, to bitch about creatively.

BECKER: You can look at the people you see three times a week and twist them in your mind, treat them inhumanely

in your mind, to create a character without actually defaming them. But you cannot accord them the respect that you accord every other human being. [Long pause] If there were no outside stimulus, I'd imagine we'd still have something to write about. Something we'd remembered or imagined.

FAGEN: You can create or compose in a vacuum.

BECKER: Keeping in mind that this is dance music, you are removing yourself from something by writing about it.

MUSICIAN: Do you think that act of distancing is important, not so much of "objectivity" as to keep a creative perspective?

FAGEN: I think it makes for better art. If you're gonna present rock 'n' roll as an art form, you have to draw on some of the traditions that are used in literature, and one that's proved effective is maintaining a certain distance from the subject. The trashier kinds of literature are the more basically sentimental kinds. Romantic, in the perjorative sense of the term. So we use that distancing technique in writing lyrics.

MUSICIAN: Speaking of dance music, can you see a time when you won't be concerned with prodding people out of their chairs?

FAGEN: I think we both really love rhythm-and-blues basically. A big back-beat. I don't know if it's a matter of dance music, it's a matter of pulse or feel.

BECKER: Jump music. Rhythm music. Something like that.

FAGEN: [Grinning] Race music.

MUSICIAN: Be careful, Donald.

BECKER: Race music. Obviously I don't dance or nothing, and never have...

FAGEN: [Pointing to Becker's crutches] Especially lately.

BECKER: Well, I've never seen you tripping the light fantastic in the last 32 years either.

FAGEN: But I have great shoes.

BECKER: Yes, you have great shoes. No one ever said you weren't a snappy dresser, but the point is: you don't dance. It's great music in your car though, you'd rather hear it in your car than pretty much anything else.

MUSICIAN: Which brings me to another question. I know you agonize over your lyrics. Does it ever frustrate you that with many or most of the people listening, they may be going in one ear — and with little in between to stop them — right out the other? That all they may want is a beat and a hummable melody?

BECKER: I assume that's the case for most of the audience, or at least a big part of it, and that's why we try to always make the lyrics not grab your attention. We want them to *sound* good with the music, even if you're not an English-speaking person.

MUSICIAN: But for those that are listening, atlas and dictionary in hand, you don't want the lyrics to be one-shot deals, like a comedy record that you put on once and it gets tired pretty quickly after that.

BECKER: That's definitely a problem. We have to be clever, but not funny.

FAGEN: We have a problem, trying not to cross the comedy threshold.

BECKER: Every time someone's in the next room when we're writing a song they'll say, "Don't tell me you're fucking writing songs in there, you're not working, 'cause you're fucking screaming and laughing in there. You're not writing, you're making up Pope jokes."

FAGEN: Sometimes Walter comes up with a line, and it's just too fuckin'...

BECKER: Funny. The whole thing would just stop; it would be like making Spike Jones records.

FAGEN: Suspension of disbelief would stop; there'd be laughter. You have to keep the equilibrium, have to maintain the irony, without getting into yuk-yuk territory.

MUSICIAN: There's also always a certain self-consciousness about being funny. Walter, you once said you wanted to branch out into odd narrative styles and more radical approaches, as long as they were "funny in the end." What kind of "funny" were you referring to?

BECKER: I'm talking about the possibility of maintaining one's sense of humor under all possible circumstances. Funny as

opposed to grave or solemn. Kurt Vonnegut's not funny, there's nothing funny about Dresden for instance, but it's *funny*. And we can't even be that funny in music.

FAGEN: When you're writing about serious subjects, and I guess we are, we have to remember that it's rock 'n' roll music and the risk of being pretentious is real high, if you're not careful. It's just too short a time to really explain anything; it's not a short story, it's not a novel.

MUSICIAN: It has to be a miniature.

FAGEN: Yeah, a miniature, and sometimes you can't fill in the details. So you hope that you give the proper signals, so that people will get a sense of what you're talking about.

BECKER: In "Gaucho" for example, there's more of a story — that you and I know about — that's not in the song. There's very little in the song. As far as I can tell, [laughing] there's very little in the song other than a fucking cape and a car and the Custerdome, and nobody knows what that is. So.

MUSICIAN: Let's use that song as a jumping off point in terms of your lyrics. Certain artists — perhaps writers or film makers more than songwriters — strive for a certain amount of



Polysemy, or ambiguity in their work, in service of not only their desire to create something rich in meaning for their audience but also to keep some of their work personal, kind of private.

FAGEN: We're just trying to use what fits. It's the exact opposite of the *New York Times*, where it's "All The News That's Fit To Print." Here, we print what'll fit. Like you say, it's not even a short story, hardly a paragraph, so the story doesn't always fit. If you get — as opposed to the kernel of the thought — the husk of the thought, maybe you can figure out what kind of story is there. I don't feel like I'm being stripped of anything if I'm understood. Why would anybody doing this sort of thing want to preserve something or keep it for themselves?

MUSICIAN: I'm not talking about intentional mystification or impenetrability, but there is a school of thought which says, while the artist must communicate to his audience, he may also keep certain details or backgrounds or underpinnings of the art rather private.

FAGEN: It depends on the song and the subject matter. The lyrics must be subordinate to the music and you can only give as many clues as you have time for. There's no intentional mystification.

BECKER: We're not trying to protect anything. It's just that some of the smaller, pettier details in a story are the best ones. The little things that you retain in your sense more than in your mind; they may not make much sense but they color something. It's really hard. There may be something to what you're saying, in that, if something is open-ended, or means more than one thing, or is elliptical or whatever, someone listening to it carefully enough will in fact become creative, and fill in the spaces with their own intelligence. And you'd be amazed at the songs people have written about that we've written. Some guy wrote us and said "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" is about Eric Clapton and the number is a joint. We get letters, phone calls — from people who "know exactly what we mean" and they just have to tell us that they know.

FAGEN: Sometimes it frightens me when we get some weird stoned Moonie with these weird ideations about these songs, and he starts talking about taking some kind of *action*.

BECKER: There was a guy living in Las Vegas when our first album came out who thought — his girlfriend has left him I guess — all of the songs were stories his girlfriend had told us. He wasn't asking any questions; he just wanted his girlfriend back. And we didn't know anything about the girl. But he thought every one of those stories was about him. He was willing to forgive us for making fun of him, making a fool of him, cuckolding him, etc., if we gave her back.

FAGEN: It's your basic Arthur Bremmer syndrome. We get a lot of letters that are written in very small printing with little pictures in the corner.

MUSICIAN: Well, you're talking about the perverse fringe of "active" listeners.

BECKER: No, this is the heart and soul of our audience. I've got news for you. Those weird people on the street — every hundredth weirdest one has a Steely Dan record at home.

MUSICIAN: People that are essentially out-takes.



BECKER: Right, or just flipped-out. Like that guy who hijacked that bus today [a friend of theirs had been hijacked in midtown Manhattan] probably has 47 copies of *The Royal Scam*.

MUSICIAN: The point is, despite the Vegas chump, a little restraint or open-endedness or ambiguity in a lyric — call it what you will — allows one to go back to a song time after time, and not just sing along, but get farther into it or think anew about it. I've read and listened to "Gauchito" many times and I still couldn't give you an orderly narrative, but I start thinking about it: O.K., here's a gauchito, a South American cowboy who's part Indian. Now, already I've come to a cultural contradiction for our country: a cowboy who's an Indian.

BECKER: Right, right.

MUSICIAN: And then you bring in Custer, as in the Custer-dome, a great Indian killer and an integral part of the Cowboys and Injuns mythology of the American West, and we have some kind of cross-cultural tension, some clashing images that may not make sense in a narrative fashion...

BECKER: Right, it doesn't have to make sense in a narrative way. Something tells me, though, that we've been better behaved in terms of being more narrative lately. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. I think with the narratives that we're undertaking [hearty chuckle] it doesn't really matter. You can't get from here to Chinatown in 30 seconds.

FAGEN: Well, I think it does matter.

BECKER: Well, it may come out the same in the long run, whether we write an understandable narrative or not.

FAGEN: I think we are communicating a little more directly than we have in the past.

MUSICIAN: Do either of you write poetry as poetry, that sort of sits around just waiting for the right piece of music?

FAGEN: Not as poetry per se.

BECKER: I used to do that, a long, long time ago, but I found out poetry was in much worse shape than any other art form, except maybe painting, which I also gave up because I didn't

like getting paint all over myself.

FAGEN: We have fragments of things.

BECKER: Little lines and couplets...

FAGEN: Story ideas and the like...

BECKER: But nothing in finished form. Rhythmically, if you read our poetry on the page it's nothing really.

MUSICIAN: So you have at least a skeleton of the music first, the chords, roughly the tempo, etc., and then you work on the lyrics line-by-line, side-by-side?

FAGEN: We work on them together. One of us will come up with the basic idea, maybe a few words, and then we'll fill in the blanks together as needed.

MUSICIAN: How do you resolve conflicts — possibly different strategies on how to say something even if you both agree as to what will be said — without resorting to bloodshed?

FAGEN: We often see it in the same way. We've been together for a while.

BECKER: We agree.

FAGEN: Every once in a while we have a problem...

BECKER: But it usually doesn't make that much difference if it comes down to one word.

FAGEN: Usually, if we disagree about something, it may be whether or not something is singable phonetically.

BECKER: That's *his* story. My story is whether it's something else. That's how we agree.

MUSICIAN: Walter, you mentioned dabbling in finger-painting and poetry. In all interviews it seems the interviewer asks for the inevitable listing of musical influences [and of course the answer is always B.B. King], but I'm particularly interested in what other artists — could be writers, painters, filmmakers, etc. — have inspired you.

BECKER: You know, we've gotten in trouble on that with the "Steely Dan" thing [the name of a dildo in Burroughs's great novel, *Naked Lunch*]. We've been invited out to dinner with William Burroughs a few times too many. So with that caveat, I can say that I like Samuel Beckett. I think it's ironic and amusing that the greatest living writer in the English language writes in French.

MUSICIAN: What does that tell you?

BECKER: It tells me that he doesn't want to be a show-off.

FAGEN: We both have our individual preferences. Vladimir Nabokov is mine.

BECKER: He was my candidate for greatest living artist, but he lost that gig.

FAGEN: I put him at the top of the list.

BECKER: He's dead, he can't be the greatest living artist.

FAGEN: Living, we're talking about the living?

MUSICIAN: O.K. then, let's talk about dead folks...

BECKER: Uh... Vladimir Nabokov.

FAGEN: I'm not visually oriented, but Walter likes very peculiar movies.

BECKER: A good cheap date. I have weird taste.

FAGEN: Walter's seen "The King of Marvin Gardens" quite a number of times.

MUSICIAN: Very bizarre in the Steely Dan sense. Jack Nicholson and Bruce Dern, your type of guys, played reversed roles...

BECKER: That was the cool part, they were so wrong for the roles. That made it for me.

FAGEN: Walter advises me *not* to see the movies he sees. That's *my* taste. I tend to like really expensive movies.

MUSICIAN: Like really expensive records. Your own, for instance.

BECKER: Donald goes for the value-per-dollar system.

FAGEN: Francis Ford Coppola stuff. "The Godfather." "Apocalypse Now."

BECKER: Did you know that the guy who plays the senator in the whorehouse in "The Godfather" is the same guy who sends Sheen to kill Brando in "Apocalypse Now"?

FAGEN: I really like Nicholas Rosa. I'm not hot on the new Germans. I like American movies; I had high hopes for Robert Altman, but I haven't seen a movie of his in years that I could sit through.

BECKER: Jean Luc Godard has made two or three snappy movies.

FAGEN: I like W.C. Fields basically. "It's A Gift" is a real masterpiece.

MUSICIAN: Can you imagine yourselves working on a more expansive musical project: a full soundtrack, a musical perhaps, or even the songs for a musical?

FAGEN: I'd like to, but the project would have to be perfectly suited for us. I wouldn't want to write background music, or music that's subordinated to visual material.

BECKER: Ronnie Reagan is president, so I wouldn't mind doing a Kurt Weill or Bertolt Brecht kind of thing. There's potential in that.

FAGEN: Socialist opera.

BECKER: Anarchist opera.

MUSICIAN: Do we have a political disagreement in the house?

BECKER: No, no, no. And there's nothing in the works right now.

MUSICIAN: What about an extended work — a unified work



of considerable length — whether you want to call it a suite or opera or whatever?

FAGEN: We've discussed this, like the idea of a concept album, but it's awfully hard.

BECKER: I thought *Aja* itself was dangerously ambitious. I really did.

FAGEN: I dunno, I think we work best on miniatures. I like variety.

BECKER: Although there was once a demo album of ours with 12 songs on it. Completely unrelated songs — some of them were shlocky commercial Brill Building songs and some were tasty songs that were obviously the work of sociophobes — and some guy took this record and turned it into a musical. That's as close as we've come. We could write the songs and then lure someone into thinking about them, connecting them, and — thinking that he's figured them out — writing a musical around them.

FAGEN: We work better with vignettes.

BECKER: And what was the last good musical you saw?

MUSICIAN: That's just my point. Anyway, how do you characterize the new record, as opposed to, say, *Aja*?

BECKER: [Half-kidding] Excellent, excellent. Newer, bluer.

FAGEN: That's a difficult question because we write the songs individually. They are single audio objects; we don't plan the album conceptually. So it's hard to characterize the thing as a whole.

BECKER: Notice how the level of this discussion has dropped from songs to "audio objects."

FAGEN: It's really getting into that heavy French thing.

MUSICIAN: Semiotic, man. Donald, you were getting ready to bring in Roland Barthes...

FAGEN: I was going to, but I better not.

MUSICIAN: Well if not different as a whole — I know it was recorded over a two year span — then do you see it as a little step forward?

BECKER: We wrote the hook for "Glamour Profession" when we were in college and now just changed the words. So we've really moved forward.

FAGEN: It's possible that we took a few steps backward with this album. In a way, it's rhythmically more simplistic than *Aja*. But the harmonies are interesting. I don't know if it's better or worse.

BECKER: I don't think there's a progression at this point — it's too deliberate on our part. We're moving sideways. When you're writing one song at a time over a long period and you don't know which ones are eventually going to get recorded and which are then going to be on the record, and then you put them together in a certain order and put it in a package, all of a sudden it's something.

FAGEN: It becomes something else.

BECKER: It becomes something you hadn't anticipated. It's taken as a whole, even to me anyway, I take it as a whole. And it has a character as a whole that the individual parts never had.

FAGEN: You work on individual songs for two years and then you sequence them in a way that seems most pleasing, and all of a sudden, you're faced with this new thing.

BECKER: [Laughing] The only thing we look forward to in finishing it is that we're gonna find out what we did.

MUSICIAN: As your vocabulary grows, musically and lyrically, and you become more aware of your artistic options, do you find it more difficult to finish a song? That is, the more strategies you're familiar with, the rougher it is to decide which one to use?

BECKER: It got tough awhile ago. Yes, the last verse is hard to write. The more you know, the more you might paint yourself into a corner.

FAGEN: But the way we write — it's more improvisational and instinctual. We don't really use "strategies" consciously.

BECKER: But we do in a way.

FAGEN: The method derives from the subject.

BECKER: But nevertheless there it is, the method. By the time you've finished everything except that last piece or link of a song, you've got to make some very, very conscious choices.

FAGEN: All right, we've learned certain things in terms of how to present the material. We now know what a bridge is supposed to do: it opens up the song musically, and we tend to open it up lyrically as well, in that it tends to talk about the subject more generally than the verses do.

BECKER: And it's also a real release from the tension of the lyrics in the verses. You're suspended in time for a while.

FAGEN: You generally find that there's much more detail in the verses than in the choruses.

BECKER: When you're in the bridge you don't have to worry about how you got to this point, however fucked up that may be, or, how did I get to this swell position I'm in now. So it's a release, a channel. Somebody invented the form, God knows when. I know they didn't have bridges in Gregorian chants but they've had them for a while.

MUSICIAN: The Brooklyn Bridge has been around for a very long time...

BECKER: Right, there you go, and you know how good you feel when you're on that because you're not yet in Brooklyn but you've left Manhattan.

FAGEN: [Wryly] The traditional popular song form of the '30s and '40s has served us well.

BECKER: Oh yes, through the '80s, through the '80s.

FAGEN: I like it, it's a good thing. It's the closest thing we have to a structure for rock 'n' roll. It's blues, and traditional song form.

MUSICIAN: How do you feel about modern improvisational music that diverges from that structure? Music that's come after the religious and political saxophonizing of the '60s — like The Art Ensemble, Cecil Taylor, Anthony Braxton, etc.?

BECKER: I don't like any of it. I'd like to think that I'm open-minded, but nothing could be further from the truth.

FAGEN: We're real conservatives.

BECKER: Hey, you like Dolphy, you're not that conservative.

FAGEN: But he played off a certain structure. He used bebop as a point of departure.

MUSICIAN: A post-modernist like Braxton uses many different kinds of structures. He's a structuralist of sorts, though maybe not in the mode of traditional song form.

BECKER: But he can't even play, so what does it matter? I can't figure it out. He sounds like a guy who has no tone, plays outta tune, and I don't know why he's playing what he's playing. Maybe I just heard the wrong records. Now Sam Rivers — the first album I heard of his sounded very interesting to me, but lately he sounds exactly like Braxton.

MUSICIAN: Let's go back twenty years — before the advent of a religious saxophonizing — you have Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz*, which sounded so far-out then, sounds almost quaint now — in that it swings like mad, it's fairly orderly and well-structured and so on.

BECKER: I know. The first time I put on an Ornette record I said, "This is Charlie Parker music except the guy has a plastic saxophone and no chord changes." I couldn't believe that people talked about how "modern" it was.



FAGEN: Not that many people can get away with...

BECKER: What he does.

FAGEN: With not having any structure. Very few do.

BECKER: He had a few very good ideas. And he had an incredible band.

FAGEN: The rhythm section was fantastic.

BECKER: They were in a fucking trance, on the same plane he was. Don Cherry and Ornette had the ideas in common, that's what made it work.

MUSICIAN: Well what about some of the ECM artists of the last decade?

FAGEN: Very uninteresting on the whole.

BECKER: [Sarcastically] Dance music. But Jan Garbarek is very good.

MUSICIAN: Speaking of the Ice King, are you familiar with a Keith Jarrett record he was on, *Belonging*, particularly a tune called "Long As You Know You're Living Yours"?

BECKER: Yes.

MUSICIAN: Have you ever listened to that up against "Gaucho"?

BECKER: No.

MUSICIAN: I'm not casting any aspersions now, but in terms of the tempo and the bass line and the saxophone melody it's pretty interesting.

BECKER: Parenthetically it is, yeah [Uneasy laughter].

MUSICIAN: At this point the reporter traditionally asks the cornered politician or athlete to "go off the record."

FAGEN: Off the record, we were heavily influenced by that particular piece of music.

BECKER: I love it. [Becker and Fagen later approved their "off the record" responses for publication.]

MUSICIAN: We were talking about borrowing...

FAGEN: Hell, we steal. We're the robber barons of rock 'n' roll.

MUSICIAN: Well, the only other thing on the record that

seems obviously borrowed is "Glamour Profession." The rhythm and feel of it, and the way the synthesizer/horn vamp swings against the pulse sounds very much like Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band.

BECKER: I don't listen to them. Donald listens to them. But I see what you mean though.

FAGEN: I liked their first record.

MUSICIAN: I'm not saying it was necessarily a conscious act of pilferage.

FAGEN: That song was influenced by disco music in general.

BECKER: Stylized disco music. Art Deco disco, with roller skates.

MUSICIAN: Nouveau Swing Disco?

FAGEN: What you're saying is basically valid. There are other things that are borrowed too. The bridge on "Glamour Profession" is a take on the bridge of Kurt Weill's "Speak Low."

BECKER: Which is taken from Ravel.

MUSICIAN: Well, I guess we've dismissed The Art Ensemble and Cecil Taylor...

MUSICIAN: Gosh fellows, all that's left is Sun Ra — I would think at least he has that touch of the absurd you go for.

BECKER: I did see him once and enjoyed it very much.

FAGEN: Especially theatrically.

BECKER: [Singing] "The planet, the planet Venus — huhn!"

FAGEN: He's funny. I also like Pharoah Sanders.

BECKER: But not the real experimental stuff.

FAGEN: True. He got into little bells and stuff.

BECKER: I like Bob Dorough. "Blue Xmas". That's what I like.

MUSICIAN: What about popular music? Anything going on that you might be a bit more enthusiastic about?

BECKER: I've had a tough time with the radio lately. It's pathetic.

FAGEN: The Talking Heads are very interesting. They're a top band.

FAGEN: Fortunately, it's mainly their album covers that I like. The covers and the guy's eyes are great. There's at least an intelligence behind them, which is more than you can say for most groups.

BECKER: Further and further behind as time goes by...they're leaving it in the dust.

FAGEN: I like Donna Summers' records.

BECKER: I bought the single, "Turn Out The Lights." Had to have it.

FAGEN: I did like Dr. Buzzard's first record. But only that one.

MUSICIAN: So I guess it's pretty bleak out there, is that what you're saying?

BECKER: I guess, unless there's something happening out there that's being suppressed, which is entirely possible.

FAGEN: Oh, you know what I went for in a way, Ian Drury and The Blockheads. More of a comedy thing.

MUSICIAN: "Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick"?

BECKER: Hit me, Hit me. Since I broke my leg I think they're much funnier, 'cause the guy has polio or something. He's crippled.

FAGEN: The flipside of "Rhythm Stick" is great, "There Ain't Have Been Some Clever Bastards". Great stuff.

BECKER: Warne Marsh is the best I've heard in the past three years.

MUSICIAN: Do you plan to produce another album of his along the lines of the one with Pete Christlieb?

BECKER: No, no more. Because it's too hard to get Warne what he wants. And he wants Neils Henning Orsted Pederson, who used to be only great and now is just *ridiculous*.

FAGEN: One more thing, I heard a record the other day, a raggy sort of thing, Scott Joplin rags, by some funny tenor player, Henry Threadgill.

MUSICIAN: That's Air, the supertrio out of the, ahem...AACM.

FAGEN: Well, what I like was the way he phrased the melodies. I was real impressed. I could tell he was a super musician just from what I heard on the radio; he had that real Sonny Rollins rhythmic integrity.

BECKER: On the other hand, how new is all that — ragtime is

only so recent you know. But I still like boogie-woogie, Meade Lux Lewis and Albert Ammons.

MUSICIAN: Television is probably the most profound shaping force in our society, yet it seems artists have a tough time dealing with it.

BECKER: That's because TV is anti-artistic. I was on my back for six months and so naturally TV came into my life in a big way. I used to have a cable TV thing hooked up and it bothered me 'cause I had trouble reaching the knob, and I disconnected it because I realized it doesn't matter what you watch on TV. Asking for better TV is like asking for a better cell in Sing Sing. It doesn't matter what you're watching: you're watching TV. It's all of a piece.

FAGEN: The commercials, the shows... good or bad, everything is elevated or sunken to a certain level.

BECKER: People talk about those big screen TVs. Can you imagine, the commercial of Ajax taking over your living room. Your brain would turn to jelly.

FAGEN: I can't believe the video-disc thing. It's madness: how much television can you watch. Steely Dan is not exactly a good item for video discs.

MUSICIAN: Speaking of video discs and corporatized mass culture... given the certain, uh, socio-political stance that comes through in your work, how do you feel about being produced, packaged, and marketed by huge corporations?

BECKER: I think they're the mafia, that's what I think. I really do. I don't like them. This new record costs a dollar more, it costs \$9.98. And we said: "Please don't make it \$9.98, that's too much." But we didn't matter. I feel like I'm robbing somebody, even though I benefit from it — I don't want it. It has nothing to do with recording artists. I don't think any recording artists said, "Make the records a dollar more so we can make more money." And I don't think any recording artists with our "socio-political stance" — because that's exactly what it is — wants to take X number of extra cents a record if it means raising the price. Who can swallow that? It's awful, but they just do it. Since 1974 I've not been crazy about the whole thing. I realized then that the reason we weren't making any money was that we were made to think we'd have to be on the road to have enough money to live and that we were always making the same amount of money no matter how many records we sold. So if I was politically minded, which I am, I'd certainly be angry about that.

MUSICIAN: Robert Fripp, the amiable *MUSICIAN* columnist who also plays the guitar, has written a series of articles about the politics of the recording industry, bemoans the Catch-22 set-up where the companies say you have to tour to sell records and you have to sell records to be able to tour.

BECKER: That's what the record companies tell you, but it's not true. They can sell records if you don't tour, aha!, but they can sell more if you do — and it's free, or it's cheap for them, so they make more money.

MUSICIAN: Any possibility that you might tour in the future?

BECKER: NO — that's about how political we are; we're not gonna tell the world about it unless you do it for us — but we're not gonna do it. And there are personal reasons.

MUSICIAN: Do you miss playing live music for people?

BECKER: Yeah, but I'd rather be playing for Jay and The Americans than touring with Steely Dan. With The Americans, there'd be some yo-yos in suits in front of us making fools out of themselves, and I'd be doing a great job.

FAGEN: Michael McDonald was in town the other night and gave me tickets to this Doobie Brothers concert, which I went to. I didn't stay long. Just going back into that world for a few hours — whew — it was unbelievable.

BECKER: There were mostly young people at the concert? **FAGEN:** Mostly.

BECKER: The concerts are for the kids. The concert is where the party is. That's where the kids go, whoever may be playing. For instance, at one point we were opening for Frank Zappa, and he had a band with like nine brass instruments that no one knew the names of, a sarouzaphone soloist, a drummer reading the charts — a very arcane thing — and it wasn't worth it,

but the point was: everyone was there and the hall was filled because that's where the party was, and that's where everybody went to do drugs.

MUSICIAN: And it becomes just like TV: don't matter what's on, it's just one show or another.

BECKER: Yeah, right.

FAGEN: Another thing I noticed at this Doobies concert was that look. We used to open for the Doobies when they were a different band, kind of a biker band with the long hair and leather jackets, they're different now. With all the agony we had on the road — and it was pretty bad sometimes, because we weren't really suited to touring as far as our personalities go...

BECKER: We were suited for indigestion...

FAGEN: But we had a lot more *fun* than it seems they're having now. Now it's strictly business.

BECKER: Big business and big dollars.

FAGEN: And they're backstage, the Doobies. Well, when we toured we'd get to the hall and start drinking and so on — you had to do it to survive on the road — but I noticed that the guy who used to have the long hair and the leather jacket had on a business suit and a coiff. It was strictly business. You know, Michael got there right before the show and he went on, 1-2-3, and did his thing. No drinks, no fun, no fucking around, no camaraderie. Business — and that's the way you have to do it.

MUSICIAN: Well, do you gig around privately, to work on your chops or just have a good time?

BECKER: I've been trying to figure out a way to do that, but you know, I can't figure out how people gig privately with the kind of music we play. New Wave and Top 40, I don't want to do any of that shit. I wish Jay and The Americans were still working.

FAGEN: I dunno, my girlfriend had a couple of friends over the other day and I accompanied them on "Over The Mountain, Over The Sea" for an hour or so.

BECKER: What the hell is that?

FAGEN: [Sings] "Over the mountain... etc., etc." But I practice. I do piano exercises four or five times a week.

MUSICIAN: Can you see putting a new band together, with which you could work without feeling like capitalists exploiting and oppressing the musicians in your employ?

BECKER: It's not even that anymore. The point now is, we've realized if we tried to do it what we'd be doing is re-creating something. It would be like Beatlemania. Do you realize how many musicians are on all our records. I mean: I'd have to learn all the bass parts. I'm gonna learn Chuck Rainey's bass parts? Ugh.

FAGEN: We're too lazy. What's more, after *Aja* came out, we tried to put something together with session musicians, good musicians. And as we started to run down the tunes this incredible sense of ennui came over both of us.

BECKER: It was a bad thing. And there was a socio-economic component added to that which I'm not gonna even talk about. But it was terrible.

FAGEN: It was unbelievably boring to start to run down these tunes for public performance.

BECKER: We had 4,000 dollars worth of musicians in the room. Guys who wouldn't go out on the road for Miles Davis, literally, and they were committed to doing this. And we both left the room together and said, "what do you say, you wanna can it." And we both said "yeah" without thinking twice.

FAGEN: We couldn't do it. It was depressing. We were going backwards.

BECKER: You play the same fucking song every single night. You're not creating anything, you're re-creating something.

MUSICIAN: Well jazz fans, what about improvising.

BECKER: Well that would be something different. It's something I've been thinking about, but the format would have to be different.

MUSICIAN: We'll be content to wait for your next record. What may we expect?

FAGEN: We'll be with a new company, Warners. And, as of yet, we have no plans. ☐