

What happened to...

Steely Dan

"They got the house on the corner with the rug inside/ They got the booze they need, all that money can buy/ They got the shapely bodies, they got Steely Dan T-shirts/ And for the coup de grace — they're outrageous."

The lyrics are from "Show Biz Kids," a 1973 Steely Dan song with a keen prophetic insight on the future of a band then on the threshold of success and deeply concerned with the impact stardom would have on their collective egos. They would continue on to become rock music's most reluctant supergroup.

Steely Dan has always been more of a partnership than a band, however. Walter Becker of New York and Donald Fagen of Passaic write and arrange songs, then get musical support from some of the most talented studio musicians in New York and Los Angeles — the two cities they have been known to variously inhabit.

Combining the forms of western music, jazz, blues, country, rock, and reggae, Steely Dan's music is composed around smartly filled suspended sequences and a stylistic device called a moo major chord (described as a major triad with neoplastic distention) which

creates an airy, modern, almost jazzy sound quality.

Their lyrics most often center around chaos and confusion, as two of their album titles, "Pretzel Logic" and "Royal Scam" suggest. They are also often inclined to fill their songs with cynical clichés in assorted languages and are fond of contrasting characters from the low-life to the nouveau riche.

Becker first met Fagen 12 years ago at Bard, a progressive college in New York's Hudson Valley. Although both were accomplished instrumentalists, they broke into the pop music field as songwriters for Jay and the Americans and the Grass Roots.

After floundering in several bands in New York City, they joined ABC Records as songwriters, where producer friend Gary Katz helped them assemble a band. But the other original members of Steely Dan — Jeff "Skunk" Baxter, Denny Diaz, David Palmer, and Jim Hodder, lasted only briefly as a unit. Steely Dan has listed almost 40 musicians on the liner notes of their six studio albums.

Becker and Fagen have been in New York recording a new album. Whether it will go to Warner Bros., their new label, or to MCA, which bought out ABC, is a matter for conjecture. Under their previous contract, they still owe one more album to ABC.

Rumors about these and other activities have been rare pieces of publicity about the elusive pair that have conferred upon them cult-like fame and respect for being hermits. Despite their exclusiveness in a publicity-conscious recording industry, critics have been generous with praise and the Village Voice even recently went as far to say

that Steely Dan's sound is the most distinct in rock since the Beatles.

Flattering comparisons have not helped Steely Dan's relationship with the press and music-industry executives, however. "A lot of interviewers are jerks," Fagen retorted on a question concerning the group's popularity during a rare interview in 1977. Part of Becker's and Fagen's bitterness is that it wasn't until the commercial smash "Aja" that deserving acclaim for their past work came pouring forth. Steely Dan's five previous albums were often labeled as lacking in melody and consistent songwriting. "Aja" had enough pop music gloss to satisfy everyone.

Along with Steely Dan's refusal to promote themselves has come a reluctance to perform. Because of early success in the singles market, they have had the rare luxury of expending all their energy in methodically crafting albums and have essentially remained underground. Recently, Becker and Fagen have taken to producing other bands and are proud of their work to improve production techniques and develop fresh-sounding textures.

While rock music searches for fresh remedies to supplant its increasingly stale formula, Becker's and Fagen's music continues to explore and remain stylish. And as their popularity rises, more listeners are discovering old material as the airwaves and jukeboxes have become saturated with the group's music. Despite all the commercial success however, Steely Dan's failure to prove they can perform as well as produce will continue to haunt a rising reputation.

— BILL GLOVIN



Walter Becker, left, and Donald Fagen, the founders and only permanent members of Steely Dan, are probably the most reluctant rock superstars in the history of the genre.