THE DRUMMERS OF STEELY DAN

1972-1980

In the first installment of our mammoth two-part feature, Mark Buckingham talks to Blaine, Purdie, Gadd and Marotta, four of the session A-listers who honed the trademark blend of jazz, rock, pop and R&B of the band that epitomised studio perfection.

Steely Dan's credits read as a roll-call of drumming greats: Jeff Porcaro, Jim Gordon, Hal Blaine, Bernard Purdie, Rick Marotta and Steve Gadd are just some of the beatsmen to have passed through the ranks, influencing generations of drummers in the process.

Much has been eulogised about Steely Dan, a band that was, in effect, a songwriting partnership between New York jazz and literary intellectuals Donald Fagen and Walter Becker. They raised the songwriting bar, recording standards with their heady brand of evocative lyrics, catchy arrangements and jazz-rock phrasing, and sold over 30 million albums in the process. From their acclaimed 1972 debut, Can’t Buy A Thrill to 1980’s Gaucho, they notched up 10 US Top 40 hits, including ‘Do It Again’, ‘Reelin’ In The Years’, ‘Rikki Don’t Lose That Number’, ‘My Old School’, ‘Peg’ and ‘Josie’. The release of Aja – which Rolling Stone ranked 145th in the 500 greatest albums of all time – in 1977, confirmed Steely Dan’s place as one of the world’s best-selling and most critically revered acts. Aided by the cream of the LA and New York City session crop, their albums embody some of the best-loved mainstream drum tracks of the era. A Steely Dan session call-up was one of the most prized, well paid and challenging gigs in town.

Steely Dan were far from being a typical group of their day. They gave few interviews and, while they did tour, they made no secret of the fact that they preferred the comforts of a well-equipped studio to the rigours of the road – a trend that has changed in recent years. Guided by their able production team – chiefly mainstay producer Gary Katz and engineer Roger Nichols – Fagen and Becker would experiment until they reached just the right sound and feel for each track, often pushing both their equipment and drummers to the limit. And they weren’t afraid to shelve otherwise accomplished tunes that didn’t meet their exacting criteria.

Counting Down To Ecstasy: 1972-1973

Unimpeded by the excess of touring, Steely Dan’s early sessions in California befitted a songwriting partnership beyond their years. Jim Hodder, the band’s original drummer and occasional vocalist, infused a real flavour into their early fresh-sounding band hits. His relaxed, West Coast feel was reminiscent of the playing of Richie Heyward and Jim Keltner; his laidback but straight-ahead eighth notes surely, Jim Hodder was being edged out. It’s believed that Fagen and Becker sought a raw authenticity for the funk-tinged ‘Night By Night’, and that Hodder couldn’t quite cut it. Guitarist Denny Dias, famous for his electric sitar solo on ‘Do It Again’, suggested a young hotshot drummer, Jeff Porcaro, as a replacement. It’s said that the bespectacled drum prodigy was greeted with the sight of a noose hanging from the rafters when he arrived at Steely Dan’s studio. Fortunately he was quick to get the joke.

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to detail complemented the pulsating bossa groove and mystery minor chords of, for instance, ‘Do It Again’, and the spiky snare and hi-hat partnership set off the energetic ‘Bodhisattva’ perfectly.

Fagen and Becker may have eschewed media attention, but they were anything but complacent in the studio. For their early albums at least, there were no computerized mix-downs, so everything had to be spot on from the beginning. Engineer Roger Nichols remarks in Brian Sweet’s absorbing Steely Dan biography, Reelin’ In The Years, about the problems with the tempo on “Show Biz Kids” from their second album, Count Down To Ecstasy. “We had a lot of problems trying to record a perfect, ultimately steady drum track; it was just one of those tunes that was so difficult to play in tempo, with everything in synch. There were no drum machines in those days, so we’d make a 24-track eight-bar loop, which at 30ips was a considerable length of tape. We trailed it out through the door, around an idler to a second 24-track machine. Everything was on that except the vocal and lead guitar. It worked like a dream.”

Skewed Logic: 1974-1975

1974’s ‘Pretzel Logic’ was an instant success and with it Steely Dan had staked their ground. But, slowly but surely, Jim Hodder was being edged out. It’s believed that Fagen and Becker sought a new drummer; that Hodder couldn’t quite cut it. Guitarist Denny Dias, famous for his electric sitar solo on ‘Do It Again’, suggested a young hotshot drummer, Jeff Porcaro, as a replacement. It’s said that the bespectacled drum prodigy was greeted with the sight of a noose hanging from the rafters when he arrived at their studio. Porcaro was quick to get the joke, and would soon become a passionate fan of their music.

Fagen and Becker, perhaps influenced by their producer Gary Katz, had already begun to relinquish the band format and opted to rely on recommended session musicians to help underpin and execute their arrangements. Some might argue that using too many drummers on different albums could dilute an act’s sound, although this wasn’t the case for the remainder of Pretzel Logic. Further drum duties were handed to Jim Gordon, who had toured with Traffic, Frank Zappa and John Lennon, and was perhaps best known for being the co-writer of Derek And The Dominos’ ‘Layla’ with Eric Clapton. Gordon quickly added his adroit touch to the album, including to what was arguably the Dan’s biggest hit, ‘Rikki Don’t Lose That Number’. Jim Keltner, who would later play on Aja’s ‘Josie’, lauded Gordon to Modern Drummer magazine in 1992: “When
“‘I’m the wrong guy! You should get Jim Gordon,’ I told Gary Katz. After walking around the block three times, cursing myself, I came back in and cut it” Jeff Porcaro on recording ‘Black Friday’
The Making of Aja

Released in late 1977 and recorded mostly in Los Angeles, Aja was Steely Dan's magnum opus. Replete with both intricate and thundering jazz-rock constructions underpinning achingly, wistful lyrics, the album stayed in the US chart Top 3 for over a year, entering the UK Top 5 without the aid of a hit single. Many will know the album best for its epic seminal title track, an eight-minute masterpiece in which Steve Gadd trades solos with saxophonist Wayne Shorter.

It's widely held that Gadd nailed 'Aja' on the first take, to the astonishment of Fagen and Becker, who supposedly asked him to play it again to see if it was really possible. Steve Gadd told Rhythm, rather modestly, "I don't know if that was the take, but I did read it straight down. They had been playing that chart with different drummers all week, so the band really knew it. I went in - I don't know if they took the first take - but we got through it! It was pretty good." This silences any critic who believed Steely Dan's music was over-produced and staid. Walter Becker, as quoted in Brian Sweet's Reelin' In The Years, said: "Gary Katz is also noted as stating 'Aja' was recorded in an hour-and-a-half. It doesn't sound like it's being read or played by studio hacks; it doesn't sound like it's been made by old men; it doesn't sound commercially motivated. It sounds like good music to me."

"'Aja' is a classic, and has to be counted as one of the great Steely Dan songs," agrees Rick Marotta. Aja won a Grammy Award for Best Engineered Recording and has sold over 6 million copies worldwide. It's a staple of any aspiring drummer's record collection, but should be enjoyed for more than the stellar performance on the title track – particular news, 'I Got the News', a bopping funk number by Ed Greene, and 'Josie', played by Jim Keltner, a track which epitomises musical drumming. Perhaps the most successful Aja track is 'Peg', which soon become an FRM radio staple. "The approach to 'Peg' was to come up with something original," says Rick Marotta. "They didn't tell me that that's what you try to do – to play a groove. I did, and Chuck started playing too. He wasn't supposed to pop. He did. We went to the chorus and changed things up just a little, and it worked. I don't think we took an intellectual approach to the song, we just started feeling it together. We did that a lot together back then. That day we just happened to come up with something a little different that worked really well, I think. I am proud of that recording. I felt that the track was shaped by me and Chuck and that the rest just fell into place. The players on the session were the best you could have, so it was a no-brainer for them. What more do you need? It's not rocket science, it's a musical moment caught on tape. Lucky for us all, I guess."

"Everybody that played with them had their own concept of what that song is supposed to sound like. If Gadd, Marotta and so on were not doing what they were doing on those songs, those songs would not be quite so happening" Bernard Purdie

Murder of his mother. He has received life, with no chance for parole," says Hal Blaine - the legendary drummer who featured on Steely Dan's Katy Lied about the tragic situation. "It's the saddest story among sad stories and, of course, it was all due to his drug abuse and mental condition since childhood."

Until his illness took hold, Gordon was one of the most requested great drummers of the '70s, and there's little doubt that he would have consolidated his place as one of the most sought-after drummers of his generation.

Steely Dan toured America in 1974, taking the double-drumming phenomenon of Porcaro and Hodder with them. Hodder, who may have foreseen an end to his tenure, was still enthusiastic when he later told Melody Maker, "Fagen had wanted two drummers since the band was formed. I was against it at first, but what the hell, it gives us time to relax in different parts so we can concentrate on the next fill. I like having the two of us drumming. It doesn't always work and you have to forget about your ego. It's great material to play and we only clash occasionally, but not so anyone would notice."

After the last gig of Steely Dan's Pretzel Logic tour in 1974, it was announced that Hodder and acclaimed guitarist Jeff ‘Skunk’ Baxter had left the band. Hodder moved on to other gigs, but his career was cruelly cut short when he died in a swimming pool accident in 1990. His tasteful performances on the album stayed in the US album chart Top 3 for over a year, entering the UK Top 5 without the aid of a hit single. His playing was the textbook for me. No one ever had finer-sounding cymbals or drums, or played his kit so beautifully and balanced. And nobody had that particular groove."

In the late 1970s, Jim Gordon complained of hearing voices in his head and was later diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. By 1981, his condition had virtually ended his career and, in June 1983, Gordon was found guilty of murder. He was sentenced to 16-years-to-life in prison in 1984, although rumours abound about misdiagnosis and subsequent sentencing. "Jim is still in prison for the murder of his mother. He has received life, with no chance for parole," says Hal Blaine - the legendary drummer who featured on Steely Dan's Katy Lied about the tragic situation. "It's the saddest story among sad stories and, of course, it was all due to his drug abuse and mental condition since childhood."

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Steely Dan's appetite for the latest hi-tech studio wizardry almost backfired during the recording of Katy Lied, and it was a close call as to whether the album would be actually released. Rumour has it that Fagen and Becker were so anguished by the sound fidelity due to the faulty tape machine they had used during recording that for a long while they refused to listen to the album in its final form.

Even for an up-coming session heavyweight like the late Jeff Porcaro, there were rigorous standards to live up to, as he told Modern Drummer magazine in 1992: "On 'Black Friday', for example, I was thinking of Jim Gordon, my shuffle champion. I got real frustrated trying to play it, and just threw a big tantrum. 'I'm the wrong guy! You should get Jim Gordon,' I told Gary Katz. After walking around the block three times, cursing myself, I came back in and cut it."

Later Years: Session Aces

By now Steely Dan's session workshop approach was gathering steam. Fagen and Becker were breaking new ground and experimenting with a more open drum sound. Enter Rick Marotta and Bernard Purdie,
who would feature prominently on the last three albums before the band's 20-year studio hiatus, *The Royal Scam*, *Aja* and *Gaucho*. Pioneer of the 'Purdie Shuffle', Bernard was renowned for his work as Atlantic Records' in-house session drummer, and was often championed as the 'godfather of funk soul drumming.' He was perhaps one of Steely Dan's most vicious hired guns - and not at all bashful about his abilities. It's said that Purdie carried around several signs, which he'd place either side of his kit during sessions, that would sing praises such as 'The World's Greatest Drummer' and 'The Hitmaker'. When we quiz Bernard about these legendary claims, he confirms that "Yes, it's all true," although he denies requesting a co-writing credit for 'Home At Last', a tale that has stemmed from the fact that his hallmark shuffle was an integral feature of the song: "No, that's not true," he tells us, "but I should have - I'm sorry that I didn't!"

According to credits, Purdie made the final cut on most of the *The Royal Scam* album (for some of which he overdubbed the work of earlier drummers), powered 'Deacon Blues' and 'Home At Last' on *Aja*, and 'Babylon Sisters' on *Gaucho*. *The Royal Scam* 'Kid Charlemagne' is a shining example of tasteful yet watertight drumming, exemplary songwriting and a depth of sound that would put many contemporary productions to shame. In light of this, it's no surprise that, as Purdie claims, he was hired to fix a few tunes from Steely Dan's first two albums.

So how open-minded were Fagen and Becker to the inimitable Purdie shuffle? "They were precise in what they wanted and expressed very highly what they didn't want," says Bernard. "The first thing they said is that they didn't want a shuffle and they didn't want the four-to-the-floor on the bass drum. I said, 'Okay, so that locks out two of the two things that you seem to want to do!' I listened to the song and suggested that it sounds like the Purdie shuffle really should be there. They said 'No'. I said, 'I think you want to hear what I have in mind, because it's going to give you the forward motion that you want, the feel of the backbeat and you're going to get the feel of the music in a forward motion.' I didn't know at the beginning how to totally explain the Purdie shuffle, except that it covered everything: quarter notes, dotted notes, half notes, whole notes, triplets - you name it."

You can heard Purdie's inimitable driving style in most songs he recorded for Steely Dan. "I was trying to incorporate my 'locomotion'. It's a situation where it's constantly moving forward and, as you keep on going, it can get faster; it can bring things out of me. I'm just trying to keep everything intense and keep it happening, at the same time keeping the tempo where it's supposed to be. In order for that to happen, there's just a certain way that you have to approach this style of playing."

Purdie's approach to preparing for the recording of the Steely Dan tracks was an unusual one; "First, they played whatever they had for me," he remembers. "I'd listen to where things were on the control room speakers, I listened to what they had to say, and then when I got back into the studio, I'd listen with the phones on. Then, before I'd play, I would start singing a part for myself, and that's what I actually see - a vision. I've been singing my parts all my life. For me, it wasn't a technique, it's just something that I did to prepare."

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Fagen and Becker were notorious for requesting take after take, with reportedly 30 or 40 takes of a track being the norm, as Purdie recalls. "The number of takes would go from 10 to a 100. But for me, when I know that I have made the best sound, the best feel, I tell them what track it is! Invariably it was the one that they would use." As guitarist Steve Khan once said, "When Purdie puts his hat and coat on, and says, 'That's it,' that's it, even for Fagen and Becker."

Bernard Purdie still feels that the parts contributed by the various hired guns called up to serve the Steely Dan cause was what really made the band's songs special. "I admire all of them," he says of his fellow Steely Dan sticksmen. "Everybody that played with them had their own concept of what that song is supposed to sound like, and that is why Steely Dan was so together - but if Gadd, Marotta and so on were not doing what they were doing on those songs, those songs would not be quite so happening. I am very proud of my work with
Steely Dan, I really am. It does make me feel that good.”

When we speak to Rick Marotta about his time with Steely Dan, he remembers being surprisingly unaware of the band when he got the call. “When I was called in to do The Royal Scam I didn’t know who they were,” he admits. “Donald came up to me and said how he was a fan, and I was like, ‘Yeah, fine, let’s get this over with.’ Larry Carlton was there cleaning the fretboard of his guitar, not saying much, and Donald sat down at the piano. And then we got to work and I was blown away. We started with ‘Don’t Take Me Alive’. The first thing I heard was the lyrics: ‘Agents of the law, luckless pedestrians.’ After about 48 bars, I stopped playing and said, ‘What the hell are you talking about?’. They explained what the song was about and how they came to writing it, and that was all it took for me to realize how great they were and that I was in for a ride.” Marotta doesn’t mince his words about the frustrations of trying to get the perfect take, however: “It was more than taxing. They’re crazy in the studio, and not always productively. I really respect them, but they could be pains in the asses.” What about the creative input they welcomed? “We had charts but used them as roadmaps. They let us contribute whatever we had and we did it whether they liked it or not,” he recalls. “They wanted us for what we could bring to the music. If they didn’t like it, they could get someone else - and they did.”

The musical bond between Purdie, Marotta and bassist Chuck Rainey was the key to the distinctively rich sound Steely Dan were becoming increasingly renowned for, and it nicely buttressed the funk-infused jazz-rock grooves of the band’s later albums. “I played with Chuck Rainey a lot then,” continues Rick Marotta. “He was exceptional. He had an amazing musical fit with Bernard too. The other guys like that were Jeff Porcaro and Steve Gadd – they were amazing drummers and incredibly supportive. I have so much respect for them. I had a lot to learn from them all.” And Rick’s kit? “I used a regular drum kit, 22” bass drum, 3” toms that I don’t think I ever hit, Zildjian cymbals and a great old wooden snare drum that I got from the professional drum shop in New York. It was supposed to have been one of Buddy Rich’s drums, and I love it. I put an old CanoSonic head on it so that it was a bit dead and had a great thuddy crack.”

Like Bernard Purdie, Jeff Porcaro and most other drum talents Steely Dan called upon, Rick is happy that he was involved, and attests to some of the greatest songs that became discarded outtakes (and, subsequently, bootleggers’ favourites), “Some never made it to the albums, and they were some of the best songs I had heard. The ones I most liked which were released and which I definitely ended up on are ‘Don’t Take Me Alive’, ‘Peg’, ‘Time Out Of Mind’ and ‘Hey Nineteen’.”

Gauchos Into the ‘80s

After the exemplary performances on Aja, there was much pressure on Gaucho and the individuals who played on it to live up to the rising hype. Gadd, Porcaro and Purdie all shared drum duties on the album, but there’s still a polished sheen to Gaucho that suggests Fagen and Becker’s notorious meticulousness hadn’t abated. Despite the album’s standout track, ‘Babylon Sisters’, being purportedly recorded in just two attempts, Fagen, Becker et al were keen to embrace the developing technology to help them capture the exact sound they wanted. As Roger Nichols explains in Brian Sweet’s autobiography, “Instead of changing EQ on the board to change a drum sound, we’ll bring in 52 different types of kicks or snares to get the sound we want. We find it better to make the adjustments at the instrument end.” Roger Nichols also used his own drum machine invention for the computerized assistance: the eight-bit Wendel, which emulated the subtleties of a human drummer - although all drum credits were attributed to a live drummer. It’s difficult to tell exactly how much of each song is actually human playing, but ‘Third World Man’ - on which Steve Gadd gives a beautifully sensitive performance - Porcaro’s stellar performance on the title track, Purdie’s peerless shuffle on ‘Babylon Sisters’, and Marotta’s take on ‘Time Out Of Mind’ are all clearly organic. As a further credit to his engineering mastery, Nichols won his third Grammy in five years.

The partnership that was Steely Dan may have sought perfection, but the end results were far from clinical. The performances from that period sound as fresh today as they did back then but, in 1981, the band disbanded, marking the end of an era for Steely Dan. They were to return 19 years later, however, and in next month’s Rhythm we speak to the major players whose beats fuelled the momentum of one of the world’s finest jazz-rock fusion bands - including Peter Erskine, Ricky Lawson and Jon Herington - all the way into the 1990s and beyond.

TOP 3 STEELY CLIPS

Classic Steely Dan moments on YouTube

‘KID CHARLEMAGNE’ LIVE
This clip was recorded in New York, with Ricky Lawson on drums. Search for: Steely Dan Charlemagne

REELIN’ IN THE YEARS
Jim Hodder hits it home in 1973, live on ‘The Midnight Special’. Search for: Steely Dan Reelin’ ‘70s

DO IT AGAIN
Another classic from 1973, with Hodder at the kit! Search for: Steely Dan Classic Rock

“It was more than taxing. They’re crazy in the studio, and not always productively. I really respect them, but they could be pains in the asses”

Rick Marotta on Donald Fagen and Walter Becker