

Review: Steely Dan in supreme form

Review: Rejuvenated after three years of touring, the one-of-a-kind band, which plays Aug. 4 in Anaheim, delivered arguably its best performance this decade.

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It's been five years since Steely Dan issued its last album, "Everything Must Go." At the time, the title, from the disc's closing song about a corporation partying up as it's going out of business, somewhat suggested that this might be the last we'd hear from Donald Fagen and Walter Becker, those snarky eccentrics, masters of their own profoundly influential jazz-funk-rock idiom – an impeccable sound recognizable from just one chord out of Fagen's filtered electric piano or one weirdly harmonized horn sustain laying over a syncopated groove.

Becker, in a recent Rolling Stone interview, didn't rule out the possibility that he and his partner might eventually cut a new batch of tunes. Yet sometimes it can still seem as though "Everything" will remain the duo's final studio statement – for recently they've done everything but plan a 10th Dan album. Two years ago Fagen issued "Morph the Cat," the last piece in a solo trilogy that began with 1982's "The Nightfly" – and just last month Becker released the reggae-heavy "Circus Money," his second Fagen-free set and first of the sort since 1994's "11 Tracks of Whack."

Meanwhile, the sophisticates who early in their careers swore off touring in part because they couldn't achieve on stage what they could meticulously control in the studio have now spent the better part of the past three years on the road. California wasn't included in last year's Heavy Rollers outing, but this summer's Think Fast trek just began journeying up and down the coast, making two local stops – Wednesday night's superb set at Nokia Theatre in downtown L.A., followed by an Aug. 4 show at the Theatre at Honda Center in Anaheim.

So they haven't become inert – if anything, they're more active now than at any other time in their storied (if interrupted) past.

Two years ago, when I complained that Don and Walt and Co. turned in a rather perfunctory performance at Irvine's Verizon Wireless Amphitheater (and wasted opportunities with opening act and former supporting player Michael McDonald), I couldn't help but wonder why such nostalgia resisters were bothering, other than to pick up a paycheck. Merely keeping chops sharp seemed a feeble excuse; after all, if they just wanted a workout, they could simply plot a string of dates at, say, New York's Beacon Theatre, like the six-date run they just played in June, and come away feeling up-to-snuff again.

I left that show sensing Steely Dan had succumbed in a way I never thought it would – it had lost some edge. Sounds crazy to say



IMPECCABLE: Steely Dan's Donald Fagen, always an unusual voice, sounded stronger than he has on any Dan tour since 2000 during the band's Nokia Theatre show Wednesday night. Bassist Freddie Washington is in the background. The band plays again Aug. 4 at the Theatre at Honda Center in Anaheim.

KEVIN SULLIVAN, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

about a group that, perhaps more than any other of the last four decades, could be held responsible for the rise of smooth jazz. But the Dan has always been different – the terminally bland music it hath wrought was never any measure of the fractured funkiness (lyrical as well as musical) that Fagen and Becker injected into the mainstream like an overdose of heroin.

Along with everything else that can be said of its challenging music – how demanding it is of even highly skilled players, how film-noir cool but also soulfulness leaps from such immaculate conceptions – it's also true that Steely Dan is just plain brilliantly weird.

Always ironically humorous, and more endearingly above-it-all since its masterminds started reelin' in the years, Fagen, 60, and Becker, 58, have concocted an indelible songbook by rooting around in society's underbelly. Their lyrics have pored over drug dealers ("Kid Charlemagne"), New Orleans streetwalkers ("Pearl of the Quarter"), Me Decade romantic drifters ("Haitian Divorce"), lecherous relatives ("Cousin Dupree"), Adolph Hitler ("Pretzel Logic"), whatever "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" is about – and maybe, just maybe, there's been a self-portrait or two, though we'll probably never know which ones qualify for sure.

So here's the amazingly redemptive thing about Wednesday's Nokia show, even more so than the fact that here at last was a group that could finally make that movie-theater of a concert venue sound warm: Suddenly it's as if the Dan has gotten its groove back.

Not only did so many details come across more trenchantly (in older pieces like "The Royal Scam," in newer satire like "Godwhacker"), not only was their fascination with the dark side of the Southwest more pronounced (whether in the Lost Wages skewering of "Show Biz Kids" or the picturesque "Glamour Profession"), but the music itself often sounded refurbished, expertly tweaked by the same band of aces I saw in 2006, here rising to the challenge of fresh reinterpretation. (And let us now bow at the drum altar of the mighty Keith Carlock, for his immensely impressive dynamics – robust and progressive yet never obtrusive – greatly enliven old workhorses while his stunning fills often boggle the brain. They say Keith Moon played as if he had eight arms. Carlock's working with at least 10.)

Mind you, what you'd get out of this show depends on how you like your Dan these days. Devotees of more willfully odd early albums like "Pretzel Logic" (which yielded only a swift "Parker's Band," sung by the ensemble's trio of backing vocalists) and "Katy Lied" (which yielded only a bit of "Everyone's Gone to the Movies" in an overture) must have been disappointed to some degree.

With each tour Becker and Fagen increasingly return to their most complex period, 1976-1980, this night dusting off half of the criminally underrated "The Royal Scam" (though none of it retains its paranoid thrill anymore), the majority of the indestructible "Aja" (Carlock was incredible on the title track) and five of seven from "Gaucho." Toss "FM" (the usual encore-ender) and Fagen's Kennedy-era snapshot "New Frontier" (cast from the same sonic mold) onto your homemade mix disc and you'll have most everything they played here. ([See the complete set list here.](#))

Which is hardly a complaint. I do wish, though, seeing as they seem so rejuvenated, that B&F had opted not to enlist opening act the Joey DeFrancesco Trio and instead served up two sets, using one of them to retool some unexpected gems. "Your Gold Teeth" and "Doctor Wu" are just begging for an overhauling, doncha think, guys? Maybe in '09?

Or, heck, how 'bout for the Anaheim gig? You were so supreme here, you've convinced me to come again.