



An Eminent Hipster Speaks

By Allen Morrison
PHOTO BY DANNY CLINCH

During the second season of the TV series “Breaking Bad,” in the episode titled “Down,” there is an amusing bit of father-son banter across the breakfast table. Fifty-year-old Walt is trying, with a notable lack of success, to bridge the generation gap musically with his teenage son, Walt Jr.

Walt: Got one—Steely Dan.

Walt Jr.: Uh, no.

Walt: Absolutely ... In terms of pure musicianship, I'd put them up against any current band you could name.

Walt Jr.: You wouldn't know any current bands.

Walt: Wait, I got another one—Boz Scaggs.

Walt Jr.: Whoever they are.

There were a lot of Walts—that is to say, music fans of a certain age—in the audience during the 2012 national tour of the “Dukes of September Rhythm Revue,” a group that included Steely Dan co-founder Donald Fagen, Michael McDonald and the aforementioned Scaggs. In Fagen's new book, *Eminent Hipsters* (Viking), which includes his diary of the Dukes' 2010 summer tour, he writes, “Mike, Boz and I are pretty old now and so is most of our audience. Tonight, though, the crowd looked so geriatric I was tempted to start calling out bingo numbers.”

Getting older is clearly on Fagen's mind. Speaking on the telephone from Memphis on a day off from Steely Dan's summer 2013 tour, he explains the “bingo” crack this way: “I was trying to be humorous. I'm really making fun of myself in a way: I'm just as old as they are. I'm basically looking at Xeroxes of myself out there. There is something funny about it.”

The affronts of advancing age have been a major theme of his songwriting at least since Steely Dan's 1980 hit “Hey Nineteen.” “When you get older,” he says, “you just see things in a different way, and you're more conscious of mortality, that's for sure. I had a lot of trouble with my rotator cuff. I had my gallbladder out. I've got trouble with my left foot—I'm like limping around,” he laughs. “Pieces of me fall off every once in a while, and I just pick them up off the sidewalk.”

Is Fagen really over the hill? Not according to DownBeat readers, who voted his fourth solo album, *Sunken Condos* (Reprise), Beyond Album of the Year. (The album got plenty of support from critics, too, taking second place in the same category in this year's DownBeat Critics Poll.)

In fact, Fagen is, creatively, enjoying a new lease on life, selling out arenas with his

songwriting partner Walter Becker as part of the revived Steely Dan, and embarking on a five-city lecture tour to support *Eminent Hipsters*. Many fans and critics regard *Sunken Condos* as Fagen's best solo album since his 1982 masterpiece, *The Nightfly*. The sound is spare, funky jazz-rock; meticulous grooves with a menagerie of unusual keyboards, as well as gorgeous vocals, crafty horn arranging and the occasional outstanding soloist, such as guitarist Kurt Rosenwinkel. The set contains some of Fagen's hookiest melodies since the Steely Dan classics *Aja* (1977) and *Gaucho* (1980).

Surely, the victory in DownBeat's poll must give Fagen some encouragement about his continued relevance, especially considering that many of the magazine's readers are young jazz musicians.

“I was surprised, actually,” he says. “The record sold pretty well, better than I expected, but I had no idea what kind of reception it would get.”

Younger fans also turned out for this summer's Steely Dan shows. Fagen says the band, which regrouped in 1993, has been drawing audiences of all ages, including young musicians, college students and parents with pre-teens.

Sunken Condos was co-produced by longtime Steely Dan trumpeter Michael Leonhart, a musical polymath who, in addition to playing trumpet and flugelhorn, co-arranged the horns and vocals (with Fagen), played a variety of vintage keyboards and synths, sang background vocals and served as lead engineer. Using the pseudonym Earl Cooke Jr., Leonhart also played drums on every track.

“I knew I wasn't there to replace Walter,” says Leonhart. “I was there to produce and to help Donald get his vision out. And he really gave me

carte blanche to try some things." Leonhart sees the new album as having "connective tissue" with Steely Dan material as well as Fagen's first solo album. "There's the sonic palette," he notes, "the sound of the bass and the drums, the tones on the guitar, the economy of the arrangements, the way the Prophet 5 doubles some of the lines in the horn section—that's straight out of the blueprint from late '70s Steely Dan into *The Nightfly*." Also like the earlier albums, the "live feel" is more studio-manufactured, a product of precise groove construction and layering.

Thematically, Fagen calls *Sunken Condos* a continuation of the exploration of mortality that infused his 2006 solo CD, *Morph The Cat* (Reprise), "but not quite as depressing as *Morph*, which was written in the wake of 9/11. I try to be honest. It's true of the work I do with Walter, too. We never try to be lifelong teenagers. So whatever our life is about, that's reflected in the songs."

Fagen's new book, *Eminent Hipsters*, is a collection of autobiographical sketches, interviews and appreciations of musicians who shaped his musical personality, including such disparate figures as New Orleans' Boswell Sisters, Henry Mancini, Ray Charles and Mort Fega, the all-night jazz DJ on New York's WEVD. A kind of down payment on a full autobiography, the book crackles with Fagen's cranky wit; it's also surprisingly sincere, providing a window through Fagen's sometimes ironic facade into his art and soul.

In a chapter titled "Class of '69," Fagen chronicles his adolescence and college years at Bard, from which he graduated as an English major. He describes himself in high school as "an intro-

verted jazz snob," "a first-tier nerd, and pitifully lonely." While the other kids were "attending sports events or knocking over gas stations," he writes, he was in his room reading magazines and science fiction, or sitting at the piano "copping licks off Red Garland records." In the same chapter, we also learn the real story behind "My Old School," and why Fagen and Becker said they were never going back to Annandale, although Fagen changed his mind in 1985 to accept an honorary doctorate. (Both Fagen and Becker were awarded honorary doctorates from Berklee College of Music in 2001.)

Of special note to jazz fans is his account of going to jazz clubs in the West Village, starting at age 12. Fagen was such a frequent presence at the Village Vanguard in the early '60s that legendary owner Max Gordon would seat him at a banquette near the drum kit, where he sipped Cokes while watching legends such as Charles Mingus and Earl "Fatha" Hines (see sidebar on page 55).

Considering how strongly influenced Fagen was by jazz and hipster culture, and his abundant talents as a jazz-rock composer, one wonders if he ever contemplated moving further into pure jazz. After he suffered from a period of self-described depression and panic attacks in the 1980s that led to creative paralysis, he eventually emerged with a move into soul and r&b as maestro of the New York Rock and Soul Revue, with Boz Scaggs and Phoebe Snow, among others.

"I still loved jazz harmony and many of its other qualities, but rhythmically I didn't know where to take it," he says. "I was kind of disappointed in a lot of the fusion experiments going

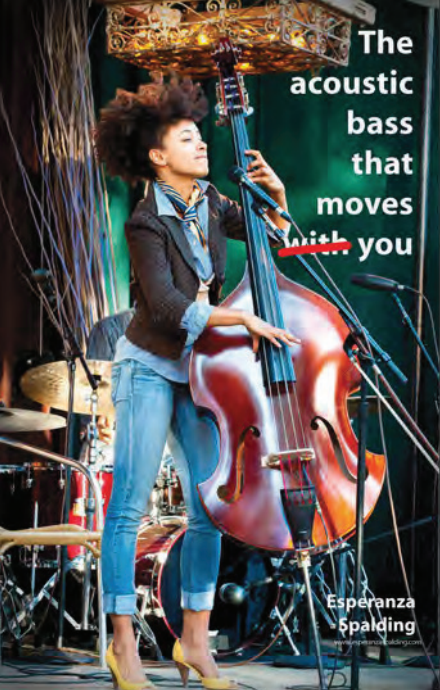
on at the time, and I also really enjoyed playing in an r&b rhythm section. When I was 17 and 18, I really got into Motown and the way the bass and drums interacted, and Southern soul music, and in the late '60s more funk like Sly & The Family Stone. I noticed I really enjoyed the role of the keyboard player in that situation. And I was never a fantastic jazz player—I have some skills, and they got better as I got older, but I never had the speed that most professional jazz players have."

Fagen is not an avid follower of the current jazz scene, saying he often feels that today's jazz is not saying anything that hadn't been said before in the '60s. "Back then there were a lot of what you might call postmodern players, who were playing with the old-fashioned [sounds] even back then. I may not have loved them, but there was something cool about it. Even Albert Ayler—although I found him hard to listen to on a sustained basis—there was some kernel of creativity about what he was doing. That sound that went back to the very beginning of jazz—New Orleans marching bands and stuff like that, which I found very interesting. I loved Ornette Coleman's early stuff, and certainly Eric Dolphy. I loved George Russell and the players he was using.

"There was all kinds of experimental stuff back then—to me it even went further than a lot of the stuff you hear today. I like Don Byron ... he's cool. I like Henry Threadgill ... but these guys are now not so young." He enthusiastically embraces the suggestion that, despite what some may think, these artists are still cutting-edge. "They are!" he says. "That's what I'm saying. Who's crazier than Albert Ayler?" Probably nobody, he agrees.

What Fagen really likes is "kind of old-fashioned, swinging jazz and hard-bop through 1964-'65," he says. "Just like with r&b, there was a generation of black artists whose experience coming out of the church gave them a certain attitude towards playing that I don't hear much anymore. I know there are thousands of great players out there; it's just that a lot of times I feel there's something missing. It's nobody's fault—it's just a culture change." Fagen feels a bit out of step with the times, which is often reflected in his lyrics. "It's like the high-tech culture; that's [also] something I can't really melt into. There's something post-human about it."

Although many critics credit Steely Dan with synthesizing a distinctive amalgam of jazz and r&b, Fagen is not sure how innovative they actually were. "I think of innovation as like Charlie Parker, or Stravinsky, or something like that. Of course, everything is a combination of past things, in a way. But there's a kind of magic transformation that makes for innovation—I don't know if we qualify in that regard. Yeah, I think we invented something—a kind of language that's derived largely from jazz and r&b that may be a little different. And especially combined with a kind of literary sensibility that went into the lyrics. But, frankly, that's not for me to decide." ☞



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Potent Prose

In this excerpt from Donald Fagen's new memoir, *Eminent Hipsters* (Viking), the vocalist and keyboardist reminisces about visiting jazz clubs in New York when he was a teenager, including the Village Vanguard.

Two of the most mind-blowing musicians I got to see at the Vanguard were both patriarchs of early jazz who were still active in the sixties. Earl "Fatha" Hines had been a member of Armstrong's original Hot Five and, during the thirties, had been the main attraction at Al Capone's Grand Terrace Ballroom in Chicago. As if that weren't enough, the band he'd led in the forties, the one that included Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Gene Ammons and Wardell Gray, was the first big band to feature bebop players and arrangements. Hines's gold lamé jacket, legendary smile and many-ringed fingers had the same effect on me as I'm sure they had on the crowd at the Grand Terrace. And then he began to play. I pretty much knew what to expect: he still played clean and swinging. I suppose it was my romantic imagination, but the music seemed to be enhanced by a sonic glow, an aura earned on its journey across an ocean of time.

The same could be said of the music of Willie "The Lion" Smith. In the twenties and thirties, Willie had been one of the mighty virtuosos who developed Harlem "stride" piano. In the sixties, Willie was still sharp and strong, a past master who seemed to have walked straight from a Depression rent party into the present, complete with cocked derby, milk bottle glasses and clenched cigar. He'd worked up his act into a seminar in jazz history, alternating pieces from his repertoire with stories about the musical life of Harlem, the cutting contests, the gangsters and the nuances that defined the styles of his contemporaries James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Luckey Roberts and Eubie Blake. He had a special affection for his protégé Duke Ellington, whose works he generously performed.

Claiming that his father was a Jewish gambler, Willie peppered his tales with Yiddishisms and made a point of wearing a Jewish star. Though the jive was fascinating, the real fun began when he commenced his abuse of the Steinway, his phenomenal left hand pumping like a locomotive as the right filigreed the melody. After knocking out his version of "Carolina Shout," Willie's comment was "Now that's what you call . . . real good." But he could be lyrical too, as he was on his own "Echoes of Spring."

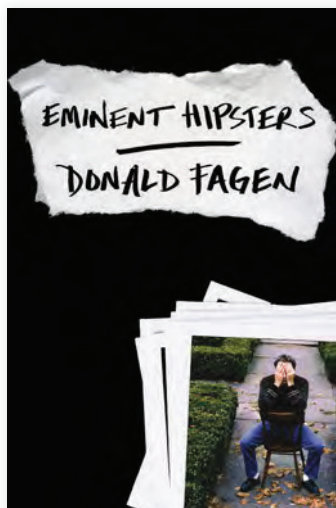
One more thing about the tough, road-hardened African American entertainers from the twenties who had to be heard without the benefit of microphones, men like Willie, Earl Hines, Coleman Hawkins, Ellington's band: they could play *REALLY LOUD*!

Bill Evans at the Vanguard was always a gas. Those familiar only with his studio recordings don't realize what a spry, funky hard-charger he could be on "up" material in a live setting. When he played quirky tunes like "Little Lulu," he could be funny, too. Of course, even then, he rarely shifted out of that posture you see in photos, doubled over at the waist, head inside the piano as if trying to locate a rattly string. By the late seventies, I noticed that this quintessential modernist had developed an odd, loping shuffle in his right-hand lines, as if he was regressing to an antiquated rhythmic style dating back to Willie Smith's day. What was up with that?

In this excerpt, Fagan writes about a 2012 gig he played with the Dukes of September Rhythm Revue.

In a house where I'm able to hear some detail in the monitors, there's no better job than being in a good rhythm section. If it's jazz, there's more freedom, but juicy groove music has its own thing. Also, as the piano player, not to mention the bandleader, I'm not confined to always playing the same part, though that's fun too. When everything's working right, you become transfixed by the notes and chords and the beautiful spaces in between. In the center of it, with the drums, bass and guitar all around you, the earth falls away and it's just you and your crew creating this forward motion, this undeniable, magical stuff that can move ten thousand people to snap free of life's miseries and get up and dance and scream and feel just fine.

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