

Puluche Album Review Rubric ©

Artist: Steely Dan

Album Title: Aja (1977) - ABC

Categories	Criteria				Rating
	4 - Exemplary	3 - Proficient	2 - Developing	1 - Underdeveloped	
<u>Compositions</u>	Every song is quality and has a distinctive appeal of its own. Tracks have a perfect flow and continuity that enhance the album's overall appeal.	Many quality songs with distinctive appeal. Tracks have a good flow and continuity that enhance the album's overall appeal.	Some quality songs with distinctive appeal but not sustained. Track flow and continuity have little effect on album's overall appeal.	Few to no quality songs lacking any distinctive appeal. Track flow and continuity have little/poor effect on album's overall appeal.	20
<u>Breaking Ground</u>	Has impressive elements of high creativity and is experimentally innovative. Developing own signature sound. Shows extreme growth and/or potential as a substantial and influential artist.	Features elements of creativity and uniqueness. Shows growth and/or potential as a developing and influential artist.	Has very few moments of creativity and uniqueness. Shows little growth and/or some potential as a developing artist. Displays some stagnation or notable regression as an established artist.	Has no creativity and uniqueness. Shows no growth and/or little potential as a developing or established artist.	20
<u>Engagement</u>	Music has a transcending quality with numerous songs that grab the listener on respective emotional/social levels. Many songs have an addictive effect and memorable quality.	Music has transcending qualities with some songs that grab the listener on respective emotional/social levels. Some songs have an addictive effect and memorable quality.	Music has some transcending qualities with few songs that appeal on respective emotional/social levels, as well as having any addictive or memorable qualities.	Music has minimal transcending qualities and few to no songs that appeal on respective emotional/social levels. No positive memorable qualities.	20
<u>Lyrical Voice</u>	Has a strong lyrical voice with multiple thought-provoking messages with clear and/or possible meanings and depth.	Has notable lyrical voice with some thought-provoking messages and/or possible meanings and depth.	Has limited lyrical voice with few-to-no thought-provoking messages, meanings and depth.	Has a weak lyrical voice with no thought-provoking messages or meanings and seriously lacks any depth.	20
<u>Production</u>	Masterful sound quality with noticeable studio techniques employed that demand headphone inquiry. Vision flawlessly executed. Overall packaging and artwork effectively compliments and enhances album enjoyment.	Very good sound quality with some noticeable studio techniques that demand headphone inquiry. Vision is acceptable. Overall packaging and artwork compliments album enjoyment.	Inconsistent sound quality with questionable studio techniques employed. Vision is questionable. Overall packaging and artwork fails to compliment album.	Questionable to poor sound quality. Lacks vision. Overall packaging and artwork fails to compliment album.	20

Comments

The core members of Steely Dan, multi-instrumentalists Donald Fagan and Walter Becker, are outstanding musicians who can also be categorized as eccentric perfectionists. Since their formation in 1972, the band released six remarkable records during this decade - followed by the stellar 1980 release of *Gaucho* - each having a story to tell due to the personalities and extreme talents that Fagan and Becker brought into the studio.

Labeled as a jazz rock band, Steely Dan were able to crossover to mass appeal due to their brilliantly constructed compositions and sophisticated harmonies.

Their presence in the 70s culminated with the classic 1977 release of *Aja*. The vision for this album was clear: incorporate several leading session musicians that would best suit the style of each song. Here's the kicker: an incredible total of thirty five studio musicians were used to complete the album. Needless to say, producer Gary Katz had his hands full (working with Fagan, Becker and also four different engineers) and deserves an incredible amount of credit for co-guiding this project.

Known for their unique mixture of jazz pop rock, Fagan and Becker were true New Yorkers but relocated to the west coast for this recording. Many of the session players utilized were from California and this infused a certain California sound on many of the songs. Thus, for the first time, *Aja* represented a sonic fusion of east meets west ("Home at Last") for Steely Dan.

Including seven songs a touch under 40 minutes in total length, the album opener "Black Cow" is a lyrically descriptive track that takes you into a relationship theme with a New York setting (Rudy's, Greene Street): "I can't cry anymore while you run around. Break away. Just when it seems so clear that it's over now, drink your big black cow and get out of here." (For curiosity sake, a black cow is a root beer float.)

The lyrics for each song are at times ambiguous but have well thought meaning to the band and listener; they are able to conjure a sense of imagery which is such a rare and admirable accomplishment.

The stunning title-track, "Aja" is a typical tour de force Steely Dan track. The arrangements are from another world of sophistication. There are so many textures so perfectly blended together - whether it is the lyrics, backing harmonies, the incredible Denny Dias guitar solo, the saxophone, the drums... - there are few bands in existence that can pull this off.

The jazzy back to New York style of "Deacon Blues" features Larry Carlton on guitar and as co-arranger. The renown thought provoking chorus with the classic sing-a-long lyrics (beautifully accompanied by female gospel backing vocals) support the songs theme of a winner versus a loser: "I'll learn to work the saxophone. I'll play just what I feel. Drink scotch whisky all night long and die behind the wheel. They got a name for the winners in the world. I want a name when I lose. They call Alabama the Crimson Tide. Call me Deacon Blues." It's pure perfection.

The remainder of the album continues the *Aja* project flawlessly. From the sophisticatedly syncopated "Peg" - with its funky bass, staccatic drumming, Jay Graydon's extraordinary guitar solo (chosen over six other versions), and the ever-present voice of Michael McDonald on backing vocals - to the strong album closer "Josie," Donald Fagan and Walter Becker printed their tickets to Cleveland.

No matter how difficult the process may have been, this studio recording extraordinaire resulted in a seamlessly blended fusion of a Steely Dan jazz pop rock patent. As a result, *Aja* still stands tall as one of the

	most unique classic albums ever recorded and embodies the pure genius of Steely Dan.	
<u>Commendations</u>	<p>One of the amazing aspects of this album is despite the perfectionist approach that encompassed <i>Aja</i>, which was essentially auditioning or choosing studio musicians for each song to achieve what they wanted, it all sounds so natural. Such an approach could have resulted in a disaster but instead achieved the perfection sought. Only true talented visionaries can execute the improbable.</p> <p><i>Aja</i> was the band's first platinum album and it became Steely Dan's best-selling album at over 5 million copies. The album peaked at No. 3 on the U.S. charts and No. 5 in the UK. "Deacon Blues" became Steely Dan's fifth Top 20 hit on the <i>Billboard Hot 100</i> chart where it peaked at #19 in 1978, and remained in the Top 40 for eight weeks.</p> <p>On April 6, 2011, <i>Aja</i> was honored by the Library of Congress to be "culturally, historically, or aesthetically important" and was added to the United States National Recording Registry for the year 2010.</p>	
<u>Next Steps</u>	<p>After the release of <i>Gaucho</i>, which represented the peak of their obsessive perfectionism in the studio and also featured much conflict and post-release personal issues, Steely Dan took a 12 year hiatus from the music scene. They had already stopped touring in 1974 and did so for 19 years.</p> <p>In 1993 the group would resume playing live concerts and would also release two more albums. Their <i>Two Against Nature</i> release (2000) was met with both critical acclaim and much controversy, as it won four Grammy awards and beat out Radiohead's <i>Kid A</i> and Eminem's <i>The Marshall Mathers LP</i> for Album of the Year in 2001. It was a good album but not <i>that</i> good (<i>Kid A!</i>?!).</p> <p>Steely Dan is still an active band and have sold over 40 million records in their distinguished career. In March 2011, Steely Dan were justly inducted into the U.S Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.</p>	
<u>Reviewer</u>	Bill Pulice	IRC: Arielle Gelb