

Neg(oti)ating Fusion:
Steely Dan's Generic Irony
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*To my parents
for music and language*

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Abstract

This thesis contextualizes the lyrics and music of the band Steely Dan within the transgeneric crucible of late-sixties and seventies pop music that produced the classifier “fusion.” The term denotes a fusing of jazz, rock, funk, and pop music styles but also subsumes a precarious critical discourse strongly invested in the race, class, gender, and ideological divisions that musical traditions build and musical genres signify. Fusion called these processes of categorization into question.

While scholarly interest in musicians’ shaping of fusion’s ideological landscape has flourished over the last decade, nearly all critical studies of fusion embrace the limiting assumption that fusion’s most important work emerged from the avant-garde jazz scene of the late sixties. In explicating Steely Dan’s engagement with fusion, I expand the ongoing critical project into the underexamined realm of rock music, where musicians encountered and shaped the questions associated with fusion in ways unique to their generic position.

Throughout this thesis I show that Steely Dan negotiated genre categories by disrupting the racialized and essentialist notions of jazz, rock, funk, and reggae musics that prevailed at the time—much in the way other fusion musicians do—while simultaneously eschewing positionality between genres. This neg(oti)ation of generic liminality was a function of the band’s own musical and lyrical positioning relative to fusion’s constituent musical genres as well as the popular rock press’s anxious approach to fusion. As such, I perform a variety of historically-based musical and literary readings of Steely Dan’s songs and of the day’s popular rock criticism in order to illuminate the unique racial, gender, and class tensions experienced by rock bands entering the transgeneric fusion landscape, and the particular ways Steely Dan experienced, voiced, and negotiated those tensions.

Keywords: American Music, 20th Century, Popular Music, Genre, Fusion, Jazz-Fusion, Rock, Rock Criticism, Steely Dan, Song Lyrics, Norman Mailer, “The White Negro”

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Introduction

Kinds of Marriage

Unfortunately Walter Becker and Donald Fagen declined to be interviewed for the project but Becker did advise me during one very late night telephone conversation ‘to carry on as if Donald and I were dead.’

– Brian Sweet, *Steely Dan’s* biographer, 1999¹

In the hours following his death on September 3, 2017, *Rolling Stone* magazine published an obituary for Steely Dan guitarist and songwriter Walter Becker. Among the press releases and quipped remembrances, columnist Daniel Kreps dug up the following quote from a 1974 interview, conducted a few years after Steely Dan’s rise to fame: “I’m not interested in a rock/jazz fusion. That kind of marriage has so far only come up with ponderous results. We play rock & roll, but we swing when we play. We want that ongoing flow, that lightness, that forward rush of jazz” (Kreps). If it seems strange of me (and of *Rolling Stone*) to frame the man’s death with an erudite and probably write-offable statement about the “marriage” of jazz and rock musics, then my goal is to convince you otherwise. In fact, the first three words of the quote alone—“I’m not interested”—characterize Becker’s best-known attribute: a dismissive stance toward all things public and probing, including *Rolling Stone*, popular criticism in general, and (as my epigraph attests) any sort of critical project resembling the one I am currently introducing. In his dismissal of generic categorizations, Becker shows an anxiety toward the critic’s pigeonholing and a gesture toward nuance. This anxiety, I will argue, is less a reflection of Becker’s inherent “I’m not interested” than it is a reflection of his band’s precarious place within the mixed-up genre landscape of seventies popular music.

Becker’s anxious place lies under the label he dismisses: “rock/jazz fusion,” one of the generic terms that emerged from a broad-spectrum convergence of jazz, rock, funk, and pop musics

¹ See Brian Sweet’s *Steely Dan: Reelin’ in the Years* (3).

in the late sixties. Regardless of his surety, critics still struggle to categorize the movement. At different times and places, its various threads are referred to as jazz-rock, jazz fusion, fusion jazz, jazz-rock fusion, jazz funk, or for catch-all simplicity's sake, just 'fusion.' The categories' instability is both symptom and cause of the troubled genre politics that characterized the music's contemporaneous reception. Indeed at a time when their constituent genres were positioned in opposition to one another, these new musics put the very process of musical categorization into question.

As Kevin Fellezs shows in his trenchant study of fusion, *Birds of Fire* (2011), conventional ideas about “the continuity of musical traditions, ethnic or nationalist pride [...], and the divide between art and commerce” failed to accommodate the new musics and the musicians who made them (6). Fellezs's book comes amidst a still-surging scholarly interest in fusion marked by publications such as Fabian Holt's *Genre in Popular Music* (2008), which traces the convergent paths of jazz and rock through the sixties, Matt Brennan's *When Genres Collide* (2017), which chronicles critical conflicts of the same period, Steven Pond's *Head Hunters* (2008), and Jeremy A. Smith's recent articles in *Jazz Perspectives*, which address the slippery work of Herbie Hancock and Miles Davis, both important figures in the movement. Like each of these works, this thesis is concerned not with the labelling of music per se, but with the ways musicians occupy, resist, and shape shifting generic and ideological landscapes. As Holt shows, genre labels are themselves the products of shifting discursive networks, and though they often reflect musical similarities, they are fundamentally a question of language applied imperfectly.

Despite their attention—indeed, their strong sensitivity—to the constructedness of musical genres, each of these studies slips into Holt's trap, applies critical language directly and imperfectly, and upholds assumptions about the very genres they wish to deconstruct. The prevalent assumption to which I refer is voiced by Holt when he claims that, within the fusion movement at large, “the

jazz-influenced music [...] is easy to distinguish from the pop-influenced music” (100). There is truth to this statement in strictly musical terms, insofar as artists approached their “fusing activities” with the musical repertoire of their dominant genre background. However, the application of Holt’s logic, has lent itself to the creation of a fusion canon whose members emerge almost exclusively from avant-garde jazz, inscribing the assumption that “fusion” is strictly an offshoot of the jazz tradition.²

There is, I think, a political project underlying this trend. In examining artists who come from a jazz background into the fusion space, critics more easily draw out the issues of race inherent in fusion’s discourses. These jazz-going-rock artists tend to be African American, and in reading their specific experiences as fusion musicians, critics reveal their subtle anxieties and resistances to a mostly-white, mostly-male, increasingly-commercialized popular music industry. In articulating and theorizing these musicians’ experiences, critics work to undermine dominant historical narratives constructed by those same hegemonic forces and thereby participate in the very deconstructionist politics that they read into their subjects. I think this project is politically productive. But in raising their particular subjects, scholars undervalue the work of artists whose place in their political project, for reason of the artists’ generic origin point, is less clear. These artists do not operate in mutually exclusive domains; without each of their influences, we cannot fully understand the works of others or of the larger phenomenon that we label “fusion.”

In contrast to Holt, I argue that the line between the “pop-influenced music” and the “jazz-influenced music” is less easily demarcated than might first appear, and, more importantly, that the fraught political space between genres was shaped and negotiated in important ways by artists on the other side of the divide. I want to be clear on this point: this is not a “recovery project,” nor does it imply the politics expected of one. Rather, it is an attempt to shift the assumptions that underlie

² Fellezs provides one exception with his analysis of Joni Mitchell, but spends a considerable amount of time qualifying his “overly idiosyncratic” choice (*Birds of Fire*, 14).

most works of fusion scholarship. I turn, then, to Walter Becker, fellow songwriter Donald Fagen, and Steely Dan.

Ostensibly a rock band, Steely Dan was known for their combined lyrical and harmonic complexity as well as for their meticulous recording techniques. This is especially true of their later works—albums *Pretzel Logic* (1974), *Katy Lied* ('75), *The Royal Scam* ('76), *Aja* ('77), and *Gaucho* ('80)—which were products of an increasingly-idiosyncratic, studio-based approach to music-making. While employing a revolving door of jazz, rock, and funk musicians to perform on their records, Becker and Fagen retained notoriously tight control over their recording sessions. Indeed Steely Dan was less a traditional band than a project autored by its songwriters.³ I will treat it—and them—as such. With the songwriters at the helm, Steely Dan retained classification as a rock band even as they moved toward a style of music that incorporated jazz, funk, and reggae into popular song structure. As demonstrated earlier, Becker and Fagen actively resisted the labels of “jazz-rock” and “fusion” while also acknowledging the presence of multiple generic threads in their music.

While critical readings of Steely Dan tend to place them firmly within the genre of rock, this project will consider Steely Dan within what I call the fusion moment of the seventies, when artists working in the genres of jazz, rock, and funk began to push beyond rigid generic categories, fusing styles and conventions, and upsetting taxonomies of musical classification. A word about my terminology: I use the term “fusion” for the same reasons as Fellezs—for its conveyance of the eclecticism and in-betweenness of its practitioners, and for its literal denotation of their fusing activities. For the sake of simplicity, I will sometimes refer to specific artists as “jazz-going-rock” or “rock-going-jazz, depending on their generic origin point, so as to portray fusing practices as unstable, constantly in motion and contention. These terms gain expediency by sacrificing the

³ Brian Sweet's 1999 biography of the band, *Steely Dan: Reelin' in the Years*, thoroughly details Becker and Fagen's studio exploits.

generic nuances of specific artists' fusion musics, but they are useful in capturing the dominant generic ideologies at work in their movements.

Echoing theorist Isobel Armstrong, Fellezs conceives fusion musicians as occupying a “broken middle,” an “overlapping yet liminal space of contested, and never settled, priorities between two or more musical traditions” (*Birds of Fire*, 8). I am concerned here with Steely Dan’s relationship to this space. I will show throughout this thesis that Steely Dan engaged with and participated in the processes of genre and racial identity (re)formation associated with the fusion movement while simultaneously and successfully eschewing positionality between genres. Further, they did so through practices only available to rock bands: through interactions with the rock press and through the performance of song lyrics, in addition to strictly musical elements. Together, these practices form the means by which Becker and Fagen tread between negotiating and negating their own generic liminality with their white, middle-class, male identities in tow. Whereas Fellezs argues that the musicians he examines used their “in-between-ness” as a strategy to foreground individual agency in the face of histories of generic separation,” Steely Dan shows us that such “in-between-ness” is both a strategy and a burden, a means of asserting individuality and also a condition in which one’s social identity—bound up tightly with generic codewords—is made hyper-salient and lucid to its own rigid critical construction (*Birds of Fire*, 8).⁴ Becker and Fagen’s response is an unflinching self-awareness that, unlike Fellezs’s musicians, conceals the social self in a smoke-and-mirrors of self-reference.

My thesis focuses primarily on Steely Dan’s song lyrics. Sociomusicologist Simon Frith tells us that “if music gives lyrics their linguistic vitality, lyrics give songs their social *use*” (Frith, 233). In order to theorize the social use of Steely Dan’s fusion music, I locate many of my readings at the

⁴ In *Birds of Fire*, Fellezs examines the work of drummer Tony Williams, guitarist John McLaughlin, singer/songwriter Joni Mitchell, and keyboardist Herbie Hancock.

point of musical-linguistic interaction between the two that Roland Barthes calls “the grain of the voice,” the manipulated physicality of the voice-singing-words, varying in volume, timbre, and diction, “where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work” (Barthes, 295). As such, Steely Dan’s lyrics are embedded in their fused musical compositions and offer a unique means of assessing their stakes and reflection within the middle space that we call fusion.

In my first chapter, I explore Steely Dan’s presence in the seventies’ popular rock press, the gatekeeper of rock culture and ideology. In addition to framing the band’s contemporaneous reception, I will show that Becker and Fagen crafted public personas out of their interactions with critics and journalists that transgressed rock music’s ideological/commercial orthodoxies of image cultivation in ways that, taken alongside the band’s transgeneric approach to music-making, throw into question their status as an “authentic” rock band

My second chapter establishes a way of reading Steely Dan’s songs while confronting Becker and Fagen’s personae as it manifests in the lyrics of one of their biggest hits, “Deacon Blues,” and in relation to the song’s primary literary influence, Norman Mailer’s infamous essay, “The White Negro.” Indeed “Deacon Blues” represents a “white negro” in identity crisis, who, like Mailer’s hipster, undergoes a symbolic racial transformation and achieves artistic and sexual freedom. My concern in this chapter is whether Steely Dan reproduce Mailer’s problematics—namely, the association of blackness with a base, sexualized jazz impulse—or departs from Mailer’s essentializing logic, and how they put Mailer’s essay to use in the context of the fusion moment.

My third Chapter examines three Steely Dan songs, “Everyone’s Gone to the Movies,” “Hey Nineteen,” and “FM (No Static At All)” in order to demonstrate the ways Becker and Fagen positioned themselves relative to various generic categories. Each of these songs contains specific generic references coupled with their racial and gendered associations, opening us to the complex network of signs at play in the fusion moment and in Becker and Fagen’s work.

My concluding section elaborates on Becker and Fagen's neg(oti)ation strategy that I trace throughout this thesis while retrospectively examining the theory of fusion presented by Fellezs. I finish by sketching recent developments in Steely Dan's career and generic classification.

Chapter One

Recording Jazz-Rock, Performing Jazz: Authenticating Steely Dan

Needing to press, to insist on supranatural results against all odds, to purvey ambiguity in an era of bald sincerity, was the whole game.

– Don Breithaupt, 2007¹

This chapter explores Steely Dan’s relationship with and presence within the popular rock journal criticism of the seventies. I have chosen to open at a temporal remove with Don Breithaupt’s 2007 volume, *Aja*, for a few reasons: Breithaupt’s book functions as a synthesis of the critical perspectives that trailed Steely Dan throughout their career. Second, Breithaupt distills the relevant critical themes and offers them in short, glossable form, useful for quick entry into the key terms important throughout this chapter. And third, his book demonstrates the crystallization of a certain generic categorization that this thesis attempts to complicate. By 2007—and certainly this is still true today—Steely Dan had come to be considered a “classic rock” band; they received airplay on “classic rock” stations, sold CDs and concert tickets under the “classic rock” label, and headlined “classic rock” shows.² Breithaupt reads Steely Dan up against other now-“classic rock” bands to demonstrate their particularity. I reverse his order of assumption: Steely Dan is particular, so why do we continue to read them up against “classic rock” bands?

While fusion scholars often argue that, to quote Matt Brennan “fusion had been disowned in [seventies] rock discourse,” this chapter’s epigraph reveals a critical interest in the ways Steely Dan transgressed the orthodoxies of rock authenticity (174). Scholars have theorized rock authenticity as a linguistic indicator used by critics and consumers to mark generic boundaries. Rock as a genre is generally coded “authentic,” whereas pop, by virtue of its commercialism, is coded “inauthentic.”

¹ From Don Breithaupt’s *Aja*, (27).

² See Amazon.com; Additionally, in the past year alone, Steely Dan shared the bill with other massively-famous “classic rock” bands such as the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, Journey, and the Doobie Brothers.

While these discussions tend toward totality (i.e., “inauthentic” rock music, for some fans, is not rock music at all), the criteria of authenticity tend to lose their stability under interrogation. Simon Frith, for instance, argues that authenticity is delineated by “some inchoate feature of the music itself, a perceived quality of sincerity and commitment,” but that judgement is also based on “extra-musical beliefs”—about genre tradition, for example, or about the artist themselves (*Performing Rites*, 71). Philip Auslander lends specificity to Frith’s “beliefs,” theorizing rock authenticity as an “ideological and discursive effect [...] linked with the romantic bent of rock culture, in which rock music is imagined to be truly expressive of the artists’ souls and psyches, and as necessarily politically and culturally oppositional” (70). Importantly, Auslander theorizes the authentication process: “The visual evidence of live performance, the fact that those sounds can be produced live by the appropriate musicians, serves to authenticate music as legitimate rock and not synthetic pop in a way that cannot occur on the basis of the recording alone” (79).

The passage from Auslander reveals the oddity of Steely Dan in terms of rock ideology. While the band performed live for its first two years, Walter Becker and Donald Fagen quickly rebranded as a studio-only group, actively denying the evidences of authenticity.³ Moreover, regarding the notion of the “appropriate musician” playing his appropriate part, Steely Dan’s recording sessions often featured multiple musicians on the same instruments, doubled and overdubbed, uncredited in liner notes. Walter Becker, officially the band’s bassist and guitarist, often did not even perform on recordings (Crowe).

³ Becker and Fagen began touring again in 1991 after an eleven-year period of musical inactivity under the name Steely Dan. While it is interesting to consider the reasons why Steely Dan began touring again (in his memoir, *Eminent Hipsters* (2013), Donald Fagen notes the importance of paying his rent), I confine my analysis to the seventies so as to address their most active years and to read them within the context of the fusion moment.

Yet, as Breithaupt shows us, rock critics maintained Steely Dan's categorization as "rock" despite their lack of interest in providing evidence á la Auslander, and despite their transgeneric sound. In fact, Breithaupt comes to the same conclusion even while acknowledging its tensions:

The notion of giving a hero's welcome to two book-wormish jazz aficionados [...] may not appeal to critics who subscribe to the "noble savage" theory of rock and roll, but inspiration isn't bestowed on the basis of methodology, locale or educational background. To the muses, Manhattan is as good as Memphis, and Bard College, Becker and Fagen's liberal-arts alma mater, is as good as the school of hard knocks. If we're lucky, the the twentieth century's best popular art will outlive that hackneyed (if not racist) debate. Authenticity comes from the darnedest places. (7)

The passage draws out the oft-raced, oft-classed narratives of rock history that form the foundation of rock authenticity.⁴ The question of who plays what and for what reason plays an important role in the authentication process for all genres in accordance with their specific historical socialization along lines of race, class, gender, and commodity. These particulars alienate Steely Dan further from the tenets of rock ideology—to an extent, this is Breithaupt's point. But it seems a non sequitur for the critic to conclude that the musicians who upset the premises of rock authenticity might then meet its criteria. The criteria themselves must have changed.

The question left unanswered by Breithaupt motivates this chapter: where exactly are those "darnedest places"? In other words, how and why have critics assessed Steely Dan in terms of rock ideology? How did the band maintain classification as an authentic rock band despite their opposition to the genre's musical conventions and mythologies of self-expression? Why were rock

⁴ Standard genre histories root rock's genealogical tree in blues forms developed by urban working-class African Americans, the most "authentic" musicians of all, singing their blues untrained to lose them. The key here is *untrained*, along with its implications and synonyms—uneducated, unmediated, unassimilated, pure—all of which serve to mystify black and/or working class musics and musicians in an air of primitivism.

fans and critics willing to overlook these factors in assessing and inscribing Steely Dan's authenticity as a rock band? Auslander reminds us that "the interesting cases [of rock authenticity] are not those [...] where identification as pop is obvious, but those in which the artist has a suspect claim to being an authentic rock musician" (69). By all means, Steely Dan *should* be suspect. This chapter explores why they were never regarded as such.

In order to demonstrate how rock critics authenticated Steely Dan, I move chronologically through the band's career and provide literary readings of rock criticism, tracing Steely Dan's critical construction through the seventies. Despite their now-solidified status as a rock band, Steely Dan's critics responded anxiously to the band's genre-mixing and transgressions of rock orthodoxy, inscribing their anxieties in language that reflected the racialized, classed, and commercial generic taxonomies of the fusion moment. I also focus on Becker and Fagen's interactions with the rock press, tracing the emergence of what I call the songwriters' *jazz mystique*, a private rhetorical performance as well a discursive effect resulting as the songwriters' attempts to neg(oti)ate their own critical construction.

Fusion's Critical Landscape

Before attending to Steely Dan's treatment in seventies rock criticism, I would like to sketch the transgeneric critical landscape at the fusion moment so as to better grasp common critical themes. Critics' responses to fusion musics had everything to do with the ways musical genres were constructed and socialized prior to the fusion moment. Kevin Fellezs, Matt Brennan, Fabian Holt, and others have demonstrated that jazz and rock musics had, by the late sixties, come to occupy opposing ends along racial, class, and commercial spectrums.

Jazz was primarily a black music, dominated by black musicians and, to a lesser extent, black consumers. Since the bebop "revolution" of the early forties, jazz had maintained a "high art"

orientation. Jazz was also not a commercial music, accounting for miniscule portions of industry-wide record sales.⁵ In contrast, rock was primarily a white music, dominated both by white musicians and white consumers. By the late sixties, rock had, at least in its ideal critical construction, maintained the “low art” orientation of its generic antecedents, rock ‘n’ roll and blues.⁶ Finally, rock music had reached its commercial zenith as the most popular music form of the seventies.⁷ Through the social process of genre formation, each of these attributes absorbed into the genre labels themselves, “rock” and “jazz” proper, and thus formed the network of ideological associations by which critics deduced artists’ authenticity. They are, in turn, the same measures by which jazz-rock fusion musics disrupted critics’ (and listening publics’) genre-encoded ideological assumptions.⁸

The ideological disruptions caused by fusion musics were voiced differently by critics of different genres. Fellezs and Brennan have shown that jazz critics’ malcontents with fusion shifted in accordance with intertwined perceptions of a given artist’s commercial intentions and racial fidelity. Anxieties appear strongest among critics and artists who emphasized racial tradition. Scholars often reference writer Amiri Baraka and trumpeter Miles Davis to illustrate this point. As recently as 2009, Baraka writes scornfully of the “cultural-artistic backwardness of fusion” (11). In his view, fusion represents a black music (jazz) resigning to a white music (rock) controlled by white-dominated record companies, selling records to white-dominated audiences. Simplified, to play fusion was to sell white, and to sell white was to sell out at the expense (literally) of one’s people. Musicians, even those making fused musics, were not immune to these racial anxieties. Hence, Miles Davis’s instruction to Columbia Records prior to the release of his early jazz-going-rock record, *Bitches Brew*:

⁵ According to Fabian Holt, “the jazz economy took a steep dive in the 1960s and reached a low point around 1972 with a share of 1.3 percent of total record sales” (87).

⁶ There are exceptions here, including “prog rock” bands such as Yes and Emerson, Lake, and Palmer and “rock poets” such as Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison.

⁷ Again, according to Holt, “rock/pop had about 75 percent” of total record sales in 1972.

⁸ For extended discussions on both jazz and rock’s social orientations in the lead-up to the fusion moment, see Holt’s *Genre in Popular Music*, chapter 4, Kevin Fellezs’s *Birds of Fire*, chapter 2, and Matt Brennan’s *When Genres Collide*.

“sell the music *black*” [emphasis mine] (Smith, 7). Davis’s comment acknowledges that the material practices of fusion conflict with the expectations of racially politicized jazz critics and then attempts damage control.

In comparison, there has been very little work done to demonstrate rock critics’ responses to fusion musics. Stated reasons for this follow the same dominant perspective that views fusion as an offshoot of the jazz tradition and thus excludes rock-going-jazz bands from in-depth analysis. Fellezs, for example, argues that rock critics themselves were largely uninterested in jazz-rock fusion (“Between Rock and a Jazz Place,” 5). Brennan nuances the point, focusing on a group of *Rolling Stone* rock critics he calls the “jazz rock misfits” who “encouraged a blending of jazz and rock.”⁹ However, he limits his analysis to their “aesthetic values” without exhuming the social coding intertwined with their language (149, 174-76). A closer reading of the “jazz rock misfits” reveals that their aesthetic judgements are tethered to the same racialized, commercialized anxieties about genre traditions, cross-generic influence, and authenticity as the fusion’s jazz critics, though they are differentiated by rock’s position relative to jazz and other traditionally black musics.¹⁰ The remainder of this chapter will examine the ways critics’ perceptions of the social in Steely Dan’s genre-blending music hinged on various musical and performative developments in Steely Dan’s career.

Steely Dan in Criticism

This section examines the anxieties of rock critics who addressed Steely Dan throughout the seventies. While I examine work from multiple critics, their arguments about the quality of Steely Dan’s music and the band’s authenticity tend to build on one another in cohesion. I focus on the

⁹ Brennan’s “jazz rock misfits” are Lester Bangs, John Burks, and Langdon Winner.

¹⁰ The writings of Lester Bangs offer an interesting case study in rock criticism’s troubles with fusion musics. For example, Bangs throws his support behind Miles Davis’s pioneering work of fusion, *In A Silent Way* (1969), while denouncing the horn-section rock band “Chicago” with equal force. Most often he casts his judgement in terms of authenticity, originality, and commercialism, each of which conti

recurrence of genred language—how critic’s deal with the perceived “jazziness” of Steely Dan’s music, for example—both in order to demonstrate rock critics’ latent encounters with and responses to the fused musics of the seventies as well as to illustrate Becker and Fagen’s rhetorical participation in their own critical construction. In this second vein, the songwriters employ a rhetorical and performance strategy that I call their *jazz mystique*, staging themselves in proximity to the stereotypes of the hip, deviant, snobbish jazz musician held my many of the era’s rock critics. The jazz mystique does not take place onstage or in front of fans—indeed the eschewal of live performance is an important element of its deviancy. Rather, jazz mystique is enacted through the private staging of personality and temperament for rock critics to interpret and relay to rock fans in writing.

Additionally, I will focus most of the attention on Steely Dan’s critics post-1974. I do this for a number of reasons: first, 1974 marked a series of important transitions for the band—from the touring circuit into the studio, from a fixed membership to a rotating cast of studio musicians, and from subtle to more obvious incorporations of jazz musical conventions into their songs.¹¹ These transitions marked Becker and Fagen’s commitment to dodging the conventions of rock music. Critics, as we will see, responded in kind. The emergent trend in Steely Dan criticism shows a league of rock critics anxiously upholding generic boundaries marked not in musicological terms—in reference to formal musical qualities—but in impressions figured socially, in terms of race, class, and commodity.

¹¹ Brian Sweet’s biography, *Reelin’ in the Years* details the motivations behind these changes. According to Sweet, there was a disagreement between Becker and Fagen and other band members Jeff Baxter, Denny Dias, and Jim Hodder regarding the value of touring was the biggest factor behind members’ departure and Becker and Fagen’s move to the studio.

Among earlier works of criticism, Chris Van Ness's concert review and interview with the Becker and Fagen, "Steely Dan: Rock & Roll via Third Stream,"¹² published in the *LA Free Press* in 1972, stands out as prefiguring the rhetoric of the jazz mystique. The article is the most conventional piece of rock journalism written about the band, where the critic becomes the reader's surrogate eyes and ears. Van Ness begins his article in this impressionistic mode, affirming Steely Dan's rock authenticity based on what he hears and sees: "[They have] more pure rock and roll energy than the J. Geils Band and the Faces put together" (Van Ness). Mentioning a band's "energy" is common practice for a critic who wants to authenticate a band's performance. In line with Auslander's theory of liveness, the term conjures images of band members' movements and stage presence, working in cohesion with an uptempo, loud, lively sound. "Energy" also plays into rock mythology, representing a conceptual channeling, no doubt of the visceral expressive energies of early rock 'n' roll. In this way, Van Ness classes rock as music of the body as opposed to the mind, "low art," linking Steely Dan with rock music's originators.

Van Ness articulates a commonly-held theory of dissimilarity between "rock" and "jazz," moving on the classed charge of "energy" to construct a Bourdieusian dichotomy between genres. The moment occurs in the critic's interview, during which Donald Fagen mentions earlier, "more complex" compositions. Van Ness responds: "I remember the first night I heard the group live, there were some things happening musically that told me that somebody was into some heavy jazz. Is that what you mean by 'more complex and pretentious?'" (Van Ness). The question illustrates the classed presumptions about jazz in the era's typical fashion—"jazz" is coded as high art, pretentious to the populist ear of the white rock fan. For Van Ness, jazz is not simply a label which signifies a taste/class orientation. It is "something happening musically," something *sensed* but otherwise

¹² "Third Stream" is a separate genre label mentioned Fagen in Van Ness's article. It is generally used to describe a fusion of jazz and contemporary classical music styles. Van Ness's title signals an interesting generic tension and release, where the style of one is achieved through the other.

outside the rock critic's range of explanation. All of the meanings which the rock critic ascribes to jazz—its class and racial orientation, its complexity, its pretension, its mystery—are buried in this sense.

Becker and Fagen's jazz mystique operates always in relation to this semiotics of jazz. Becker's response to the critic, for example, offers an early model of the jazz mystique's rhetoric: "It wasn't really jazz, but you're quite right that Donald and I are really jazz fans" (Van Ness). In claiming a closeness to the genre and then abdicating the label, Becker marks himself an aficionado with knowledge to dispute his own authenticity as "jazz." If Van Ness heard pretension in the things "happening musically" on stage, then Becker has confirmed his suspicion. Even if Becker insists that his music is not "jazz," something about Becker himself—his pretension, his mystery, indeed his desire to shirk the critic's labelling—is *jazzy*. Until Becker and Fagen moved permanently to the studio, "jazz" remained, for Steely Dan's critics, an undefined socially-grounded signifier. *New Music Express's* Steve Clarke interviewed the songwriters about their shared interest in jazz and "prejudice against rock" ("Reelin' in from Woolies"); Robert Christgau wrote in *Creem* that the *Pretzel Logic* itself "can be called jazzy without implying an insult" ("Steely Dan: Pretzel Logic"). It is unclear whether Christgau is punching up toward "pretentious" art-jazz or down toward cool-jazz Muzak—either is cause for critical trepidation.¹³

Following Steely Dan's 1974 transitional period, critics began to figure Becker and Fagen's generic transgressions in explicitly extramusical terms, focusing not on the "jazzy" impression of their music but on the generic slipperiness of Becker and Fagen themselves. In a review of Steely Dan's *Pretzel Logic* (1974), *Rolling Stone's* Bud Scoppa prefigures the critical shift while revealing the strategic function of Becker and Fagen's jazz mystique: "Steely Dan has turned into one of the best American bands, and surely one of the most original. Their only problem is the lack of a visual

¹³ Muzak refers to a corporation that produced generic background music through the eighties.

identity to go with their musical one—as pop personalities, they're practically anonymous” (“Pretzel Logic”). Scoppa’s desire for fleshed-out “pop personalities” conflicts with Auslander’s “rock romance” and signals the flexibility of rock ideology under conditions of increasing commercialization in the seventies. Even as it troubles the rock critic, Becker and Fagen’s “lack of visual identity” becomes a resistance to the marketing interests of corporate record labels and thus a more genuine fulfillment of rock’s anti-commercial ideology. In a paradox of generic oppositions, the jazz mystique becomes the means of fulfilling rock’s ideological imperatives.

Critics were not inclined to write about Steely Dan as such, likely because their slipperiness confounded conventional forms of rock criticism where the critic’s sensual impressions determine a band’s rock-ness. Critics Janet Maslin and Dewey Gram confront this problem in their *Newsweek* article, “Recluse Rock”: “There is something forbidding, even menacing, about them” (“Recluse Rock”). Becker and Fagen force an oblique literariness out of the critics that normally would not fit the rock lexicon. The *them* in question is Becker and Fagen, but the critics concede that “much of their menace comes from their music. Steely Dan’s songs blend a sophisticated understanding of jazz with a droll, sharp-edged literary sensibility. Each number is catchy yet maddeningly elusive, its lyrics twisted in ‘Pretzel Logic’ [*sic*]—as one of their album titles has it.” Maslin and Gram lay bare the mechanism of the jazz mystique, admitting to reading Becker and Fagen’s personal inaccessibility in line with the “sophisticated” jazz qualities of their music. As such, the absence of critical accessibility becomes, paradoxically, the primary critical object.

In his *Rolling Stone* interview and review of Steely Dan’s *Aja* (1977), Cameron Crowe demonstrates a different strategy of accommodating Becker and Fagen’s inaccessibility. Crowe adopts a satirical narrative strategy, parrying Becker and Fagen’s obscurantist gestures with caricaturization, attempting to refocus his surrogate eye on their physicality. With regard to the “blurry character[s]” demeanor, he remarks that

The pair are like delinquents taking an oral exam in detention. Becker is long-haired and wisply bearded, in the spirit of Howard Hughes' later years. He exudes a newt-like translucence. Fagen, by comparison more tanned, is wearing dark shades that he will not remove. And his mouth is caricature-sized; it's as if he has an extra two inches of lip and no room for it. It's true—they could be characters from their own sinister songs. (The Second Coming...")

Where Maslin and Dewey began to develop a literary strategy for approaching Becker and Fagen, Crowe translates their oblique sense into a visual narrative that lampoons the songwriters' abstract, jazzy personae as grotesquery. His bodily probing implies not only that Becker and Fagen actively reject the curated visuality of rock culture, but that they, like their music, are not a natural fit. But neither are they a fit for "jazz." Crowe's mild racializations—pointing to Becker's "translucent" skin and Fagen's "caricature-sized" mouth, which seems to signify Jewishness—place the songwriters in racialized generic liminality, somewhere between rock and jazz without fitting clearly into either category. Their bodies reflect their non-belonging, taking the jazz stereotypes of sophistication, high-mindedness, and pretension and pushing them to their logical physical ends of recluse and unhealthiness. Indeed Crowe's album review becomes an ironic attack on Steely Dan's unplaceability.

Becker and Fagen actively reinforce Crowe's characterizations. Fagen, for example, remarks that listeners and critics "have to have a certain jazz consciousness to understand what we're doing"; Becker, in turn, maligns the critical establishment, claiming that "most pop critics [...] are mainly interested in the amount of energy that is [...] on record. This is primitive rock & roll energy." Unlike their rock music peers, Steely Dan uses "real charts and everything. It's more productive. The musicians enjoy getting asked to do something that's challenging. [...] it's not stupid music" ("The Second Coming..."). This to place rock musicians and critics at an evolutionary disadvantage. Steely

Dan's music does not, in the songwriter's formulation, represent a one-strand permutation of rock music or a fusion of multiple genre styles, but a progression from the "stupid," "primitive" music that wrongfully captures both the market and the critical imagination. Crowe's physical descriptions of the songwriters are thus recast as embodied stereotypes of "jazz"—sophistication, high-mindedness, and pretension turned recluse and unhealthy.

Crowe has a difficult time accommodating Steely Dan's commercial success into his satirical scheme. He notes near his conclusion, *Aja* is "the first Steely Dan album to break into the top five," and the shift reads as a critical failure. The set of criteria Crowe deploys to criticize the band as rock have apparently shifted and Becker and Fagen's rhetoric is affirmed. Crowe's response is one of ironic abdication: "Perhaps one can try too hard to extract the Secret Intentions of Steely Dan." For Crowe, critical resignation becomes the the only way to capture Steely Dan. The mystery itself becomes the proper-noun label—"Secret Intentions"—as Crowe's project mirrors the songwriters', classified by concealment.

The non-label set forth by Crowe in his article became the critical assumption for the remainder of the seventies. In the minds of critics, mystery and concealment was Steely Dan's whole intention. In the words of *Rolling Stone's* Ariel Swartley, "Steely Dan have perfected the aesthetic of the tease. Their sound is as slippery as their irony. Are those the trumpets of angels near the end of ["Gaucho"]? Could that slouching gaucho, the one denied a room in the singer's high-rise inn, be the new messiah?" ("Gaucho"). Swartley's reference to the lyrics is incidental to her grandiose religious language. Her metaphysical grandeur shifts definitively away from the physicality of previous critical efforts, having abandoned her role as rock authenticator. The article represents a full enactment of the jazz mystique's discursive effect whereby the songwriters' strategy of smoke and mirrors is taken up by the critic in place of description and classification.

The final discursive effect of the jazz mystique is not to push Steely Dan between genres but to remove themselves from generic discourse completely. Their sustained classification as rock is counterintuitively rooted in this removal. Given the diametrical positioning of “rock” and “jazz” throughout the seventies, it becomes difficult to imagine any artist moving beyond their established generic boundary—either into the middle space of fusion or into another genre entirely—without first sustaining a critical conversation about their lack of generic fitness. Becker and Fagen’s elusiveness seems to have guarded from such a conversation, allowing critics to map their anxieties about Steely Dan’s music onto the songwriters’ themselves, to focus on their blurriness at the expense of their musics. Steely Dan maintains the label “rock” because Becker and Fagen guarded it from questioning.

Steely Dan’s Fusion

In examining Steely Dan’s music, it becomes clear that Walter Becker and Donald Fagen engaged in “fusion musicking,” perhaps to the greatest extent of any popular rock band of the fusion moment. We observe fusion in Becker and Fagen’s instrumentation, chordal harmonies, musical pastiche, and sound engineering; we observe it in the personnel invited to perform on their albums; and we see it in their song lyrics.

When rock critics experienced Steely Dan’s “jazziness,” they were probably relaying an impression of Steely Dan’s complex harmonic structures and chord voicings. Music theorist Walter Everett has noted that Steely Dan’s music is “arguably the most tonally complex of any rock music with such broad popularity” (201). Of the limited scholarly work on Steely Dan, Everett’s is the only one to flesh out their jazz influence.¹⁴ He notes the increasing complexity of Steely Dan’s harmonic

¹⁴ See Everett’s “A Royal Scam: The Abstruse and Ironic Bop-Rock Harmony of Steely Dan” for extensive detail on Steely Dan’s complex use of harmony.

repertoire as the band progressed through the seventies, affirming critics' ramping interest in Becker and Fagen's musical inaccessibility.

Aside from harmony and voice leading, Becker and Fagen utilized a kind of jazz-rock pastiche, quoting musical passages from jazz tunes and reframing them in a rock context. In Steely Dan's 1974 hit "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" (*Pretzel Logic*), for example, the roving piano line that begins the song is quoted directly from Horace Silver's standard "Song for My Father." Also on *Pretzel Logic*, Steely Dan records a cover of Duke Ellington's "East Side St. Louis Toodle-Oo," replacing Ellington's jazz orchestra with rock instrumentation, even reproducing one of trumpeter Bubber Miley's recorded solos is verbatim, using a talk box to approximate the Miley's plunger mute tone.¹⁵ These particular arrangements are less seamless fusions of jazz and rock sensibilities than patchworks of generic motifs serving as a transition to more complex, fused original compositions in the late seventies.

In order to accommodate their increasingly complex compositions, Becker and Fagen hired and networked with a range of jazz and fusion musicians during the late seventies. Notable names include Crusaders guitarist Larry Carlton, Miles Davis alums Victor Feldman and Wayne Shorter, studio drummer Bernard Purdie.

Finally, Becker and Fagen demonstrate their interest in genre-blending in their song lyrics. The most obvious example in their discography is the song "Parker's Band," also from *Pretzel Logic* (1974), which presents lyrics in praise of the legendary bebop jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker:

Savoy sides presents a new saxophone sensation¹⁶

It's Parker's band with a smooth style of syncopation

¹⁵ A talk box is an effect unit used by musicians to shape the sound of an instrument in accordance with speech sounds voiced into a small tube attachment. The sound of a talk box is quite recognizable, as if the sounds of an instrument are phrased and breathed like speech and singing.

¹⁶ "Savoy" refers to Savoy records. Between 1945 and '48, Parker recorded and released multiple sessions on the Savoy label.

Kansas City born and growing
 You won't believe what the boys are blowing
 You got to come on man
 And take a piece of Mr. Parker's band

While rare critical mentions of the song conclude that it is a sentimental “tribute” to Parker’s music, the song addresses fraught questions of cross-racial musical appropriation and advertisement that had become especially salient at the fusion moment as musicians pushed beyond racialized and commercialized generic boundaries (Clements, 193).

Consider the song’s vocal performance: Fagen delivers the words as a Savoy salesman through multiple overdubs and a tight, dry studio reverb effect. The result is a catchy, alliterated bullhorn advertisement for Parker on behalf of Savoy Records, and “You” (yes, “You”!) the listener are invited to “take a piece of Mr. Parker’s band. What it means to “take a piece” of Parker’s band is multiple and overlapping. The Steely Dan instrumentalists perform one of them. The song’s doubled-up, frantic percussion, grainy guitar licks, moderately-complex harmonic choices, and excited saxophone solos all “take a piece” of Parker’s discography. Fagen’s Savoy salesman persona turns what seems like bebop sentimentalism into an obnoxious advertisement, inviting the listener to attend Parker’s shows and purchase his records. The “piece” in question may well be a vinyl LP. The song deals simultaneously in sincere tribute and ironic parody, both “tak[ing] a piece” of Parker itself and referencing an unsavory history of white counterculture appropriation of Parker’s image and music, propelled, the song suggests, by a hyperbolic marketing campaign.

Moving forward, my next chapter addresses similar questions regarding Steely Dan’s negotiation of irony and sincerity in their lyrics, keeping mind the same questions of counterculture sentimentalism, cross-racial interactions and appropriation within the generic landscape of the fusion moment.

Chapter Two

Crossing That Fine Line: “Deacon Blues” and “The White Negro”

Like a lot of kids in the fifties, [Walter and I] were looking for some type of alternative culture, some kind of escape, really, from where we found ourselves. I think ‘Deacon Blues’ is a nice example of that.

–Donald Fagen, 1999¹

Walter and I wrote a tune, ‘Deacon Blues,’ that toyed with the cliché of the jazz musician as antihero. It was kind of a takeoff on that old essay by Norman Mailer, ‘The White Negro,’ not to mention our lives up to that point. I’m sure we thought it was hilarious.

–Donald Fagen, 2013²

In the previous chapter, we examined rock critics’ anxieties about the genre-blending of Steely Dan’s rock-going-jazz direction, Becker and Fagen’s emergent jazz mystique, and the fusing practices that enabled and accompanied it. Now, as we move into a discussion about the role of genre in Steely Dan’s lyrics, recall the claim invoked in my introduction from the sociomusicologist Simon Frith’s essay, “Why do Songs have Words” (1987): “lyrics give songs their social *use*” (233). In other words, a song’s participation in a system of social signification depends on its specific deployment of language. That is why when we talk about what songs are *about*, we quote, dissect, interpret, and appropriate lyrics.³ The accompanying music does not so much take on a secondary importance but rather buttresses, accents, ironizes, or otherwise heightens the meanings carried in words. That is also to say that a song’s meanings are only fully accessible when the song is considered as a site of musical-linguistic interaction, meeting at the point that Roland Barthes calls “the grain of the voice,” the manipulated physicality of the voice-singing-words, varying its volume, timbre, and diction, “where melody explores how the language works and identifies with that work” (252). Taken in harmonic, instrumental, and sonically-engineered contexts, the grain becomes a productive nexus of

¹ Cited in an episode of the BBC television series *Classic Albums*, “Steely Dan: Aja,” directed by Alan Lewens. The episode originally aired in 1999.

² From Donald Fagen’s 2013 memoir, *Eminent Hipsters* (132).

³ When I speak of “songs,” I refer to the popular American song form that Frith interrogates, with its standard verse-bridge-chorus structure.

signification and meaning-making for musicians and listeners respectively. Recent fusion scholarship presents almost no analysis of vocals or song lyrics because nearly every study centers on jazz-going-rock fusioners who performed instrumental music.⁴ Rock-going-jazz bands such as Steely Dan who subscribed to the rock convention of lyric-writing thus offer a new and uniquely-linguistic avenue of assessing particular occupations of, and reflections on, the middle space we call fusion.⁵

In line with the unstable nature of the fusion space posited by Kevin Fellezs, the problem I confront in this chapter is an instability of social use(s) in one of Steely Dan's biggest hits, "Deacon Blues" (1977). Released on the band's most financially- and critically-successful album, *Aja*, the song has since become a sort of signature, typifying Becker and Fagen's complex, jazz-tinged compositions of the late seventies. As my epigraphs attest, it also typifies in its lyrics the songwriters' jazz mystique, though in two seemingly contradictory ways: Fagen's first quote casts "Deacon Blues" as a sincere reflection on childhood alienation and the yearning for "alternative culture"; the second ironically recasts that alienation and alternative culture as cliché. This instability speaks directly to Becker and Fagen's understanding of "jazz" as a constituent musical genre, and thus how they conceive of their own fusing practices. What it means for this song to support contradicting interpretations—and for Fagen to express both understandings of his work—is the chief concern of this chapter.

Moreover, Fagen voices the song's irony in reference to a literary predecessor infamous for his interest in racialized "alternative cultures"—indeed, Norman Mailer's reputation on the subject tends to precede his actual writings. In the over 60 years since its publication, Mailer's quintessential essay, "The White Negro" (1957), has generated continuous critical condemnation for its hyperbolic

⁴ There is one important exception: Herbie Hancock's 1973 recording of "Watermelon Man" from his album *Head Hunters* features percussionist Bill Summers blowing into a beer bottle to mimic hindewhu, a Central African singing/whistling technique. Hindewhu does not utilize language in the way of the popular American song form, but nonetheless the grain of Summers's voice still makes it on record.

⁵ Again, I am referring to the adopted this term from Kevin Fellezs, who uses it in his *Birds of Fire* (2011) to denote an "overlapping yet liminal space of contested, and never settled, priorities between two or more musical traditions" (8).

assessment of blackness in America. Important for this project is Ingrid Monson's essay, "The Problem with White Hipness," (1995), which holds Mailer's essay at the pinnacle of the twentieth-century white bohemian's prurient identification with African American culture through jazz music. Since the publication of Mailer's essay, scholars like Monson have enumerated Mailer's wide-ranging racial problematics. When Donald Fagen invokes "The White Negro" as a "takeoff point," he assumes this historical lineage and enters into the critical conversation.

Reading "Deacon Blues" in Mailer's wake draws out the same questions of "cultural appropriation, racialized alterity, and Euro- and North American condescension" that animated the critical discourse surrounding fusion, especially in relation to white rock-going-jazz groups (Fellezs, *Birds of Fire*, 165). Whether "Deacon Blues" reiterates or ironizes Mailer is important to understanding how Becker and Fagen conceive of their own music in racial terms. Additionally, most analyses of jazz music in "The White Negro" fail to account for Mailer's own embeddedness within an unsettled transgeneric discourse that speaks directly to the conditions of the fusion moment. This chapter shows how Becker and Fagen joined this conversation, both as critics and artists, and utilized Mailer's essay to conceptualize the questions raised by their own fusing practices. I argue that the instability of "Deacon Blues" exhibits Steely Dan's ambivalence toward the generic categories of "rock" and "jazz," and that Becker and Fagen neg(oti)ate fusion's middle space through the simultaneous reinscription and ironization of Mailer's racialized music critical project.

Critics have long pointed out the racial mythologies undergirding "The White Negro's" eponymous cross-racial figure, the hipster. According to Mailer, the hipster has "absorbed the existentialist synapses of the negro" developed over two centuries "living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy" in order to transcend the anxious post-war malaise of white America (340-41). In the "negro," Mailer weaves an image of a Reichian noble savage, mapping his "existentialist synapses" with "infinite variations" of emotional/orgasmic states that are in turn given

voice in his music. For Mailer, jazz is the “negro’s” means of impressing his precarious existence on another and is thus the generative seed of white negroism: “jazz is orgasm, it is the music of orgasm, good orgasm and bad, and so it spoke across a nation, [...] it spoke in no matter what laundered popular way of instantaneous existential states to which some whites could respond, it was indeed a communication by art because it said, ‘I feel this, and now you do too’” (341). Though Mailer obviously valued jazz music, he was not a musician himself and lacked the theoretical vocabulary to discuss jazz as music. Accordingly, his criticism falls on the impressionistic language of the Beat writers from whom he drew inspiration and prefigures the similarly-impressionistic writings of Steely Dan’s rock critics.⁶ All of these writers share a tendency to read jazz music in purely social terms.

While we can easily trace Mailer’s forward-moving influence on the rock critics of the fusion moment, the fusion moment’s genre landscape also speaks back to Mailer’s and illuminates an unexplored influence on his cross-racial vision: rock ‘n’ roll. While critics such as Ingrid Monson and Jon Panish conclude that Mailer conceptualized the hipster in proximity to black bebop musicians, the publication of his essay is oddly historically distant from bop’s heyday in the mid-forties.⁷ It was, however, directly preceded by the popular boom of rock ‘n’ roll on American airwaves, led by a multiracial cast of musicians. These musicians stoked, in Fellezs’s words, “white parental fears of cultural miscegenation and the corruption of white middle-class youth” (*Birds of Fire*, 49)—the same fears embraced culturally and biologically by the hipster and polemically by Mailer. By testing white America’s cross-racial tolerance, rock ‘n’ roll may well have enabled Mailer to conceive of the “white negro” as an even more radical transgressor of racial boundaries. Further, Matt Brennan demonstrates that, in the early days of rock ‘n’ roll, the idiom had not “ruptured” commercially or

⁶ For an extended discussions of bebop in Beat literature, see Julian Levinson’s “All the Metaphors You Are: Conceptual Mappings of Bebop in James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’ and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*” (2012) and John Panish’s *The Color of Jazz* (1999), especially chapter 3, which explores literary deployments of bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker.

⁷ For brief discussion, see Monson’s “The Problem of White Hipness” and Panish’s *The Color of Jazz*.

critically into a self-contained genre and was perceived by many musicians as an offshoot of the jazz tradition (1-5).⁸ Mailer potentially saw rock 'n' roll as another "laundered popular" form of jazz, racially curated for white suburban squaredom but not wholly independent from his "jazz."

Regardless of Mailer's engagement with multiracial music cultures, his concept of racial fluidity is paradoxically bound by essentialism. Most criticism on "The White Negro" takes this logic to task, though critical voices were not always unified. Early responses from the writer James Baldwin and the activist Eldridge Cleaver, both members of sixties black intelligentsia, characterize the initial polarization generated by Mailer's essay and help to trace the critical conversation surrounding the "The White Negro" to the point of Steely Dan's entry. Baldwin's famous essay, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy" (1961), sets the dissenting tone and criteria with which scholars continue to approach Mailer's essay. Baldwin responds to Mailer: "to be an American Negro male [and thus, the "Negro" of Mailer's essay] is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others" (269-70). Baldwin deduces Mailer's racism and prefigures the arguments from Eric Lott, Ingrid Monson, and Andrea Levine, among others.⁹

The omnipresence of Baldwin's critique in more recent Mailer scholarship comes largely at the expense of Eldridge Cleaver's. This is likely due to the fact that nearly every mention of "The White Negro" in the Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968) is crowded by ad hominem attacks on Baldwin's homosexuality. For the sake of this discussion, there is one passage from Cleaver's book that provides insight into his reaction to "The White Negro" removed from homophobia: in the book's introduction, Cleaver calls himself "a student of Norman Mailer's *The White Negro* [*sic*], which

⁸ The most prominent of these musicians was Duke Ellington, who proclaimed in his 1955 essay, "The Future of Jazz," that "Rock 'n' Roll is the most raucous form of jazz, beyond a doubt [...] It is simply one aspect of many" (quoted in: Brennan, 3).

⁹ There was a boom in "White Negro" scholarship in the mid-nineties, likely generated by Eric Lott's landmark study of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft* (1993), which mentions Mailer's essay as "the twentieth century reinvention of [the] homosocial and homosexual fascination" with blackness expressed in nineteenth century blackface performance (56).

seemed to me to be prophetic and penetrating in its understanding of the psychology involved in the accelerating confrontation of black and white in America” (123). What we know, then, is that even among the time’s African American thought-leaders, the value of Mailer’s essay was disputed in strong polarity and its racial mythology had yet to be solidified in criticism.

Becker and Fagen wrote and recorded “Deacon Blues” in the interim between the Baldwin-Cleaver dispute and the reemergent scholarly interest in the essay the nineties, amidst the flux of the fusion moment’s identity politics. Like Fagen’s reflections in this chapter’s epigraph, the song seems to pull in both directions, simultaneously toward anachronistic celebration and revisionist ironization of Mailer’s hipster “antihero.” These competing temporalities exert themselves on the song’s mid-life suburban speaker, whose white negroism appears as a fading dream, grasped for in notes almost too high for Fagen’s voice to reach: “I’ll make it this time / I’m ready to cross that fine line.” The notion of “crossing that fine line” is central to Becker and Fagen’s take on Mailer’s racial politics and the genre politics of the fusion moment, both of which deal in the figurative drawing, crossing, and blurring of racialized lines between people, genres, authenticities, and geographies. These are, in turn, the themes that circulate through “Deacon Blues,” and that I explore through the rest of this chapter and thesis.

From the get-go, “Deacon Blues” accentuates the spatial and musical dimension of Mailer’s racial theory, placing its character in the suburbs—the seat of musical squaredom—marking him as white. Even before the music plays, the song is slated in the *Aja* LP’s liner notes as an “Edge City ballad,” saying *suburb* but also *border*, presumably up against an urban space, the site of Mailer’s racial crossover (Phalen).¹⁰ The song’s first line makes clear the character’s intention to cross that border: “This is the day of the expanding man.” The character’s qualifies his “expansion” with reference to

¹⁰ I cite “Michael Phalen” here, although it’s likely that he never existed. He is credited as the rock journalist who wrote liner notes for *Aja*. However, there are partially-substantiated rumors in online fan forums that the name is actually a pseudonym used by Becker and Fagen.

jazz as Fagen's voice labors on a trill and his character remembers, "it seems like only yesterday / I gazed through the glass / at ramblers, wild gamblers," improvisational soloists playing in an urban jazz clubs. In Mailerian terms, the improvisational jazz soloist is the height of romance because he literally performs his precarious existence note by uncharted note and thus acts as the purest sort of cross-racial translator, allowing whites access to his immediate experience via music.¹¹

While the character's Mailerian cross-racial desires might appear anachronistic upon the song's release in 1977, twenty years after "The White Negro's" cultural moment, the remainder of the song takes anachronism as the object of its irony, knowingly constructing the character's anxieties out of his historical dislocation from Mailer's hipsterdom. The next verse prefaces the character's repeated attempts to "cross that fine line" as not only futile in the eyes of his suburban associates, but also knowingly improbable in the mind of the speaker: "You say it's a crazy scheme / This one's for real / I already bought the dream." Having "bought the dream" of racial crossover nearly twenty years prior to no avail, the hipster of "Deacon Blues" becomes the faded hipster amidst midlife identity crisis.

The song's clearest connections to "The White Negro" are in its chorus, which functions as the faded hipster's racial imaginary and thus constructs a musical fantasy as if walking through Mailer's essay line by line. Likewise, the chorus is the song's slipperiest section, where Steely Dan oscillate ambiguously between irony and sincerity. Unlike the verses, which pull along with an airy gaudiness over Steely Dan's closest instrumental approximation of corporate Muzak, the chorus is delivered with a rhythmic and syllabic staccato by Fagen and hired studio singers, Venetta Fields,

¹¹ It appears that, because Mailer was not himself a musician, and because he writes about jazz as spontaneous, unmediated emotional expression, Mailer was unaware of the technical rigour involved in improvisational jazz performance. Without knowledge of musical scales, harmony, melody, phrasing, etc., the notes that emerge from an improviser's voice or instrument *do* appear spontaneous, although the improviser's choice of notes is limited by the tune's harmonic context.

Clydie King, and Sherlie Matthews, whose gospel-like vocals supply a sort of signified black authenticity while simulating the vigour and sex of the faded hipster's fantasy:

I'll learn to work the saxophone
 I 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

The Mailerian tropes abound. The conflation of saxophone jazz and feeling, for example—or moreover, the ability of the saxophone to translate feeling is practically lifted from Mailer's musings. *Feeling*, of course, is a loaded term in Mailer's Reichian lexicon, strongest in orgasm, strongest for the "Negro." Where Baldwin accuses Mailer of casting the black man's body as a "walking phallic symbol," the phallic symbol of "Deacon Blues" is the saxophone itself, which, in the nexus of genre associations called up by the faded hipster, is no less gendered or raced (269-70). With the saxophone providing entrance into the existentialist state of Hip, the violence of the faded hipster's imagined drunk driving death channels the hipster martyrdoms of James Dean and Charlie Parker and thus provides Hip's greatest expression—for the faded hipster, such a death is the height of psychopathic romance and rebellion.¹² And in the entendedé of the song's eponymous line, the faded

¹² In one section of his essay that bore the bulk of the contemporaneous criticism, Mailer claims that violence is a necessity of Hip's psychopathy: "The psychopath murders—if he has the courage—out of the necessity to purge his violence, for if he cannot empty his hatred then he cannot love, his being frozen with implacable self-hatred for his cowardice."; On a separate note, the deaths of James Dean and Charlie Parker occurred under different circumstances, Dean's via car accident and Parker's via drug overdose. The faded hipster's imagined death is an amalgam of the two.

hipster turns romance to religion, like the prophetic figure Mailer tries to embody in his later writings on Hip.¹³

However much the faded hipster's fantasy indulges in Mailerisms, though, it remains restrained by his geographic and imaginative limits. Consider the chorus's final couplet, where the faded hipster assigned himself the title "Deacon Blues." Publicly, Becker and Fagen hold that their song title refers to Los Angeles Rams defensive player David "Deacon" Jones; others hold that it references the then-losingest team in college football, the Deacon Blue Devils.¹⁴ Either reference might be absorbed into the name without disrupting its religious implications. But the faded hipster asks for the name not, as Mailer might have, to lead a "psychically armed rebellion" against "the mean empty hypocrisies of mass conformity" (356)—his is a fight already lost to the winningest of white middle-class entertainments. That the Mailerian dichotomy of Hip and Square is only imagined by the faded hipster as the better part of an college football doubleheader speaks to the banality of his own position relative to Mailer.

The racial, geographic, and temporal natures of the faded hipster's call-back fantasy are realized in the song's vocal performances. I now turn explicitly toward questions of genre within the musical arrangement of "Deacon Blues" as opposed to the song's lyrical references to Mailer. The interplay between lead singer (Fagen) and back-up singers (Fields, Kind, and Matthews) during the chorus fits generally within established conventions of rock vocal arrangement. However, "Deacon Blues" makes explicit the gendered and racial hierarchies assumed and (re)inscribed by conventional rock back-up singing in its construction of the faded hipster's racialized fantasy.¹⁵ The presence of

¹³ See Mailer's "Hipster and Beatnik" and Richard G. Stern's interview with Mailer, "Hip, Hell & the Navigator," both published in *Advertisements for Myself* (1958). The latter piece in particular shows Mailer expanding on Hip's religious qualities.

¹⁴ See Donald Fagen, *Eminent Hipsters*; and Brian Sweet, *Reelin' in the Years*. Considering the chorus's address of the Alabama Crimson Tide, the Blue Devils reference would keep the chorus consistently in the realm of college sports.

¹⁵ See the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter" (*Let It Bleed*, 1969) or Pink Floyd's "Time" (*The Dark Side of the Moon*, 1973) for examples of conventional, implicitly-raced and gendered interplay between lead and back-up vocals in rock.

Fields, King, and Matthews's soft, punchy gospel harmonies during the chorus and nowhere else on the track literally articulate the blackness of the musical persona that the hipster wishes to enter. Their presence is, of course, idealized, and this idealization—as well as the hipster's submission to it—is performed through a series of subtleties in musical arrangement and studio mixing that upend the conventional position of black, female back-up singers in rock music.

There has been very little scholarly work done on the sociology of back-up singing in popular music, but Susan Fast's essay "Genre, Subjectivity, and Back-up Singing in Rock Music" (2008) provides a thorough synthesis of the available research. In the following passage, she details the musical conventions of rock back-up singing that "Deacon Blues" resists in pursuit of its Mailerian fantasy:

Back-up singers are meant to 'blend' well and are not supposed to overpower a lead singer or sound distinctive; but timbral contrast and vocal power and control are often precisely the function that back-up singers have in rock; they are meant to reference a social world different from that of the band members and, for this, we must be able to hear their otherness. (178)

In addition to the "blending" and "timbral contrast" mentioned by Fast, rock back-up singers tend to double the lead vocalist's words in harmony at a song's focal points, offering a sonic juxtaposition through which the back-up singer's raced and gendered "otherness" becomes legible. It is also important to recognize that, at least for recorded music, the conventions of rock back-up singing—or, rather, the conventional *sounds* of rock back-up singing—are easily achieved during the studio mixing process, where voices are dampened, reverberated, or moved around the song's virtual sound stage among any number of engineering effects.¹⁶

¹⁶ The "sound stage" or "image" of a musical recording refers to the sonic placement of specific instruments, voices, or sounds within a stereo mix, used to mimic the multi-directional listening environment of a concert, where sound originates and is heard from multiple different origin points on stage.

Each of the conventions that Fast and I have pointed out are toyed with in the recording of “Deacon Blues” so as to construct an “otherness”—or, in Mailer’s vocabulary, a “margin”—to which the faded hipster’s fantasized identity is beholden. These are the clearest musical-linguistic indications of the “pull in both directions” mentioned earlier in which the song reimagines the racialized generic traditions registered in “The White Negro” in productive fashion even as it constructs and reinforces the myths which enable the white Negro’s fantasy. Both movements are predicated on an intentional subversion the conventions of rock back-up singing and thus a curated empowerment for Fields, King, and Matthews. For the singers themselves, this amounts to a simultaneous de-marginalization and re-marginalization. Timbral difference, for example, often the clearest marker of a track’s outsiders, is reduced, and Fagen’s voice falls back, both in volume and image, to take a nearly unmarked place among the voices of Fields, King, and Matthews. While their presence on the song is virtually foregrounded, their status *as outsiders* has not changed; rather, the faded hipster’s status as insider, at least in his own mind, *has*.

The chorus’s staggered rhythms and vocal enunciation, too, pull in both directions. The back-up vocals are arranged ostensibly so as to provide the singers with a measure of authority over the song’s culminating moments, implied by their articulation of the strong-beat “I,” beginning the chorus’s second and sixth lines, “I play just what I feel” and “I want a name when I lose.” These moments depart from the expectation of back-up rhythmic doubling to which most of the “Deacon Blues” chorus conforms, and yet participates equally as the character constructs a scene of idealized and fetishized blackness. Fagen’s own enunciation of the “I” lags behind the back-up singers’, falling on the bar’s weak beat as an antiphonal response to their lead, asserting presence and preempting the lead singer even as that assertion becomes a composite figure (three voices, one “I”) comparable to Mailer’s archetype (“*the negro*”). In the grain of their delivery the assertion is made strong and urgent, puncturing the song’s white suburban Muzak surface with a push of breath even as that

breath is eroticized, recalling Mailer's "infinite variations" of orgasm. Indeed the chorus is as much sexual fantasy as musical.

If the first chorus plunges into Mailerian fantasy, then the following verse shows the fantasy's idealism morphing with each successive line into the hipster's environment. What emerges is a grotesque amalgamation of Mailer's hipsterdom, subsuming his cross-racial ideal into his actual white suburban environment. Immediately out of his fantasy, he remarks, "this is for me / the essence of true romance," and proceeding to a mildly racialized line, "sharing the things we know and love / with those of my kind." Who exactly the faded hipster's kind *is* does not matter here so much as the marking of *different* kinds. Indeed, following the racialized chorus, the listener as well as the faded hipster himself are primed to think in racial terms. By the next lines, those of his kind appear to have been swallowed by the suburb surroundings, leaving the faded hipster wandering "like a viper / through these suburban streets," channeling Kerouac as if to share his loneliness:

I'll rise when the sun goes down

Cover every game in town

A world of my own

I'll make it my home sweet home¹⁷

The verse marks the faded hipster not only as a grotesque suburban Mailerite, but also as an intertext of fifties white counterculture racial attitudes under the scrutiny of a new era. As Fagen reaches again for the high notes, "ris[ing] when the sun goes down," the grain of his voice engages a musical rhetoric of nostalgia—his vocal delicacy plays the faded hipster and his fetishistic dreams in sympathy even as the song maintains its irony. Rock journalist Andy Gill qualifies this point, looking

¹⁷ The whole second verse seems modelled after the infamous scene in Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957): "At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among the lights of 27th and Welton in the Denver colored section, *wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night...* [emphasis mine]"(179). Indeed, as Baldwin demonstrates in his "The Black Boy..." Mailer's thinking in "The White Negro" too was influenced by Kerouac's novel (278).

to Becker and Fagen’s “affection for these sorts of faded hipsters. [...] [“Deacon Blues”] brings a nobility to that kind of faded hipster attitude” (cited in: Lewens).

The song’s final verse weds nobility with mocking irony as the faded hipster achieves a measure of imagined racial crossover via musical performance. Fulfillment begins in its first line, which can be read as a fulfillment of the racial desire contained in Kerouac’s statement, “not enough night”:

This is the night of the expanding man

I take one last drag

As I approach the stand

I cried when I wrote this song

Sue me if I play too long

This brother is free

I’ll be what I want to be

The image is at once pathetic and—for the listener who has bought Fagen’s sympathetic portrayal—liberating: its setting appears to be an open mic night at a bar, a far cry from the wild gambler’s jazz club at the song’s beginning. And yet it portrays the same improvisational gambling, enacting a bastardized version what Ralph Ellison calls the “cruel contradiction” of jazz: “each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity; as individual, as member of a collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus because jazz finds its very life in improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazz man must lose his identity even as he finds it” (cited in: Frith, “Music and Identity,” 303). The “chain of tradition” that the faded hipster links to is practically the opposite of what Ellison had in mind: it is not a line of professionals, canonized jazz performers, and jazz standards rooted in an African American tradition, but a line of racist ways of hearing and seeing jazz, rooted in a white counterculture tradition. Like Ellison’s jazz man who

discovers his identity by becoming, in effect, an intertext of musical performances, the faded hipster becomes “what [he] want[s] to be” in the uptaking of textual fragments from Mailer and Kerouac, the fastening of a musical ideology, and the performing of that ideology’s ideal. The faded hipster finally breaks from Mailer in that he achieves his imagined racial crossover not by absorbing the “negro’s music,” as Mailer theorized the process, but by his own performance of white negroism. This is, in Ellison’s words, the faded hipster “los[ing] his identity even as he finds it.”

None of this is to romanticize the faded hipster’s jazz fantasy, which remains fetishistic and racist. I also do not mean to position the faded hipster against Ellison’s jazz man. To see them in opposition is to reinscribe Mailer’s racial essentialism. Indeed the faded hipster does not offer a foil to the jazz man so much as they both reveal, together, the shakiness of racialized musical ideologies and the taxonomies that they generate. We return, then, to the question of genre-mixing that began this chapter: what does Becker and Fagen’s address of “The White Negro” tell us about the way they conceived of and enacted their rock-going-jazz movement, and how do they put “The White Negro” to use in their occupation of the middle space that we call fusion?

First, consider the way the Steely Dan songwriters occupy their own song. The final verse of “Deacon Blues” contains a subtle yet expansive moment of self-reference: “I cried when I wrote this song / sue me if I play too long.” Hearing Fagen sing out *I wrote this song* amidst the faded hipster’s performance is enough to alert the listener to the character’s constructedness, but the second line points outside “Deacon Blues,” to the music industry reps and radio DJs responsible for marketing Steely Dan’s music. By the time Steely Dan released *Aja* (1977), Steely Dan has solidified itself as frequent shirker of radio-friendly-pop-song duration conventions. Almost none of their tunes pre-*Aja* ran less than four minutes, and many approached six. *Aja* saw Becker and Fagen digging in, with five of seven songs clocking at over five minutes, and two over seven. “Deacon Blues” lasts seven minutes and thirty-three seconds, and with Fagen’s line, “sue me if I play too long,” rounding out

the five minute-mark, the songwriters work a quick joke on the bored listener or ad-money-hungry DJ.

But while Becker and Fagen's self reference points the listener outside the song, it also pulls the songwriters into the faded hipster's performance, nexusing them with his intertextual identity even as they ironize that identity's musical, racial, and ideological bearings. Here is the overarching 'pull in both directions': identification with the Mailerite faded hipster and simultaneous delegitimization of the faded hipster's Mailerism. Becker and Fagen have absorbed the cross-racial ideals of Mailer's essay while simultaneously deconstructing those ideals and can be considered *postmodern "white negroes."*

The postmodern "white negro" model is a musical iteration of Becker and Fagen's rhetorical and performative jazz mystique and figures into their generic neg(oti)ation strategy accordingly. First, the model acknowledges the diametrical positioning of "jazz" and "rock" in the seventies in terms of race, class, and commodity, and acknowledges the songwriters' own embeddedness within those generic taxonomies. The figure of the postmodern "white negro" thus becomes an ironic, self-inscribed, knowingly-problematic racial identity that performs the rigid coupling of race and genre in line with Steely Dan's rock-going-jazz music. "White negro" thus becomes a cognate of "jazz-rock" and the racialization of genres is laid bare in essentialized absurdity. In this way, Becker and Fagen negate established generic categories. Second, the model of the postmodern "white negro" allows for the performance of fused music that moves between and beyond racial/generic taxonomies by calling constant attention to its own racialization and thereby assuming and subsuming critical anxieties into the music-making process. Here, Becker and Fagen negotiate liminal spaces between "jazz" and "rock."

The model of the postmodern "white negro" is not without its own problematics—namely that it risks reinscribing through emphasis the very racial taxonomies that it tries to push beyond.

Logically, its slipperiness should move circularly in the face of such reinscription, deconstructing again and again its own racial essentialism, but it is possible to imagine a listener stopping before the circle is complete and misreading the irony. But this is tantamount to ‘not getting the joke,’ and as we saw in the previous chapter, Becker and Fagen do not much care to provide explanation. The postmodern “white negro” model affirms that slipperiness in the face of essentialism is their imperative. Moving forward, I continue to explore Steely Dan’s neg(oti)ative musical practices with respect to racialized, classed, and commodified genre categories. In the next chapter, I consider the ways gender becomes a lyrical fulcrum on which Becker and Fagen pivot between, unhinge, transform, and remove themselves entirely from the fraught generic questions of the fusion moment.

Chapter Three

Race Musics: Steely Dan's Generic Positioning

Becker: Jump music. Rhythm music. Something like that.

Fagen: [Grinning] Race music.

Breskin: Be careful, Donald.

– Interview with David Breskin, 1981¹

The previous chapter focused on Steely Dan's racial/generic evasiveness in "Deacon Blues" and creation of the postmodern "white negro" model. This chapter opens that discussion across Steely Dan's discography. Focusing again on the interaction of musical references, gendered performance, and racially codified language, I provide short readings of three songs, "Everyone's Gone to the Movies" (1975), "Hey Nineteen" ('80), and "FM" ('78). I demonstrate a comparative trend between songs whereby masculine sexuality and sexual creepiness become keystones from which Steely Dan articulates their own generic position relative to acts on the side of rock, the side of jazz, and toward a middle space we call fusion. Under the conditions of the fusion moment, where racial identity is made hyper-salient against morphing genre boundaries, Steely Dan's articulation of specifically-raced sexual desires and encounters becomes both a means of critiquing generic ideologies that hold those boundaries rigid, and a means of negating the critical imperative to articulate a given musician's genre position.

What I call Steely Dan's aesthetic of creepiness functions as a satirical inversion of the rock sub-genre of cock rock. Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie define it as follows:

By cock rock we mean music making in which performance is an explicit, crude and often aggressive expression of male sexuality. [...] Cock rock performers are aggressive, dominating, boastful and constantly seek to remind the audience of their prowess, their control. [...] In these performances mikes [*sic*] and guitars are phallic symbols; the music is

¹ From David Breskin's interview with Becker and Fagen, published in *Musician*, March 1981.

loud, rhythmically insistent, built round techniques of arousal and climax; the lyrics are assertive and arrogant, though the exact words are less significant than the vocal styles involved, the shouting and screaming. (43-44)

Frith and McRobbie point to the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, and Thin Lizzy—all contemporaries of Steely Dan—as the archetypal cock rock bands of their time. As the definition suggests, each of these bands built their reputations in front of audiences. Think back to Philip Auslander’s theory of rock authentication—if rock is dependent on live performance for authentication, then cock rock is hyper-dependent. It might seem strange, then, to consider Steely Dan as engaging with this hyper-visual sub-genre. As we saw in the first chapter, the band refused to perform live or market themselves visually for most of the seventies. At a remove from cock rock visual culture, Becker and Fagen craft musical narratives that reimagine the cock rocker’s idealized sexual exploits.

Frith and McRobbie note that “the cock rock image is the rampant destructive male traveller, smashing hotels and groupies alike” (44). Likewise, Steely Dan’s cock rock narratives center around female exploitation. There are, of course, troves of stories, images, songs, and hearsay that support the image of the libertine rock stud dating back to the earliest rock ‘n’ roll.² What Frith and McRobbie do not make clear are the troubling questions of age and consent at the heart of the cock rock image. While the theorists argue that the sub-genre “acknowledge[s] in its direct physicality that women have sexual urges of their own,” any attempt to extend rock’s male-centered libertine ideal to women is tempered by the fact that many male rockers staged sexual encounters (often illegally) with young teenage girls (50).³ The cock rocker’s “stud status” was always christened in outspoken rumor networks awash with stories of stars bedding young girls. The site of the intergenerational

² Consider the famous image of Elvis shaking his hips to the deafening approval of his young female audience. Sexual freedom has always figured prominently into the rock mythos, which holds the music itself as a sexual de-inhibitor.

³ For more on rock’s history of underaged sexual exploitation, see Ann Powers’s “The Cruel Truth About Rock And Roll.”

encounter in rock music is charged as such, and male rock stars have long exploited their own sexual menace toward young girls as a selling point in their music and image.

From the genre's beginnings, rock musicians drew on the sexual punning and explicitness of blues lyrics and spawned a quasi-tradition of inscribing, even bragging about underaged sexual encounters in their song lyrics. In rock'n'roll, it may have began with a string of songs by Chuck Berry in the mid-fifties, including "Sweet Little Sixteen" (1958), which tells of a sixteen-year old girl who "all the cats wanna dance with." The Rolling Stones' variation on the theme, "Stray Cat Blues" (1968), stages Mick Jagger luring a teenage girl for sex and setting the standard for cock rock pedophilia that Steely Dan would satirize:

There'll be a feast if you just come upstairs
 But it's no hanging matter
 It's no capital crime
 I can see that you're fifteen years old
 No I don't want your ID

All the elements of a predatory cock rock lyric are present: seclusion away from the stage or party, acknowledgement and insincere dismissal of criminality, feigned ignorance of the target's age, and the "I" at the center of it all, inviting an autobiographical reading. The song plays more like self-mythologizing than straight retelling, but, in light of the Stones' actual criminal encounters with young girls, the lines between sexual myths and sexual crimes are severely blurred.⁴ This gets to the fundamental problem of the cock rock subject: the listener (or viewer) cannot know the extent to which the music imitates, precisely, the unsettling sexuality of rockers' live.

⁴ From Powers's essay: "In 1966, Mick Jagger's girlfriend Marianne Faithfull was 20 and already a mother when police on a drug raid at Keith Richards' mansion found her wrapped in a fur rug while tripping, the only woman in the house" (Powers).

Steely Dan's aesthetic of creepiness begins with the formula made popular by the Stones but forces the listener to pathologize cock rock's predatory masculinity. Becker and Fagen's earliest and least subtle variation on the themes of cock rock is the song "Everyone's Gone to the Movies" (1975), in which the underage sexual encounter is reimagined not with a rock stud but with fictional suburban pedophile and child pornographer, Mr. LaPage. While reviews of the song's album, *Katy Lied*, appraise Steely Dan's lyrical "ruminations" and "immaculately tasteful" compositions, everything about "Everyone's Gone..." is made to be as horrifically distasteful as possible (Christgau, "What Kind...?"; Mendelsohn, "Katy Lied"). After a pickup drum beat (an apt musical pun for the occasion), the listener enters Victor Feldman's modulating vibraphone tremolo as one enters a circus funhouse. Fagen's coaxing vocal delivery confirms the intended audience:

Kids if you want some fun
 Mr. LaPage is your man
 He's always laughing, having fun
 Showing his films in the den
 Come on, come on
 Soon you will be eighteen
 I think you know what I mean
 Don't tell your mama
 Your daddy or mama
 They'll never know where you've been

The song's language does not severely diverge in content from "Stray Cat Blues" (or other cock rock pedophilia tunes).⁵ Indeed it is more forthcoming than other songs, rightfully calling its exploited

⁵ There is an unsurprisingly large catalogue of songs by popular rock artists narrating, recalling, or imagining sexual encounters with young girls. Some of the more popular tracks: Neil Diamond's "Girl You'll Be A Woman Soon" (1967),

subjects “Kids” and instructing them, “Don’t tell...,” a request usually only implied by the secluded settings of other songs. Mr. LaPage, too, parallels the cock rocker as fun-having “entertainer” of white suburban youth.⁶ Although the criminal action of the narratives is comparable, the suburban pedophile, bereft of masculine rock mythology, becomes a far more transgressive figure to the listener than Jagger’s “I” in “Stray Cat Blues.” “Everyone’s Gone...” defamiliarizes these sorts of cock rock narratives by locating the site of the underaged sexual encounter, paradoxically, in a familiar and commonplace setting, at least for typical, white, suburban rock consumers.

While Mr. LaPage’s whiteness is assumed for both generic and geographical reasons, Steely Dan’s “Hey Nineteen” (1980) narrates a similarly-exploitative intergenerational encounter while uncovering the importance of racial ideology in the cock rock ideal. Like “Deacon Blues,” “Hey Nineteen” narrates from the perspective of a faded “white negro” type who retroactively associates his sexual potency with black music. His cock rock ideal represents a flirtation with cross-racial authenticity as well as a return to the “stud status” of his youth. Just as “Deacon Blues” addresses the hopeless myths of the faded hipster, “Hey Nineteen” shows the hopeless myths of the cock rocker, measured against the song’s teenage girl who upends the stereotypical easiness of the rock song’s teenage girl simply by the fact that, in the words of the faded cock rocker, “we can’t dance together / no we can’t talk at all.” The cock rock ideal does not sustain itself in the face of the mundane ordinaries of intergenerational exchange.

It is not fully accurate to refer to the character of “Hey Nineteen” as a faded cock rocker—he merely subscribes to sub-genre’s exploitative ideals. More accurately, the character is a faded frat

Gilbert O’Sullivan’s “Clair” (1972), Billy Joel’s “Only the Good Die Young” (1977), and a slew of songs by Aerosmith (1982), Ted Nugent (1981), Motörhead (1981), Eric Clapton (1985), and a few others, all tellingly titled “Jailbait.”

⁶ As Fabian Holt has shown, rock audiences at this time were largely white, suburban, and young (84).

boy in his mid thirties, calling on the cock rock ideal in order to recapture the libertine sexuality of his college days.⁷ Fagen's character begins the song in cheap reminiscence:

Way back when
 in Sixty-seven
 I was the dandy
 Of Gamma Chi
 Sweet things from Boston
 So young and willing
 Moved down to Scarsdale
 Where the hell am I?

Aside from the standard cock rock motifs ("sweet things," "young and willing"), we observe in the faded frat boy's subjectless musings movement from libertine college town to dry suburb, from youth to (lower) middle age, from a feeling of groundedness to a feeling of dislocation. The final line of the verse asks "where the hell am I?" We might compare the line to Jagger's autobiographical "I" in "Stray Cat Blues," whose strength and surety assumes rock's sexual mythology with no ideological friction. In comparison, the faded frat boy struggles to voice his masculine subjectivity outside the instability his question, both at the level of sentences ("[I] moved down to scarsdale") and the level of ideology. Cock rock's masculine subject seems to require the exploitation of a "nineteen" or a "fifteen" in order to self-generate.

By locating the faded frat boy's masculine subjectivity within the frame of musical ideology, Becker and Fagen reveal the substrata of racialized generic associations subsumed by the cock rock subject. Take Fagen's second verse:

Hey Nineteen

⁷ This is my own approximation of the character's age based on how the character dates himself.

That's 'Retha Franklin

She don't remember

The Queen of Soul

It's hard time befallen

The sole survivors

That the character positions himself as a sort of soul music ambassador to the younger generation is especially comical considering his own Scarsdale affluence and whiteness—characteristics that, taken together, should close him off from any sort of black authenticity. Fagen's squirmy vocal flourish—the frat boy's apparent estimation of 'Retha's chops—only seals the dandy's deal. His is the route of appropriation, venturing claim on an ostensibly black musical form in order to advance his creepy sexual agenda.

This particular lampoon allows the listener insights into Steely Dan's self-positioning relative to archetypal cock rock themes and to rock music writ large. Through their irony, Steely Dan's aesthetic of creepiness strives to destabilize the generic mythology of rock music and thus their own place within the now-destabilized category. Becker and Fagen reveal the ideal's precarious underpinnings in sexual exploitation, criminality, generalized creepiness, and mild racial fetishization. As in "Everyone's Gone...", "Hey Nineteen" sets out to defamiliarize the masculine subjectivity of rock ideology and strike at the generic footing of rock itself.

There is a self-negating logic that informs Steely Dan's satirization of cock rock, of rock's generic subjectivity and, to the extent that rock subsumes them, of creepy masculine sexual expression and whiteness. Of course, Becker and Fagen possess each of these things—classification as "rock," masculine subjectivity, whiteness, and an interest in performing ostensibly black music. Steely Dan's aesthetic of creepiness seems, then, to problematize the very position—generic, racial, gendered—from which it disseminates its satire. Here again we see Walter Becker and Donald

Fagen teasing Mailerisms, implying that their racial, gender, and generic positions might be abdicated through the denouncing of their ideological enclaves. In order to gauge Steely Dan's racial, gender, and generic positioning in its fullness, let us now move to Steely Dan's lyrical address of black masculinity, couched in the racially-coded genres of funk and reggae.

The main issue I confront with regard to Steely Dan's address of black music genres is that Becker and Fagen never vacate white subjectivity in addressing black musics. This is particularly perplexing considering their ironic negation of whiteness performed in their cock rock satires. This strategy allows engagement not with the musics themselves but with dominant white racial ideologies through which black musics are constructed, read, and used by white listeners. The song I examine here, "FM," makes heavy use of the genre cues of funk and reggae musics.

Prior to examining Steely Dan's use of funk and reggae, I would like to reiterate my tentative labeling of the band as "rock-going-jazz," simply because their address of funk and reggae supplies a generic nuance that the term does not overtly capture. As I examine Steely Dan's generic positioning, I consider funk and reggae musics as commensurate with jazz because of the salience of race in determining generic compatibility prior to the fusion moment. Additionally, these genres share an essentialized blackness in the generic logic of the time, even though that blackness was constructed in different and sometimes opposing ways.⁸ Especially to the ear of the white listener of the seventies—including the characters of Steely Dan's songs—jazz, funk, and reggae would have been grouped together much in the same way they are today under the singular label "black music."

Steely Dan's "FM (No Static At All)" (1978), satirizes the way white listeners hear "black music" in relation to rock music. The difference in musical meaning pivots on a fulcrum of

⁸ In *Birds of Fire*, Kevin Fellezs details these oppositions—between jazz's sophistication and funk's populism, for example—while maintaining that the racialized construction of genres during the fusion moment, primarily by whites, obscured their differences and accentuated their shared blackness (54-57). Indeed a major part of Fellezs's project is to rearticulate those differences as they surfaced during the fusion moment.

masculine sexual expression that reiterates dominant white readings of black male cultural production—funk music in particular—as primitive and hypersexual.⁹ For the suburban partiers of “FM,” however, hypersexuality is the aim. Fagen sings from the perspective of a “white negro”-esque nu-hipster, arrogant in his dismissal of the AM radio DJ supplying old, white, unsexual tunes to the party:

The girls don't seem to care what's on

As long as it plays till dawn

Nothin' but blues and Elvis

And somebody else's favorite song

For the song's narrator, this music is an anticlimax. The blues, Elvis, and the AM DJ who spins them—these figures represent a sort of old guard to the white suburban racial imaginary. If rock 'n' roll once provided white markets with spatially- and racially-mediated access to hypersexualized black cultural forms, then in 1978—twenty-four years after Elvis began his career, sixteen years after the Stones first presented their blues derivative—these forms have faded into the mediocrity of typical Steely Dan suburban life. Indeed these are the proto-cock rock musicians whom Steely Dan satirize as criminally-old predators in other songs. The Thin Lizzies of Frith and McRobbie's analysis only seem to absolve this tradition of its explicitly black prerequisite.

In the mind of Fagen's white male listener, funk and reggae act as refreshers, as sexual stimulants for the party's women, performing the seduction that proto-cock rock bands no longer can. Compare the song's chorus, for example, to that of “Hey Nineteen,” and the faded frat boy seems even more a cultural and sexual pariah. The narrator of “FM,” on the other hand, *knows how it's done*:

Give her some funk'd up music, she treats you nice

⁹ Fellezs also uses the metaphor to articulate the way musical meanings ‘pivot’ on a fulcrum of race (54).

Feed her some hungry reggae, she'll love you twice

The girls don't seem to care tonight

As long as the mood is right

Funk and reggae are conflated and constructed in typical fashion for the time. Moreover, “funk” is returned in part to its original use in describing bodily fluids, which are metaphorically ceded to and transferred among the party’s “girls” in gendered exclusivity. Much like an infection, the narrator’s “funked up music” moves from female body to female body; they are vulnerable to funk’s black masculine presence, it seems, in ways unknown but readily usable by white men in their pursuit of sex. Despite the song’s overtly adventurous, anthemic sound, branded like an FM radio jingle, “no static at all,” the song lands in a murky, predatory space similar to the obviously satiric “Hey Nineteen.” The music may be high fidelity, but its purpose in the mind of the male narrator is as low as the most ardent cock rocker.

Here is where Becker and Fagen draw their irony: “FM” is ultimately a song about the ways racial ideology infiltrates affective, sexual, and social “moods” via musical association, and the way commercial mediators aid in the construction of those associations. As such, the narrative Fagen’s character enters into a sort of racialized, radio-fueled hyperreality—indistinguishable in his experience from the raced genre narratives on which his masculine sexual desires rely on for expression. The crux of his listening experiences is, of course, the radio station itself, which provides white suburban listeners access to black music on exclusively-black stations, taxonomizing generic racial associations. Additionally, like the faded hipster of “Deacon Blues” and the faded frat boy of “Hey Nineteen,” “FM’s” nu-hipster stakes his masculine sexuality in black musics whose associative geography and socio-economic experience are dislocated from his own. He is, to the ideology of funk, inauthentic.

Songs like “FM” create a problem for critics who wish to position Steely Dan in proximity to the black musics they address in their lyrics. Blackness, for Steely Dan, loops back to whiteness. This is not a problematic essentialist limitation, but an acknowledged symptom of their racialized genre cultures and of the ideologies that inform and perpetuate them. Indeed even as Fagen sings about “funk” and “reggae” in “FM,” the instrumentation draws from funk’s bass-centered vamping but remains firmly rooted in the blues, foregrounding guitar improvisation that rarely breaks out of its home-key minor pentatonic blues scale. It is as if the song’s character grasps neither the differences between the two nor the fluid generic continuities between ostensibly separate black musical forms.

The point contributes to the song’s satire—Fagen’s character is never farther from “authenticity” than when he mistakenly inauthenticates the “funked up music” that fills his party. But it also represents an unironic attempt at generic positioning in apparent contradiction to Steely Dan’s cock rock satires. All of these songs are in the end self-referential. If Steely Dan’s negation of rock music is linked by their racialized generic culture as a negation of whiteness, then “FM” acknowledges that whiteness is un-negatable; that the white listener’s negotiation of traditionally black musical genres is always seen through whiteness. Surely this carries over to playing these styles of music, too. The two-way model at once defies the period’s racialized logic of musical genre and enforces it, leaving irony (i.e., deliberate inauthenticity) as the only method through which the white listener or musician can engage black music.

This is not to say that Becker and Fagen theorize musical genre in racialized, essentialist ways. Rather, through their constant toying with racialized generic tropes, the songwriters present themselves as hyper-aware of genre’s racial taxonomies, and of their own embeddedness within those racial taxonomies. Their simultaneous de-positioning and re-positioning reflects their broader neg(oti)tion of the the fusion landscape seen previously in their rhetorical jazz mystique and

postmodern “white negro” model, whereby their own critically-constructed racial limitations are accentuated ironically even as they work to deconstruct racially-essentialist notions of musical genre. The effect of the strategy in the cock rock satires of “Everyone’s Gone...” and “Hey Nineteen” and the funk satire of “FM” is to remain occupants of an essentialized racial category while deconstructing the ideology that erects essentialist boundaries, enclosing racial identity in smoke and mirrors all the while performing musics that pushes into the middle space of fusion.

Conclusion

Neg(oti)ating Identity

Carry on as if Donald and I were dead.

- Walter Becker, to his biographer, Brian Sweet, 1999

In this concluding section, I would like to briefly sketch a way of theorizing Walter Becker and Donald Fagen's genre neg(oti)ation strategy; I would like to revisit some of this project's animating concepts and show how they are finally transformed in relation to Steely Dan's music; and I would like to call attention to Steely Dan's activity post-seventies. I have chosen to bring this thesis to a close by recirculating its introduction, Walter Becker's dismissive response to his biographer's inquiry, although I've removed it from its context in the biographer's sentence.¹ This is not meant as a slight to Sweet's biography, which does what a biography should. Rather, it's meant in respect—or in post-passing tribute—to Becker's droll wit, which, in this instance, aptly voices this section's title. His ironic self-removal from the critic's project not only confuses the critic and calls attention to the (unwelcomed) staged-ness of his examination, but also casts a thin doubt over the critic's judgements, forcing the critic's reader to question, If his subject doesn't take him seriously, why should I? In this way, Becker negotiates and thus unmakes himself as subject. For critic and fan, he becomes unstable, unreadable, negated.

By extension, I'd like to suggest that Becker's statement typifies Steely Dan's relationship to the generic categories that critics construct and enforce, and that Steely Dan's fusion music similarly enacts its own critical unmaking. As we've seen numerous times throughout this thesis, musical genres codify race in reductive and essentialist ways. The fusioners of the seventies confronted these rigid generic taxonomies and created musics that, in the words of Kevin Fellezs, "sounded out in-between-ness" amidst diametrically-opposing genres. Critical tensions arose to meet them when

¹ See Introduction (or Sweet's *Reelin' in the Years*) for the quote in its original context.

essentialized racial/generic taxonomies could not accommodate generic in-between-ness unproblematically. Hence, Miles Davis is seen as “selling out” (“Miles Davis”); Joni Mitchell is seen as “trespassing.” (Fellezs, 14). Fellezs argues that fusioners used “‘in-between-ness’ as a strategy to foreground individual agency in the face of histories of generic separation” (6). But individual musical agency is always elusive when the categories through which we construct musical individuals—tradition, race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.—are never as fluid as the musics themselves. Aware that the fusioner is always-already problematized, Becker and Fagen created rhetorical and musical strategies of self-negation, ironically calling attention to their own occupation of racial/generic categories even as they destabilize those categories. They sound out in-between-ness not to foreground individual agency but to foreground the individual’s fundamental instability.

Becker and Fagen’s strategy of self-negation troubles existing readings of fusion that fix on an aesthetics and politics of disruption and assertion. These readings figure Fellezs’s notion of “individual agency” and figure it sonically, highlighting musical passages of high volume, breakdown, discontinuity, epitomized by trumpeter Miles Davis’s pioneering *Bitches Brew* (1970).² At the time of its release, Davis made the politics of his musics clear. Prior to the release of *Bitches*, Davis interviewed with *Rolling Stone*’s Don DeMichael and famously told the critic, “I don’t like the word rock and roll and all that shit. Jazz is an Uncle Tom word. It’s a white folks word. I never heard that shit until I read in a magazine” (“Miles Davis”) Davis positions his fusion music in order to subvert racialized systems of linguistic dominance and essentialized genre labels, but he still maintains an argument of racial essentialism. It recalls the trumpeter’s instruction to Columbia records prior to the release of his fusion classic *Bitches Brew* (1970), “sell it black,” both in its adherence to sixties-era cultural nationalism and in its muted anxiety about remaining decidedly black while moving toward a

² Additionally, in *Birds of Fire*, see Kevin Fellezs’s analyses of Lifetime and Mahavishnu Orchestra, fusion bands known for their fast, chaotic, disruptive tunes.

white-dominated style of music. Ultimately both statements functions as damage control in the face of jazz critics who would dispute Davis's racial allegiance.

We must also consider both quotes in their market contexts—both critics and record company marketing teams play out their roles as generic classifiers always in relation to groups of consumers. This orientation toward the commercial value of generic classifiers is obvious enough in the case of record company reps, but critics, too, work to inform consumers, shape tastes, cater to specific audiences who are undoubtedly figured in the static, rigid form of demographics. When Davis signals his disinterest in the labels of “jazz” and “rock,” his voice is subsumed by DeMichael's, who plays curator for *Rolling Stone*, a magazine that catered and shaped the interests of mostly-white rock fans. DeMichael may well have pounced at the opportunity to print Davis's denouncement of “jazz,” his interest in rock, and his affirmation of rock music's racial origin myths.

However, prominent critical readings of Miles's “electric turn” have affirmed the idea of Davis's self-assertion in compounding racial and musical terms. Greg Tate declares that Davis's work “is the model and measure for how *black* your shit really is” (86); Fabian Holt ramps the hyperbole, asserting that *Bitches Brew* “confronts [rock] like a boxer without gloves, with sheer volume and spiritual power conveyed through [Davis's] majestic trumpet playing” and “introduces a new form of discontinuity that can be heard as a sonic metaphor for the historical moment of disruption in jazz” (96). This conventional linking of aesthetic and ideological disruption implies an idealized politics that foregrounds not only “individual agency,” as Fellezs claims, but collective agencies for whom “in-between-ness” might offer new aesthetic forms. There is, however, a utopian impulse underlying this aesthetic of disruption that assumes a unified individual's ability to enact a unified politics. For Davis, this was not the case. His attempts at damage control exhibit a destabilized musician placed by the commercial and critical wings of the music industry in a position

of re-essentialization. His in-between-ness is always-already the function of interlocutors whose interests lie in solidified racial and generic categories.

Steely Dan ironizes the very notion of the individual's in-between-ness by emphasizing the ideological fixedness of the musician as critical subject and thus questioning the musician's ability to "follow" their music into the in-between. This is the model of the postmodern "white negro," whose very name points to the essentialist inability of the artist to experience the fluidity of his music—racial categories are merely suspended next to one another, decoupled from musical fluidity. This decoupling presents problems to what Fellezs calls fusion's "broken middle," the in-between space of unresolved overlap and competition between "musical priorities." In the words of Isobel Armstrong, from whom Fellezs appropriates the term, the broken middle represents a "logic of breakdown [...] where opposites [in dialectical formation] fail to transform one another" (17). For Fellezs, the broken middle is the meeting-place of the musical and social, both of which figure into its "logic of breakdown." Becker and Fagen problematize the "broken middle" by ironizing racialized readings of music, by signifying their fused in-between-ness musically and then ironizing themselves out. By its own terms, Steely Dan seems to have revealed the broken middle's broken middle by positioning themselves between in-between-ness and full abdication of dialectical opposites, which is the kind of heady absurdity Becker and Fagen could only have hoped for.

In practice, Steely Dan's generic slipperiness slipped away with the fusion moment at the end of the seventies. Since then, the band has undergone a number of conceptual changes that seem to undermine its original project. Becker and Fagen began touring again in 1991 with a new set of studio musicians and have not stopped since. The death of Walter Becker in September of this year has not put a halt to anything, although Donald Fagen has changed the name of his touring band to "The Nightflyers," after his 1982 solo album, *The Nightfly*. As mentioned earlier, Steely Dan is now

sold under the label “classic rock,” but this label reduces a few interesting sub-generic movements that I’d like to highlight here.

The first is “yacht rock,” a catch-all term for west-coast, smooth, soft, easy-listening, unchallenging, highly-commercialized “lifestyle music” of the seventies and eighties—artists such as Kenny Loggins, Michael McDonald, Toto, Hall & Oates, and Steely Dan (“Sail Away,” ‘Toal). Regardless of the quality of these artists’ music, the term itself, “yacht rock,” is pejorative. It denotes music that is undoubtedly white, undoubtedly middle-aged, undoubtedly upper-middle-class, and undoubtedly lame. I meet the term with contention as it reduces the evasiveness of Steely Dan’s work and re-essentializing the band in the same racial terms that they meticulously tried to destabilize.

“Dad rock” is no more useful in terms of racial essentialism, but race is less important than age in determining the dad rocker. It largely accounts for the same group of artists as “yacht rock,” only casting them and their listeners in middle-class generational decline. Here’s a definition that captures the spirit:

Dad-rock is nostalgic. Dad-rock was mostly made in Los Angeles in the 1970s. A dad-rock album rocks, but not too hard. A dad-rock album is very tired and would like to drink precisely one cold Rainier. Dad-rock is laid back, man. Sometimes dad-rock needs seven different guitarists to come in and try the solo before someone nails it. Dad-rock doesn't do coke anymore but would listen to a song about it. (Greenwald)

Among younger generation, “dad rock” has become a new sort of hipsterism perhaps best advocated most by Canadian indie rocker Mac DeMarco, an artists never sure of his own sincerity. Dad rock is consumed ironically, until it isn’t. Then irony slips on itself, and “dad rock” becomes endearing.

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