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Steely Dan: These guys aren't shy

Jazzy classic rockers sound off ahead of concert Tuesday night at Embassy Theatre

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Walter Becker and Donald Fagen, better known as the creative team behind rock group Steely Dan, who'll be performing at the Embassy Theatre on Tuesday night, are never afraid to share their opinions.

Though they do few interviews, the pair recently participated in a teleconference with reporters to discuss everything from their latest tour to the Internet to music and beyond.

Formed in the early 1970s, Steely Dan is best known for its string of hit rock/jazz albums from the '70s and '80s, such as "Can't Buy a Thrill," "Pretzel Logic," "Aja" and "Gaucho." The albums sold in the millions and earned Becker and Fagen a spot in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2001.

The duo also managed to produce their fair share of hits along the way, including "Do it Again," "Reelin' in the Years," "Rikki Don't Lose that Number," "Peg," "Deacon Blues" and "Hey Nineteen." Fans can hear all of those songs on their current tour, which they've amusingly named "Mood Swings: 8 Miles to Pancake Day."

Asked in the teleconference the meaning of the tour name, the response was typically frank, a trademark of interviews with the Steely Dan leaders.

"How did it come about? We made it up," Becker replied.

"In truth, we put up Mood Swings — that was the easy part — and then we were reminiscing about the old television show which was called 'Route 66,' and we remembered how in those days they used to name TV episodes using very eccentric titles like 'Who's Afraid of the Muffin Man,' things like that," Fagen added.

"So, we decided we were going to have a subtitle for our Mood Swings tour," Fagen said. "In fact, we're thinking we might change the subtitle every few weeks."

Though Steely Dan did initially tour early in their career from 1972 to 1974 with the same core group, starting in 1975 they disbanded that group and focused on studio work with various session musicians under the name Steely Dan and abandoned playing live.

Steely Dan recorded and released albums successfully until 1981, when they decided to go their separate ways and pursue solo ventures.

In 1993, they decided to come back together to tour as well as to release two more studio albums, "Two Against Nature" (which won four Grammy awards) in 2000 and "Everything Must Go" in 2003.

They've continued to tour since and are glad that they are touring now as opposed to during their career heyday in the '70s.

"Everything has changed," Becker said of touring.

"The venues and the menus and the hotels and everything have gotten better," Fagen added. "So now it's much more fun to play. I'm glad that we turned into a big-time touring band later in life. It's almost like we planned it out that way."

On this tour, Steely Dan will play different shows depending on the city in which they're performing.

Some cities will get a greatest hits show, like the show in Fort Wayne, and other cities — usually larger cities where they'll be playing multiple nights — will get a complete Steely Dan classic album played as well as selected hits.

One thing that clearly stood out during the teleconference with Becker and Fagen is that neither is a big fan of the Internet.

When asked about Twitter, both of them bristled in union in their dislike of social media.

"No, I've never had a Twitter account," Fagen replied when asked about Twitter. "I don't have a Facebook or a Twitter. In fact, now I don't even have a Website. I used to, but I canceled it because it took too much time."



More Information

Audio interview with Steely Dan

The News-Sentinel

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What: Steely Dan "Mood Swings: 8 Miles to Pancake Day" tour concert.

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Embassy Theatre, 121 W. Jefferson Blvd.

Cost: \$39.50, \$59.50, \$79.50 and Gold Circle seats \$125. Tickets are \$39.50, \$59.50, \$79.50 and Gold Circle seats \$125. They are available at the Embassy box office, 424-5665, Ticketmaster outlets, www.ticketmaster.com and 1-800-745-3000.

"No, of course not," Becker said about being engaged online. "I thought Twitter was a joke until about 12 weeks ago — and really I thought it was like a gag or something — and then I find out that it's not. I thought it was like the National Lampoon or The Onion or whatever."

As the last questioner in the teleconference, I asked the duo if they were fans of high-resolution downloads or any other high-resolution format for music, which was an offshoot of the discussion of the Internet. Both were quite adamantly opposed to newer formats.

"The thing about those things is it's too bad they don't have any good music anymore to play on all those new formats," Fagen replied. "Maybe they should have a moratorium on inventing new formats until someone has done some good music."

"When they invent a format that sounds as good as a nice, clean, piece of vinyl played on a good turntable, then someone should let us know," he concluded.