



Walter Becker Back to Bass-ics

ALTHOUGH HE PLAYED bass sparingly on the last couple Steely Dan records, Walter Becker hits the four-string head-on on his second solo record *Circus Money*.

"I do it when I can," he said. "On this particular record, I wanted to because if you're trying to influence the shape of the rhythmic content of the tunes, that's sort of the best place to do it from, for me anyway."

"I knew in the end it was going to be me or Larry Klein (co-producer, songwriter, and bassist), and in the end, Larry weaseled out of it."

Becker's first record since 1994's *11 Tracks of Whack* is a bit of a departure for those accustomed to dense chord changes and sophisticated harmonies. "I'd been listening to a lot of Jamaican music and wanted to do something with that."

He eventually wrote the groove-oriented tunes with Klein, many of which contain nods to his recent listening habits while focusing on the groove.

"Larry has a unique set of talents which are different from mine, and he added quite a bit to the writing and producing. It's also more fun to have someone to goof around with when you're doing it!"

Becker was Steely Dan's original bassist, playing the instrument on many of its early records. By the

time of *Katy Lied*, he had added guitar to the music, playing brilliant solos on cuts like "Black Friday" and "Bad Sneakers." His guitar playing, he says, always comes down to the blues, and while he has added things, blues are still the basis. That background comes from being an avid reader of *Downbeat* magazine when he was a kid. "Overachieving little jazz nerd that I was, I'd read about blues and stuff from Pete Welding's column. So I started listening to that stuff and realized it was pretty good." It also helped that the late Randy California of Spirit fame became a neighbor of his. "When I met him, I had just gotten my first electric guitar and I couldn't figure out what the hell to do with the thing, you know? I learned how to play the blues from Randy and records, but Randy was the first guy I was ever in the room with that I could watch play the licks."

Becker was a Strat player until the early '90s, and points out he was photographed during his Steely Dan days with what he calls "guitars of opportunity," including a Fender Duo-Sonic, an Epiphone archtop, and another old Epiphone that made the cover of *Katy Lied*. Now, he uses a signature guitar he designed with Roger Sadowsky. Proceeds from its sales are being donated by Becker and Sadowsky to The Jazz Foundation,

which provides assistance to musicians in need.

"I wanted to do something to acknowledge the contribution to my guitar playing that Roger has made," Becker said. "We talked about it and came up with the idea."

His amp collection includes several Mesas, including a Maverick and a Lone Star Special. He has also used several Top Hat amps and points to different Bogners as being "a staple of my road setup for a long time."

With both Becker and Donald Fagen doing solo work, how do they decide what songs go where? "When we work on a Steely Dan album, pretty much any idea I have, I throw into the pot. And Donald does the same, as far as I know. We just go from there." With the band touring frequently, how do they choose which songs to do from their extensive catalog? "We tend to do those that seem most consistent with the configuration of the band we have. Those are the later tunes. The folk-rock type things are simpler, and sometimes we rearrange them. But as a rule they don't lend themselves to the four-horn section."

As for the future, Becker says he would consider production work. He has produced numerous times before, including records for Michael Franks and Rickie Lee Jones. "I'd also like to write songs for people. In a way, for me anyway, the writing part of the process is the most fun." How about a solo Walter Becker tour? "Yeah, I would do it. I have no plans at this point, but then I'm not a big planner." Going hand-in-hand with that remark is his take on any new Steely Dan material. "Hard to tell. Usually we're the last to know." — **John Heidt**



In the '08 VG Price Guide listing for the '65 Firebird III, I notice a \$3,000 price difference between the reverse models compared to the non-reverse models. Why? — Al Ziegler

It's an issue of one model being more appealing to players/collectors due to aesthetics, rarity, and due to more popular guitarists using the reverse model. Gibson changed the shape after receiving a letter from Fender concerning infringement upon their offset-waist design. Gibson changed both the appearance of the instrument and the fundamental way it was constructed. Gone was the novel neck-through-body design, replaced by a simpler set-neck method, the banjo-style tuners giving way to standard six-in-line/upward-facing machine heads. The Firebird was thus stripped of many of its unique features.

The greater value of the reverse is also greatly influenced by the number of famous guitarists who have featured the guitar in their performances through the years. Eric Clapton, Brian Jones, Johnny Winter, and Allen Collins have all used reverse Firebirds in their illustrious careers. One of the very few champions of the non-reverse Firebird is Gatemouth Brown.

Why is it that some Fender Telecasters play so effortlessly, while others are a real chore to play, even when they share the same frets, string gauge, amount of relief, action, etc? — Ed Gonzalez

One factor that can have quite an effect on Tele string tension is the height of the saddles. As one raises the saddles, not only is the action raised, but greater string tension is created. As greater tension is produced, it becomes harder to bend strings. In the case of a guitar with a separate bridge and tailpiece, like a Les Paul, the stop tailpiece can be raised or lowered, which will raise or lower the string tension without changing string height. Unfortunately, on the Tele, they go hand in hand.

There is a degree to which you are at the mercy of your guitar, and how low you can get away with setting the height of your saddles. One option might be a top-loader bridge.

Zac Childs is a professional guitar tech based in Nashville. If you have a question about guitars, anything from nuts and bolts to historical or celebrity-related inquiries, drop a line to him at zac@askzac.com.