



**ALBUM REVIEW:**

Steely Dan (reissue)

**Aja**

Cisco/ABC 1006 180g LP

Produced by: **Gary Katz**

Engineered by: **Roger Nichols, Elliot Scheiner, Bill Schnee, Al Schmitt**

Mixed by: **N/A (Roger Nichols?)**

Mastered by: **Kevin Gray and Robert Pincus at AcousTech**

Executive Engineer: **Roger Nichols**



Review by: Michael Fremer  
2007-07-01



Let's get right to the point of this reissue, which is the sound, since anyone shelling out big bucks for it is doing so because he or she is familiar with the music and loves it to death. This new Cisco reissue is vastly superior to both the original pressing (ABC AA 1006) and to Mobile Fidelity's 1/2 speed mastered reissue (Mobile Fidelity MFSL 1-0333).

If your stereo system (or your personal savior/used record dealer) tells you otherwise, blame it and/or him, not Elliot Scheiner, one of the original engineers on Aja who oversaw this reissue, or Donald Fagen (no introduction necessary), or Kevin Gray and Robert Pincus who mastered it from the original analog tape at AcousTech.

Let me tell you why this new reissue is easily the best sounding Aja yet. The bass on the original is (only by comparison to this reissue) a mushy, indistinct, unformed blob. The original's top end (I sampled four clean ABC originals), particularly the cymbal shimmer and ring, is undernourished, soft and shelved back in amplitude. The midrange is pushed forward, creating a false zone of warmth that gives the upper range of the kick drum a highly colored but forward "thunk."

The entire picture is mildly compressed and Fagen's voice is thin and sounds tracked with a phasey aural exciter (in reality it's layers of voice overdubbing as Fagen covers his tracks to produce a "fatter" vocal sound). Back in those days it was impossible to manipulate the multiple tracks to match perfectly. Today that's relatively easy to accomplish. That's a fine formula for FM radio, college dorm and crash pad stereos and mass vinyl production circa 1977, but for a high resolution, high dynamic system in 2007? No. The superb recording and pristine production by Roger Nichols, Elliot Scheiner, Bill Schnee and Al Schmitt (a CSN&Y-like super group of recording engineers) had much more to give.

The Mobile Fidelity piles on even more blobby bass and while the half speed high frequency groove etching is incredibly detailed and well-focused, it's also been bleached and brightened and the upper mids have been sucked out to make the high frequency transients stick out. This reissue's bass is tight yet lithe, well-focused and harmonically complex, texturally detailed, solid and revealing. You'll follow the bass line tune with new ease. However, if your system doesn't go all the way down, it won't sound like there's great bass and probably the original and/or the Mo-Fi will sound "richer and fuller" but that's because the original was produced for mass, not audiophile consumption.

The cymbal crashes have that “I can count the rivets” quality my friend Frank Doris used to write about Bill Porter’s productions, revealing incredible detail that glistens with sweet brassy, percussive textures and extends to the stratosphere without sounding tipped up or in the least unnatural.

Putting it more bluntly, this is a stupendous production. If it doesn’t sound good on your system now, it awaits being revealed for how good it really is when your systems is elevated to match the occasion.

If you hear hashy, sizzly highs, that’s your system speaking. If you hear anemic bass, same thing, and if the original sounds more dramatic, vivid and full, don’t blame the reissue. The better your system, especially in terms of dynamics, bass weight and slam and transient clarity, the better this reissue will sound.

The title track reveals layers of hidden detail and dynamic nuances and layering buried on the original. Steve Gadd’s drumming has never sounded as dramatic or full-bodied. There are small percussive accents including triangle and wood block that emerge from the former haze to become cleanly rendered events without sounding bright, bleached or etched and Fagen’s voice layers become full bodied and easily separated yet the totality of the desired intended effect becomes more fully expressed.

This remaster exudes the kind of musical honesty you might expect when one of the original engineers and the artistic center of gravity are involved in its production.

Truthfully, I’ve not heard a truly bad sounding edition of Aja. It’s such a well recorded, sumptuous production one would have to work hard to make it sound bad. Compared to most pop/rock recordings, any edition of Aja (that I’ve heard) sounds good. This one sounds great.

So, this most elegant and ambitious of Steely Dan albums featuring “jump in” production depth and cinematic sweep has never sounded better in my opinion. The tape has obviously held up as well as the music. I can’t imagine the upcoming Japanese reissue at best mastered from the analog tape copy originally sent to Japan, sounding any better, though I’ll be sure to have a listen.

By the way, if someone says the reissue doesn’t sound any good, be sure to ask about that person’s playback system. For the record I listened on The Continuum Caliburn turntable with Cobra arm, the Grand Prix Monaco turntable with Graham Phantom arm and the Merrill MS21 turntable with Triplanar arm. Cartridges included Lyra Titan i, Koetsu Urushi Vermillion and Air Tight PC-1. Phono preamps included Einstein Turntable’s Choice and Manley Steelhead. Preamp was darTZeel and amps were Musical Fidelity kW’s driving Wilson MAXX2s. Cables were TARA Labs Zero interconnects and Omega speaker cable. Believe me, I heard what’s on the vinyl loud and clear and it’s spectacular!

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