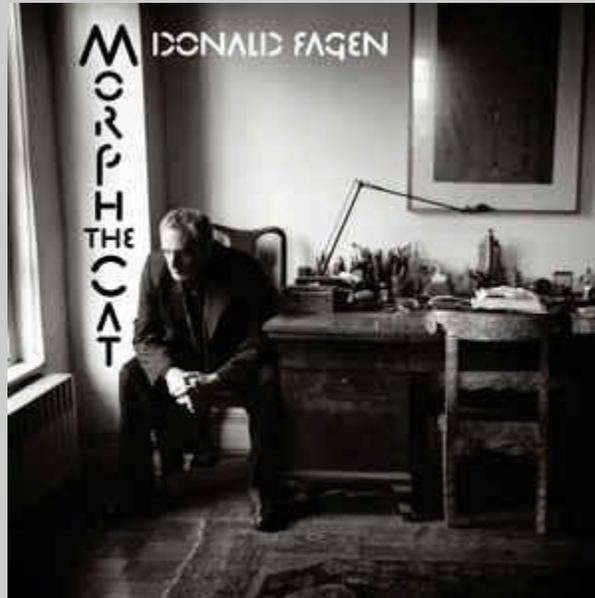


Morph The Cat by Donald Fagen

First song: Very nice. Rest of the album: OK.

Donald Fagen's album *Morph the Cat*, released in March 2006 provides good listening pleasure to those expecting great things from the Steely Dan mastermind. Not exactly *The Royal Scam* but a good listen during dinner or at a more sophisticated gathering.



The title track opens the album telling the story of a “vast, ghostly cat-thing” floating over New York City, according to the brief synopsis seen at the head of each of the printed lyrics on the disk’s liner notes. It’s hard to tell at first where the song is going, melodically, until the chorus kicks in for the first time. When it does, it’s a breath of fresh air featuring classic Fagen vocal harmonies mixing male and female voices.

Here Comes the H Gang

Who the “H Gang” is I’ll never know but they must have been something else. I’ve always felt out of the loop trying to decipher Fagen/Steely Dan lyrics. It’s as if he was a friend who snuck away to parties and illicit meetings that I wasn’t privy to. I bet I’m not the only one who feels that way but I bet I’m one of the few who admit it.

This is another breezy jazzy song with the vocal harmonies reminiscent of *The Nightfly* album. Great dinner music. I wouldn’t say the harmonies harken back to the 1950s, as with *The Nightfly*, but I would say they harken back to Steely Dan of the 1970s. You might call that a copout on my part and I might agree but I don’t want to manufacture

influences that aren't attributable. Where's Donald Fagen when a journalist needs him and what is this "H" he speaks of?

What I Do

Safe enough to say that Ray Charles is the influence here. That's what I say and it's not a stretch. Great backing vocals from Amy Helm, Carolyn Leonhart and Cindy Mizelle along with Mr. Fagen. Sweet sentiment to a sweet source and nicely done. I've always thought Fagen was somewhat of a jazz influenced Ray Charles with a bigger budget. That's not a stretch is it?

Brite Nitegown

In the album's liner notes, Fagen refers to a W.C. Fields quote, likening death as "the fellow in the bright nightgown." He goes on to explain that "each verse is a different encounter with the fellow." I assume he speaks of Death and not W.C. Fields, although it may be on us to make that distinction.

Decadent party references abound with each verse, the last one ending with: "I'm sittin' on the rug gettin' a victory hug, from the fella in the brite Brite Nitegown." There are no typos here and I'm thinking to myself I gotta hang out with Fagen one of these days before I meet the fella in the Brite Nitegown.

The Great Pagoda of Funn

No, it's not a dish on the menu and I don't typically associate a pagoda (a temple or sacred building) as a place for fun but I'm not Donald Fagen. As he states in the liner notes, the song is about "lovers attempt to shut out the harsh realities of life."

It all works as only Fagen can make it but the tune is forgettable. Where is Walter Becker, Wayne Shorter and Steve Gadd when you need them.



Security Joan

Joan is not a Pinkerton, she is an airport security checkpoint representative, waving a wand and checking the X-Ray machine and Donald has the hots for her. Here are the closing lines:

*Honey you know I ain't no terrorist,
Confiscate my shoes-my cell phone
You know I love-love-love you
Security Joan*

What ever happened to the days when he was longing for Rose Darling, Josie or even Hey Nineteen? Aside from that, melodically this song leads me down a path to nowhere for six-plus minutes. Great dinner music again and I'm ashamed to say that's all it does for me because the production is so good.

The Night Belongs to Mona

Same song as the previous one only shorter with a longer title and a better name and subject.

Mary Shut the Garden Door

I always thought gardens had gates and not doors but this is Donald Fagen's world we live in and I want to live in that world. Good track but not a memorable one.

Overall, the album is a bit mechanical, which is par for the course with Fagen/Steely Dan but the tunes are not what they were back in the day, not that they're supposed to be, because Fagan spoiled me rotten back in the day.

Morph the Cat is as polished as can be and we wouldn't expect anything less from Mr. Fagen. It's not exactly *The Nightly* but it wants to be, with a much more modern sensibility. As good as the musicians are, they don't have a lot of room to roam, and we don't hear the sweet sonic tones of the instruments like we did on *Aja* or countless other albums, but then I guess I'm a little stuck in the past. I sometimes wish Mr. Fagen was too.