7 Ten Jazzbo Rockstars

Joni Mitchell, Earth, Wind & Fire, Frank Zappa, Santana, Steely Dan, and More

The story goes that Joni Mitchell first heard the miraculous bass of Jaco Pastorius on a mid-1970s road trip from LA to Maine. In Boulder, Colorado, she stopped in to visit guitarist Robben Ford, a member of her touring band who played on her most recent album, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* (1975). Ford had an advance copy of Pastorius's debut album, and when the tender ballad "Portrait of Tracy" came on the stereo, Mitchell knew that she was hearing a musical innovator and an audacious kindred spirit. She was particularly wowed by Pastorius's trademark use of fluid melodies on the low end of the bass, highlighted by his chiming, pinging harmonics.[1] He had the charisma of someone comfortable calling himself the best bass player in the world, and thus was a good match for Mitchell, who was in her early thirties and already considered the greatest singer-songwriter in the world. "He had a big bushy ego that ruffled a lot of people," Mitchell recalled a decade later, "but even his arrogance appealed to me."[2] Together, they partnered on an

exquisite series of albums that transformed her career through jazz fusion.

Mitchell was hardly a typical folk or pop star. Like many, she taught herself guitar as a teenager, but with her left hand weakened by a childhood case of polio, she couldn't play the fingerpicking patterns from her instructional records. So she threw them out and found her unique way around the frets.[3] Even back in the mid-1960s, when the Saskatchewan native was entering the folk scenes in New York and then LA, she was experimenting with what would be known as "Joni's weird chords," where she used alternative tunings on her guitar to create unusual voicings and droning sounds that enabled her to sound almost orchestral while playing solo.[4] Such unusual voicings gave added artistic depth to her earliest signature songs: "Both Sides Now" (1969's *Clouds*), "Big Yellow Taxi" (1970's *Ladies of the Canyon*), and "A Case of You" (1971's *Blue*). She made tentative forays into jazz tones on *For the Roses* (1972) with woodwind musician Tom Scott, who brought his whole fusion band, L.A. Express, to play on Mitchell's 1974 hit record, *Court and Spark*, and on a warm and loose live double album, *Miles of Aisles* (1974). By 1975, she felt confident enough to capture the drifting haze of LA society with *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*' jazzier, more experimental musical milieu.

Pastorius joined up on *Hejira* (1976), a sublime album whose impressionistic lyrics and open-vista sound evoke that meandering journey Mitchell made across North America the previous year. The very first track, "Coyote," sets the tone with its spare instrumentation: just subtle percussion, "Joni's weird chords," and Pastorius bubbling and chiming on the bass as if in conversation with Mitchell's tale of a wandering lothario.

If *Hejira* was cinematic like an intimate road movie, then the double album *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* (1977) was the self-indulgent epic that can be later rediscovered as an ambitious work of genius.

For years, critics dismissed *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* as a mess. To be fair, the biggest mess of Mitchell's career was the album cover, where she posed in Blackface as a sleazy male alter-ego she called "Art Nouveau."[5] In various interviews over the years, her explanations for this crassly racist image have been vague and confusing, and no matter what she could say, it remains a shocking choice for someone who was steeping herself in Black music traditions and becoming lifelong friends with Black jazz legends like Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. Her egregious mistake was tacitly acknowledged when the album was remastered and reissued in 2024 with a new cover photograph of Joni as herself, grinning and obscured by a large yawping wolf's head.

As for the music, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is mysterious and magical, unjustly misunderstood when it came out, as fans just wanted her to go back to her imperial phase of radio hits. *Rolling Stone*'s Janet Maslin led the way in 1978, saying that "[Mitchell] has been inexplicably inclined to let her music become shapeless as she tries to incorporate jazz and calypso rhythms that eventually overpower her . . . These days, she appears bent on repudiating her own flair for popular songwriting."[6] But the fiercely independent Mitchell was never the type to let anyone overpower her. Instead, she relished the new sui generis sounds she was making with Pastorius, jazz-funk singer Chaka Khan, percussionist Airto Moreira, Weather Report drummers Alex Acuña and Manolo Badrena, and

Wayne Shorter, who collaborated with her more in the years ahead. These artists help make Mitchell's more conventional songs sound otherworldly while also contributing to her expanding musical vision, including a sidelong jazz symphony called "Paprika Plains" and a drum-circle freakout called "The Tenth World." The whole album sounds like a heat mirage sprawling and flickering before a setting California sun. That inchoate magic draws you to its horizon the more you listen, but you have to take the time. Most people didn't, so it was her last album to go gold upon its release.[7]

Commercial success completely eluded her final "jazz" studio album, an homage and quasi-collaboration with legendary jazz bassist and composer Charles Mingus, who died in 1979, just months before the album came out. A stark, hermetic collection of spoken interludes and ghostly tunes, *Mingus* featured Mitchell hammering at her weird chords on her own songs or singing her lyrics based on Mingus's compositions, such as his elegiac standard "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat." Fittingly, only jazz musicians backed her on the record, including Herbie Hancock and three-quarters of Weather Report in Shorter, Pastorius, and drummer Peter Erskine. The reception from rock criticism's literati was predictably mixed, and Mitchell's days as a top 40 artist were pretty much over. Still, she finished out the 1970s—and her jazz phase—with her second live double album, the wonderful *Shadows and Light*, which was recorded in Santa Barbara in 1979. Mitchell and Pastorius collaborated with a new set of jazz fusion stars, including saxman Michael Brecker and guitarist Pat Metheny and his keyboardist Lyle Mays, all of whom bring a welcome brightness and openness to such enigmatic music.

Even if it managed to largely kill her album sales, Mitchell's jazz phase burnished her reputation as a brilliant musician, in addition to being a brilliant songwriter. But even though today she's lauded as a rock artist who excelled at incorporating jazz into her music, she always dismissed any suggestion that she was concerned with genre. "My songs . . . they're not folk music, they're not jazz, they're art songs," she explained at the Library of Congress in 2023, where she was honored with the prestigious Gershwin Award for Popular Song. "They embody classical things and jazzy things and folky things, long line poetry." But what about the bad reviews at the time? asked Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden. "[I'm] hard to discourage and hard to kill," said the legend, who had recently completed her recovery from a near-fatal brain aneurysm. And with that, the walls of the Library's Great Hall rumbled as the audience roared.[8]

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Mitchell became (and still is) the exemplar of the jazz-playing rock star, and the seeds of her artistic triumphs were first sown in the wild cultural winds of the late 1960s. Back then, Miles Davis and friends, of course, were forging fusion from a jazz perspective, but several rock and soul musicians were also joining in, and they were eager to fuse jazz with *their* music.

In 1967, Bronx-born nineteen-year-old singer-songwriter Laura Nyro gained enough buzz from her debut album to play at the Monterey Pop Festival, where, legend has it, she flopped so miserably that she left the stage in tears. However, Columbia Records head Clive Davis liked what he saw, and when she auditioned for him in a darkened rehearsal room, he

was blown away by her performance and her brilliant songs.[9] Her first album for the label, *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession* (1968), still sounds remarkable today. The song cycle flows from street-corner soul to jazzy torch songs to theatrical anthems, while also yielding timeless songs in "Eli's Comin'" and "Stoned Soul Picnic." Over it all was her voice, a powerful instrument that ranged from full-throated wails to the smoky phrasing of a cabaret chanteuse.

Nyro followed up this breakthrough with releases that varied in both sonics and tone: the harrowingly dark and spare *New York Tendaberry* (1969); the warm and inviting *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat* (1970); and the soul-song covers album *Gonna Take a Miracle* (1971), the latter a genuinely miraculous collaboration with vocal trio Labelle. Shy and artistically uncompromising, Nyro took a five-year hiatus from music in the middle of the 1970s, permanently stalling her career, but not before directly influencing bigger stars that decade, like the young jazz-rock beatnik Rickie Lee Jones, power-pop whiz and balladeer Todd Rundgren, and even magna diva Barbra Streisand.

Nyro's life and music could have run an entirely different course if she had accepted an offer to be the lead singer in a jazz-rock band that had just lost their frontman. Back in the late 1960s, Al Kooper, still best known today as the organ player on Bob Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone," initially led Blood, Sweat & Tears. Technically, Kooper was actually one of the several cofounders of the group, but he was certainly the spokesman in 1968, when he told *Rolling Stone*'s Jann Wenner how he wanted to create a band focused on horns, citing a royal flush of jazz fusioneer influences: James Brown, The Beatles, Ray

Charles, and even Maynard Ferguson,[10] the jazz bandleader who first introduced Joe Zawinul to Wayne Shorter. The first version of Blood, Sweat & Tears with Kooper was thus an octet, with a four-piece brass section and a rock section including drummer Bobby Colomby, known later for giving Jaco Pastorius his record deal. Their debut album, *Child Is Father to the Man* (1968), is a fascinating hybrid, based strongly in the hippie blues and pastel psychedelia of the time but with sterling horn charts playing over every track. However lovely the music may be, the sound of jazz sometimes takes second place to the sumptuous pop sound of the Moody Blues.

When the time came to record a follow-up, Kooper was out of the band, pushed out by that old bugbear of musical differences. After being approached to replace him, Nyro had to be talked out of joining by her devoted manager, a young David Geffen, who believed in her as a solo artist. Instead, Blood, Sweat & Tears hired a leather-lunged Canadian named David Clayton-Thomas to sing her song "And When I Die" for their self-titled sophomore release, as well as breakthrough hits like "You've Made Me So Very Happy" and "Spinning Wheel." Now a grooving jazzy behemoth, the band swung through a version of Traffic's "Smiling Phases" and swerved into a hot Latin interlude on their cover of Billie Holiday's signature tune, "God Bless the Child." *Blood, Sweat & Tears* would even go on to win Album of the Year at the Grammys, beating out stiff competition like The Beatles' *Abbey Road* and *Johnny Cash at San Quentin*.[11]

Unfortunately, Clayton-Thomas's immigration status eclipsed the band's brief time in the sun. Threatened with the deportation of their lead singer, the band was essentially

forced by the Nixon administration to promote America on a 1970 tour of Iron Curtain countries like Yugoslavia, Poland, and Romania. When they returned to the United States, they described their genuine shock at the repression in the Communist bloc and were swiftly labeled as government stooges by the counterculture press.[12] With their street cred permanently ruined, Blood, Sweat & Tears soon faced scathing reviews and declining sales, eventually becoming a legacy act with a revolving door of band members. It remains one of popular music's weirder tragedies, especially since the album *Blood, Sweat & Tears* was a template for so many albums released in the next decade.

That album's producer was James William Guercio, who was simultaneously working with another big band, combining rock energy with bold jazzy brass. Composed of Windy City club-gig veterans, this septet called themselves the Big Thing, and then Chicago Transit Authority, and finally just Chicago. Unlike Blood, Sweat & Tears, which regularly changed band members and relied heavily on outside material, Chicago had a remarkably steady lineup through most of the 1970s and boasted three strong songwriters in keyboardist Robert Lamm, guitarist Terry Kath, and trombonist James Pankow.

Lamm particularly shined on the group's debut, a double album called *The Chicago Transit Authority* (1969), where he wrote such delightfully breezy jazz-rock hits as "Beginnings," "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?," and "Questions 67 and 68." Meanwhile, Kath showcased his mastery of six strings, bending notes in various gritty bluesy solos or sculpting a gnarled seven-minute noisefest called "Free Form Guitar" that could slot in nicely on an early-1980s Sonic Youth record. The

other songs are either delightfully messy jams or have glorious horns blasting fanfares every few bars. Chicago continued to mesh jazz horns and rock on their second album, called simply *Chicago* (1970), and their third, called *Chicago III* (1971), and they did so in ways both beautiful and baroque. Chicago's sunny disposition and polished musicianship appealed to millions of record-buying pop fans, but these same traits also repelled hipster tastemakers, who effectively labeled the band as terminally uncool.

As the 1970s progressed, the band gradually lived down to that reputation, as the hits kept getting bigger and blander. At the same time, the jazz influence kept getting smaller, with the exception of *Chicago VII*'s opening twenty-five minutes of sizzling instrumental jazz-funk and sassy brass. Eventually the commercial lure of treacly ballads like "If You Leave Me Now" trumped musical adventurism, and by the end of the decade, Chicago were rewarded on the charts—and derided in the press—as a schmaltz-rock juggernaut.

At the same time, a fusionesque soul-funk juggernaut stormed the pop charts during the 1970s. Earth, Wind & Fire used funk and soul as a base rather than rock, but their founder and leader, Maurice White, had a jazz musical background. White grew up in Chicago and became a session drummer for Chess Records in the mid-1960s, which is where he met pianist Ramsey Lewis, who had just scored a major soul-jazz hit called "The 'In' Crowd" in 1965. Lewis took a shine to White and brought him aboard on drums, and for the next few years, they moved up from small clubs to premiere venues like Carnegie Hall. All the while, White learned how to be a bandleader by watching his mentor.[13]

In 1969, White went out on his own and formed EWF. By the time of their 1971 self-titled debut, the band was a sprawling eleven-person unit with killer grooves and soulful group vocals to rival Sly and the Family Stone. Their early albums clearly reflected jazz fusion's influence, with longer instrumental jams that had the lush feel of a classic CTI Records platter. Once 1974's *Open Our Eyes* came around, EWF had a stable team of regulars: Maurice's brother Verdine on bass, Larry Dunn on keyboards, Al McKay on guitar, Ralph Johnson on drums, Andrew Woolfolk on reeds, and Philip Bailey on vocals with his trademark angelic falsetto. This group pared the songs down to a tighter length, but many were still flush with the piano vamps and Afro-Brazilian rhythms that kept true to the band's jazz roots.

EWF's 1975 album *That's the Way of the World* finally made them superstars, with radio staples like the slow-burning title track, the sultry ballad "Reasons," and the blissfully frenetic funk of "Shining Star," which hit the top spot on Billboard's Hot 100.[14] As White put it in his memoir, the album was such a success that "Columbia Records wanted another album, like, yesterday."[15] Loath to take a break from a lucrative tour, White decided to record a double album, called *Gratitude* (1975), with three sides live and one studio. Even the smoothest songs and the tightest funk workouts have room to breathe here, and the horn players blow sparks and flames like joyously soulful dragons. The best moment on the record comes at the top of side two, with an incandescent version of Ramsey Lewis's "Sun Goddess." White and several of his EWF brethren had recorded the original for Lewis's 1974 album of the same name, and this eight-minute, summery jazz-funk zephyr became an unlikely

massive radio hit. This success pleased White to no end, as he could return the favor to the mentor who had brought him up in the first place.[16]

Even as EWF continued to cement its place as one of the greatest funk and soul bands of all time, White always referred to jazz as his roots. In his final years when he was writing his memoir, he continued to look back fondly on the *Gratitude* era as special, one where he could balance creating beloved hits with an expansive, genre-free take on music. "We were stretching out," he wrote. "We were an R&B band. We were a jazz band. We were a pop band. We were a world music band. We were an Afro-Cuban band. We were feeling the power of our musical diversity, and so were our audiences."[17]

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"Jazz is not dead, it just smells funny." Ever since 1973, when Frank Zappa drawled this quip, countless cynical fans and writers have quoted it to deliver a nasty take on jazz's fragile future. At the time, Zappa was one of popular music's most quotable rock stars, thanks to his formidable intelligence, rapacious wit, and often repellent arrogance. These days, this particular joke has gone stale from overuse, but what's still funny about it is that Zappa was actually a pioneering rock star who incorporated jazz and became a master jazz guitarist. By the time he threw out this offhand line, he had focused on making excellent jazz fusion records for at least four years.

Perhaps Zappa mocked jazz because he considered himself an avant-garde composer first and foremost. After all, he also regularly insulted rock music as brain-dead and stupid, even when he was enjoying his greatest commercial success

by playing it. With his original 1960s band, the Mothers of Invention, Zappa changed how audiences heard popular music by creating musical collages that smashed together hard rock, doo-wop, contemporary classical, musique concrète, and absurdist satire. The Mothers were versatile multi-instrumentalists who could change styles on a dime, even when Zappa was increasingly introducing chunks of jazz fusion into this decidedly lumpy gravy. In 1969, he released *Hot Rats*, a straight-up smooth-and-groovy fusion record that has been an urtext for budding jazz guitarists ever since. And as he entered the 1970s, his musical output split in two, between smutty comedy live albums that have aged poorly and instrumental albums that are still a pleasurable mash-up of electric Miles Davis, Mahavishnu Orchestra, and Chicago's horn section.

By the early 1970s, Zappa toured with a genuinely hot jazz fusion band that could keep up with the vertiginous twists and turns in his compositions. Most important were keyboardist George Duke and Ruth Underwood, the latter an astonishingly fast and precise percussionist on xylophones, marimbas, and vibraphones. By December 1973, when Zappa began recording the live double *Roxy & Elsewhere*, his band also included drummer Chester Thompson, who went on to play with Weather Report and prog legends Genesis; keyboardist Don Preston, a Mothers veteran dating back to the mid-1960s; Napoleon Murphy Brock, a reedman and singer that Zappa had recently seen playing in a Hawaiian nightclub;[18] and the trio of Fowler brothers, consisting of bassist Tom, trombonist Bruce, and trumpeter Walt. All of these musicians could play Zappa music, then loosen it up with funk and swing; the whole

album has a loose, almost rubbery feel that throbs with the thrill of taking music to its complex limits while still making it fun. And the famous quote about smelly jazz is right there, six-and-a-half minutes into the final track, "Be-Bop Tango (Of the Old Jazzmen's Church)." Here's where Zappa brings audience members on stage to compete in a jazz-improv dance competition. When you hear him say the line—in contrast to reading it—Zappa doesn't sound nasty at all. In fact, it sounds like he's having a blast.

Over in England, Jeff Beck was also shedding the shackles of rock strictures and feeling free in the fusion faith. He was one of the three iconic guitarists that emerged from the 1960s British group the Yardbirds. The other two, Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, went on to stellar mainstream careers, but largely stayed based in rock, no matter how rococo Cream or Led Zeppelin could get. A player who pairs a bristling tone with uncanny precision, Beck took his thrilling technique and went somewhere far weirder as the 1970s progressed. When he left the Yardbirds, Beck's solo albums veered from raucous hard rock into generic funk rock, until—as he told the press at the time—he was finding more inspiration in fusion stars like Billy Cobham and Return to Forever bassist Stanley Clarke.[19]

Their influence is felt most strongly on *Blow by Blow* (1975). On this mostly instrumental album produced by The Beatles' George Martin, Beck's guitar sounds utterly sassy in a jazz-funk context that overflows with throbbing bass, layers of polyrhythmic keyboards, and even moments of symphonic excess worthy of Deodato's "Also Sprach Zarathustra." *Blow by Blow* remains a fabulous listening experience, and it became Beck's highest charting album, reaching No. 4 on the Billboard

pop chart.[20] *Wired* (1976) was almost as good and almost as successful. Thanks to Mahavishnu Orchestra's synth dynamo Jan Hammer, strutting jazz-funk gives way to stomping prog-rock fusion, and fortunately the good tunes on *Wired* keep the music from sliding into brazen bombast. But by the 1980s and beyond, Beck moved away from this era and chose to apply his pyrotechnic guitar to faceless hard rock. Oddly, Beck disowned his successful jazz fusion years as he got older. In 2010, he told *Guitar Player* how fusion is "a bad word now," how he regretted mixing genres, and how he should have just stayed with "earthy rock and roll." He even said he wished he'd never recorded *Blow by Blow*, what many consider his best solo album: "It just reminds me of flared trousers and double-breasted jackets."[21]

Carlos Santana would certainly never regret mixing genres, as it's what he's done since his very start as a musician. Born in a rural Mexican town and raised in Tijuana, his father was a mariachi bandleader who passed down a pride in his country's traditional music, even as he was drawn to rock 'n' roll like any eager teenager in the late 1950s. By the start of the 1960s, teenage Carlos was playing guitar on three-chord songs in gritty Tijuana strip clubs,[22] and by the end of the decade, he and his self-titled band were stealing the show at Woodstock with an incendiary set that welded together Latin music and acid rock. Santana scored radio hits with "Black Magic Woman" and "Oye Como Va" and went platinum on their first three records, including *Abraxas* (1970), which has been a dorm-room staple for generations of college students. Multiracial, multicultural, and multigenre, here was a band that had spiraled into stardom by not recognizing boundaries.

And then in 1972, Santana released *Caravanserai*, which launched a whole new phase in the band's evolution: largely instrumental, with extended tracks combining elements of Afro-Cuban music, Brazilian samba, and incandescent jazz-rock into a swirling maelstrom of piercingly loud bliss. A beautiful record, it was also far from the commercial sound they'd been enjoying. This new music was deeply spiritual, and it became even more so during the Caravanserai tour when the Godfather of Fusion, Larry Coryell, introduced him to his new guru, Sri Chinmoy. Before long, Carlos was joining John McLaughlin in the studio to record the loud homage to their master, *Love Devotion Surrender* (1973),[23] while the more rock-oriented members of the band—singer/keyboardist Gregg Rolie and guitarist Neal Schon—left the group to form a little stadium-rock ensemble called Journey.

From thereon out, Carlos and the newly configured Santana emerged, with a particularly key addition in two fusion keyboardists: Tom Coster and Richard Kermode; Santana joked that they were his band's Keith Jarrett and Chick Corea, respectively.[24] Over a bed of shimmering electric keys and boiling drums, Santana expanded further into a widescreen jazz-rock fusion on their next two studio albums, *Welcome* (1973) and *Borboletta* (1974). *Welcome* added the eccentric but soulful vocals of Leon Thomas, best known for singing on Pharoah Sanders's famous free jazz hymn, "The Creator Has a Master Plan," while *Borboletta* was even more explicitly aligned with the jazz fusion of the time—guests included Return to Forever's Airto Moreira, Flora Purim, and Stanley Clarke—and its breezy, humid feel sounds like a road trip from a Bahian beach into the Amazon rainforest. In between these two

grand projects, however, emerged a true magnum opus: a Japan-only live triple album, *Lotus* (1974), recorded at Osaka's Koseinenkin Hall on July 3–4, 1973. Carlos and Santana do indeed play many hits off *Abraxas* here—*hola*, "Oye Como Va"—but they're folded into nonstop Afro-Latin jazz fusion that burns for an exhilarating two hours with the intensity of electric Miles Davis and soars with the spiritual ecstasy of the Mahavishnu Orchestra. *Lotus* is arguably one of the greatest jazz fusion documents, period—no matter that it was released by a musician who still identified primarily as a rock star.

Even if it became less fashionable as the decade moved into the next, Carlos Santana never abandoned the idea that all musical ideas can converge happily. When he released his 2014 memoir, *The Universal Tone*, he described this fusion—in the literal sense—as a spiritual practice. "[W]ith it ego disappears and energy takes over. You realize that you are not one alone; you are connected to everyone," he wrote. "Suddenly the music compels people to go against what they thought was aesthetically solid for themselves, and what used to fit so well then feels really uncomfortable. It raises people's consciousness and stops the static so they can hear the forgotten song within."[25]

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As the 1970s rolled toward the 1980s, jazz fusion among rock musicians became less de rigueur and more dead on arrival. Punk and disco emerged and delivered a jolt to popular music. The relative simplicity of these new genres was refreshing and produced many life-changing masterworks of their own, but at the time they were also a harsh rebuke to complex music

like prog rock and jazz fusion. And with fusion becoming smoother and acoustic jazz raising its traditionalist head, rock artists reasonably turned away.

One band that leaned in instead was Steely Dan. Formed in 1971 by two Bard College classmates, keyboardist/singer Donald Fagen and bassist/guitarist Walter Becker, the band progressed further into jazz fusion through the 1970s. Even as a ten-year-old growing up in New Jersey, jazz was Fagen's first love and a means of mental escape in dull suburbia.[26] As they moved through the 1970s, Steely Dan transitioned from rock songs with earworm choruses, like "Reelin' in the Years" from *Can't Buy a Thrill* (1972), to complex tunes mixing in Latin and jazz-funk, like "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" from *Pretzel Logic* (1974) and "Kid Charlemagne" from *The Royal Scam* (1976).

By the time they recorded *Aja* over many months in 1976 and 1977, Steely Dan was less a band than a recording project, where Fagen and Becker worked with popular music's most accomplished and polished session musicians and then notoriously subjected them to a fastidious search for sonic perfection. The top-shelf talent included funk bassist Chuck Rainey; a pantheon of legendary jazz, soul, and rock drummers like Steve Gadd, Bernard Purdie, and Jim Keltner; Joni Mitchell jazz-rock alums Tom Scott and Larry Carlton; pianist/percussionist Victor Feldman, who played with Ronnie Scott in the UK in the 1950s and with Miles Davis in the United States in the early 1960s; and Wayne Shorter himself wailing away on tenor sax on *Aja*'s title track. Somehow, Fagen and Becker managed to meld all these artistic contributions into a consistently sleek sound that mixed both jazz-rock *and* jazz-funk into catchy pop songs—so catchy that three of them ("Peg," "Josie," and "Deacon

Blues") cracked the top 40 of the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart. *Aja* was the hottest album in the band's history, hitting No. 3 on the Billboard 200,[27] and almost fifty years later, it was still their only album to reach double-platinum status.[28] They couldn't quite repeat the trick on 1980's *Gaucho*, which took three arduous years to make. The duo burned through their budget, employed more than forty musicians, and took perfection to such an obsessive degree they wore the oxide off the tape of one song by listening to it too many times.[29] Fed up with each other, the duo went their separate ways and wouldn't release another Steely Dan album again for twenty years.

1980 was also the year that Van Morrison dropped out of public consciousness, following up an acclaimed album, *Into the Music* (1979), with an uncompromising and mystical jazz fusion album called *Common One*. The irony is that Morrison became revered internationally just a dozen years earlier by releasing an uncompromising and mystical jazz fusion album called *Astral Weeks*. Back in 1968, Morrison was best known as the lead singer for the raw Northern Irish rock band Them, of "Gloria" fame, and for one sweetly romantic solo hit called "Brown Eyed Girl." But Morrison always had musical tastes far more eclectic than rock and pop. Growing up in Belfast in the 1940s and 1950s, he was raised on his father's record collection, which included country, blues, big-band jazz, and Charlie Parker's bebop records,[30] and he started playing the saxophone as a teenager. Morrison always retained an abiding love for all these genres, but when he recorded *Astral Weeks*, jazz and his native Irish folk music won out.

While recording in New York, Morrison wove long, glorious progressive songs that soared with Celtic soul and floated on

a base of lithe acoustic jazz, played by veterans like guitarist Jay Berliner, bassist Richard Davis, and Modern Jazz Quartet drummer Connie Kay. A sublime record, *Astral Weeks* is routinely cited on all-time-best lists of rock albums, as is its follow-up, *Moondance* (1970), whose title track is a swinging jazz tune with little rock styling at all. Both albums cemented Morrison as a solo artist who fused genres into a new thing he dubbed "Caledonia soul music," yielding more radio staples and critical acclaim. He would have a few commercial slumps in the mid-1970s, when his albums took a resolutely mystical turn, but then he bounced back quickly by the end of the decade with the LA-style rock of *Wavelength* (1978) and the horn-driven folky soul of *Into the Music*.

By 1980, however, Morrison was at an artistic crossroads. He wanted to let the songs stretch out beyond the four- or five-minute mark without shaping them into digestible singles and album cuts, and he wanted to explore the "far-out" stuff that had been gestating in his mind for months and years.[31] So he and his septet decamped to the exquisitely named Super Bear Studios in France's Alpes Maritimes, a former Knights Templar monastery that appeared to be haunted[32]—perfect for an album of obscure meditations on gnostic history, literature, and the mystic unknown with titles such as "Haunts of Ancient Peace." With six songs totaling just under an hour, *Common One* certainly stretched out with some far-out stuff but was brought down to earth by the jazz horns of Pee Wee Ellis and Mark Isham.

Needless to say, the album tanked, and critics were completely divided. *Creem*'s Mitchell Cohen called the album a failed attempt to "recapture the epic grandeur of *Astral*

Weeks,"[33] but Lester Bangs argued in the *Village Voice* that it was rapturous and vast "holy music" too easily dismissed by small-minded rock critics.[34] To this listener, at least, *Common One* sounds like a superior jazz fusion record to close out the decade, one that combines the eerie luminosity of Miles Davis's "He Loved Him Madly" with the quiet mystery of a prime ECM release—a beautiful sound, indeed.

Unfortunately, Morrison wouldn't have another radio hit until 1989. This time around, the song was a simple love song called "Have I Told You Lately," whose soft-focus orchestration made it palatable for easy listening stations and weddings 'til kingdom come. By that point, the 1980s were almost over, bright pop and hair metal reigned supreme, and the 1970s jazz fusion era seemed almost forgotten. But that's another story entirely.

Ten Essential 1970s Jazz Fusion Albums by Ten Jazzbo Rockstars

Eli and the Thirteenth Confession, by Laura Nyro (1968)
Blood Sweat and Tears, by Blood Sweat and Tears (1968)
The Chicago Transit Authority, by Chicago (1969)
Roxy & Elsewhere, by Zappa/Mothers (1974)
Lotus, by Santana (1974)
Gratitude, by Earth, Wind & Fire (1975)
Blow by Blow, by Jeff Beck (1975)
Aja, by Steely Dan (1977)
Don Juan's Reckless Daughter, by Joni Mitchell (1977)
Common One, by Van Morrison (1980)