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The Yacht Rock Mindset and the Steely Dan Resurrection

The summer of 2022, for many, was the first one in a few years without strict Covid restrictions or a fear of being around others in crowded spaces. Many of us could go places and see friends and family we haven't seen for years comfortably. The atmosphere was brimming with pleasure, freedom, and a desire for fun. These sentiments translated into popular media, specifically with Gen Z utilizing the social media platform Tik Tok. One particular trend on the app was to post yourself relaxing, maybe in your backyard with sunglasses and sunscreen on, while listening to a form of music from about 50 years ago, proclaiming that this season was a #YachtRockSummer. Seemingly appearing out of nowhere, yacht rock grabbed onto our generation this summer and shows no signs of letting us go. Where did this newfound adoration of yacht rock come from, and why does it manifest itself primarily in our generation?

Let's take a trip back to the 60s. Most music at this time had an underlying serious agenda that pertained to the 60s counter-culture, an anti-establishment movement that preached about "making love, not war" and other forms of social justice. The music, no matter how important, was heavy, with severe and biting lyrics being at the forefront of compositions. Enter the 70s, where counterculture still flourished, but a groovy and more light-hearted approach to music developed. The everyman and musicians needed a break from all of this political jabbing, instead gravitating to fun songs with an undercurrent of irony. Characterized by a tongue-in-cheek attitude and ear-worm melodies, yacht rock came to fruition as a facetious counter-culture to counter-culture.

Yacht rock is the umbrella term for heavily melodic, catchy songs starting in the 70s that features interesting chord progressions, soft vocals, and sheer technical prowess. Although popular in the 70s and 80s, yacht rock died out soon after with the growth of alternative rock, grunge, and slowcore bursting onto the scene. The genre has ostensibly flown under the radar for many years up until recently, with Gen Z succumbing to the "yacht rock mentality" of relaxation and realizing the ideas of "che sarà, sarà" and "c'est la vie" through the listening of yacht rock. Contrary to popular belief, yacht rock has not been a hidden gem for years, but has instead permeated every generation even to a slight degree.

A few examples include the use of *Escape (The Piña Colada Song)* by Rupert Holmes in many movies and television shows, *You Make My Dream Come True* by Hall and Oates being prevalent on social media, and the Guardians of the Galaxy soundtrack leaning on yacht rock. One of the more efficient reintegration strategies for yacht rock has been through sampling, with one of the notable being Yung Gravy's song *Cheryl* depending on Player's *Baby Come Back* for the beat. Modern sampling brings new life to yacht rock. The revitalization of yacht rock has been here for years, but there is one band that has achieved more publicity than any other recently: Steely Dan.

With 4.8 million listeners on Spotify and a recent uptick of listeners as seen on last.fm, Steely Dan is a leading group in the yacht rock genre. Steely Dan was founded in New York at Bard College in 1971 by two social outcasts, guitarist Walter Becker and keyboardist Donald Fagen. Bonding over their similar musical tastes, they focused on creating a jazzy, genre-bending style. Released 50 years ago this November, their debut album *Can't Buy a Thrill* was a key example of yacht rock, incorporating an ironic tone with Donald Fagen's odd yet enchanting vocals. The song "Dirty Work" from this album was included in a 2022 episode of *Euphoria*, the popular teen drama show about kids breaking the status quo. Kanye West sampled the Steely Dan song "Kid Charlemagne" in his song "Champion." Even the Netflix special "Oh, Hello! On Broadway!" features John Mulaney's character referencing Steely Dan quite a bit. The band has been around for half a century and referenced this much in popular culture, so why have they only experienced this uptick in the past few months?

The current cultural implications of music post-Covid point to the stripped-down, melancholic genre of "sad boy indie" becoming obsolete, thus giving rise to lush, vibrant yacht rock. People are innately self-indulgent, doing what they want to be happy. Instead of pushing themselves further down the depressive state that the pandemic caused them to be in with sad music, people are turning to yacht rock, Steely Dan, and the like to breach into a carefree world. Completely bypassing the seriousness of lyrics of

the Phoebe Bridgers and Fleet Foxes types, Steely Dan dives into the absurd and embraces their inner cynic, writing lyrics about how world peace is baloney and how a drug dealer can be like Charlemagne or Jesus in some people's eyes.

Steely Dan's aesthetic also correlates to "Dadcore," the recent movement devoted to wearing clothes and listening to music similar to a dad's. Being ironically cool is valuable in the eyes of Dadcore enthusiasts, and Steely Dan fits the bill because, as far as the industry goes, they never should have made it due to their sardonic coolness rather than rockstar coolness. Were they talented? Sure. Did they have "the look," serious lyrics, or a career devoted to touring? Absolutely not. The shift from counter-culture seriousness of the 60s to absurdity and irony made Steely Dan the antihero and the antithesis to pop. The current zeitgeist after Covid is a sense of freedom and lack of restriction. People are liberated, and instead of being locked inside, they're flocking to be with others and have fun. Such is true with yacht rock and, more specifically, Steely Dan. In the 60s counterculture, yacht rock was a breakaway from a society far too serious and a turn towards groove, irony, and fun. History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme, as we see a similar shift occurring in our post-Covid world.