

## INTERVIEW

# Todd Snider – 1 Interviewer – 0

**Songwriter Todd Snider offers up nonsensical genius that leaves the interviewer scratching his head**

by Al Kaufman

There comes a time in every music writer's life when he just has to throw up his hands and realize that he has been beaten. I have been thrashed soundly.

Todd Snider is a wildly gifted singer/songwriter in the true Texas sense of the meaning, even though he calls East Nashville home these days. His heroes—Jerry Jeff Walker, Kris Kristofferson and John Prine, to name just a few—look at him with the same admiration that he places upon them. He writes songs about regular people doing somewhat irregular stuff, often times with hilarious, but sometimes with tragic, results.



**The Devil You Know**

Todd Snider

*New Door Records*

On his new CD, *THE DEVIL YOU KNOW* (New Door Records), he writes about the time he was mugged, except he chooses to do it from the mugger's perspective. On "Just Like Old Times," he writes of hanging out in a cheap hotel with an old high-school girlfriend who is now a prostitute, and he needs to explain himself when a cop knocks on the door. But he also tackles issues of the power of the working class ("Looking for a Job") and religion ("Happy New Year," in which he confesses to being an "evangelical agnostic").

The CD's centerpiece is "You Got Away with It (A Tale of Two Fraternity Boys)," in which one guy tells of all the trouble he and his college friend got into and out of. It seems like a typical knock on frat boys. Then the narrator goes on to say how he wasn't surprised when his buddy got out of all the trouble in Florida and that it was good to see him in Camp David, and we realize the frat boy in question is George W. Bush.

On stage, Snider's long, rambling stories are just as entertaining as his songs. They're the kind of stuff that make the incoherent rants of the late Hunter S. Thompson (in his latter days) sound downright sane.

When I tried to set up an interview with Snider, I was told by his publicist that I should email him some questions. While this is not my preferred method of interview,

I thought that this might at least limit Snider's ramblings and make it easier to piece together some good quotes for a nice feature.

I was wrong.

Snider has had problems with drugs in the past. But even though he jokes in the interview that he is currently on acid, I believe that this is the real Todd Snider, in all his maniacal genius. He answered about half of my questions, not in order. But I use the word "answered" loosely.

What we mainly learn in the interview is that Snider's friend and fellow musician, Will Kimbrough (they often appear on each other's albums) invented a killer insect; that another musician friend, Jack Ingram, owes him some money; that yet another, Hayes Carll, had something horrible happen to his dog at the hands of the police; and that another, Pat Green, is on a new 25 dollar bill.

To try to piece together a feature story out of these answers would take someone of far greater talents than me. What follows are Snider's answers with only the grammar tidied up. That alone, even with the help of spell and grammar check, took five hours to do.

Enjoy. Love this man. Buy his brilliant music. See his remarkable shows. But if you ever have to interview him, well, consider yourself warned.

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**Al Kaufman:** Instead of writing down the song lyrics, you tend to tell where the song came from in your liner notes. It's often more informative than just writing down the lyrics. Is this a conscience choice on your part?



**Todd Snider:** I guess I got that off Jerry Jeff [Walker] and somehow just fell into doing it on the last few records. I like to let the listener know that my songs were written to ease a legitimate pain or celebrate a legitimate joy and not some song written 'cause I needed a song, and when I do this, you can see that these songs are for real people who will hear them, react and respond. And I like the listener to know that I am coming at it like that and not writing for publishers and things like this. I don't want my pain eased by singers who aren't sincerely trying to ease their own, and so I try to prove that I am, I guess. But see, the thing about Kimbrough that a lot of people don't know is that he also, besides being a great guitar player, is a closet science inventor type guy. He has a lab in his basement where he invented an insect out of junk from around his house. The insect lives, breathes and feels, and can eat 20 pounds of garbage in 10 seconds but only when Kimbrough tells him to. The bug's name is Knickleback, and I've seen it eat an entire elephant, but I have

also heard Kimbrough's threats to other songwriters, and while for now he is clearly joking, I do think this insect could be dangerous in the wrong hands. And to be honest, because of his unbelievable guitar work, I am suspicious of Will Kimbrough's hands and afraid for everyone because of his fanged insect he calls Knickleback. Something to think about, eh? But to answer your question, yes.

**AK:** Like Randy Newman and Richard Thompson, you write a lot from other people's perspective. Do you ever finish a song like that and say, "Whoa, did that really come out of me?" or are you able to separate yourself from your characters?

**TS:** See, to me, this is the problem with Jack Ingram. I saw him years ago at Billy Joe Shaver's birthday party and he borrowed seven dollars and 50 cents from me, promising to "get me back real soon." Well, that soon has gone on for years. Then a few weeks ago I see him and I say, "Hey blank spectrum, what gives with my money?" you know, and he says, "Oh I got it. I'll just give you a 10." And he pulls out this huge roll of cash; all 20s, although he also had a couple weird "25s" with Pat Green's face on them, but I'm not sure they were real money. Either way he didn't have a 10 and didn't want to break a 20, so he gets two quarters from a roadie and says, "Well, here's 50 cents of it, I still owe you seven." Well that just tears it. I love Jack and his music, but anybody who knows me knows I'm all about the paper. Business is business, and I cannot let this aggression stand. So if you're reading this Ingram, you better get my money or I got two words for you: Will Kimbrough. And he'll have one word for you: Knickleback. But really to answer your question in total honesty: yes and yes.

But you'd be surprised at how much of the "characters" lines were mine at one time or another. So don't get all sentimental on me now babe, cuz you haven't even told me what your old name was yet. [A paraphrased line from "Just Like Old Times."]

**AK:** All reports say you're clean, yet in a recent article you said you still smoke some pot and have a few beers before you start writing. What's your definition of clean?



**TS:** Totally sober, which I'm not and haven't been ever. The soberest days of my life were spent on lithium, and I hated it. Now I smoke pot and drink wine some, but nothing like I used to. And my doctor says my health is the best it's ever been, which is not to say it's great. I was bullshitting if I said I drank before I write though; I never do that. I do bullshit in interviews though, no problem. I'm on acid right now. Am I an alcoholic? Yup. Drug addict? Yup. Bi-polar? Yup. Obsessive compulsive? Check. Am I happy about any of it? Nope. I wanted to play pro baseball. Never got past grade school with it. I've been wrestling with my fate ever since. I hope it's fairly entertaining and not too concerning to people cuz it's the only life I got and the only way I know how to live it. Did you know that people in Morocco speak Riff? It's the name of the language. I think Jimmy Page and Keith Richards ought to move down there where everybody speaks their language. But let's get back to Hayes Carll for a minute. What happened to his dog was an outrage. That's what these questions should all be about. The music community needs to rally behind Hayes and tell the government that you can't just come in the middle of the night and take people's dogs, no matter how drunk they are; the people, the cops or the dog. Sorry to keep going back to the same subject, but it's really got me angry. That and the whole way everyone is so uncool to whales and shit. Free Willy.

**AK:** What do you want people to get out of your music?

**TS:** Something, that's for sure. I'm not sure what yet, but maybe just enough to keep enough of them coming back. Enough to where I could button my shirt real low and wear sunglasses inside without people thinking I'm an ass hat. You know, I wanna be humble, like Jesus. Also, if somehow Jack Ingram could get seven bucks out of my music that would kill two birds with one stone. And while I'm on the subject, do you think anyone ever made the joke that thanks to Anita Pallenberg [ex-girlfriend of Keith Richards in his younger, wilder

days] there was nearly a time when two Stones got killed by one bird? Which is another way to look at it. No one? Ok, that's my riff then. Also, I would like it if people got limericks out of my music, or tongue twisters like this one I wrote last week. Check it out: How much space would a my space space if a my space could space space? Something to think about?

**AK:** Your last CD, EAST NASHVILLE SKYLINE, seemed so personal, and this one seems like you're trying to get into the heads of other people. How many times do you write a fictional song or a song about someone else and people think it is about you? Do you consider that a compliment?

**TS:** I've only written three or four fictional songs. "Sunshine" [about a failed suicide attempt] is the only fiction on the last two. This CD seems more personal to me than the last one. I consider it a compliment when someone thinks of my song no matter what they think. I appreciate the time, the effort. But what I wanna know is what this country is doing for the doomed? See, there are three kinds of people: the screw heads, the pot heads and the doomed. The screw heads live out in the suburbs, burrowed deep into the trenches of society, living off illegal incomes, illogical morals; and they don't like you. They like your daughter, but you sir, they hate you. And the pot heads, well, they don't scare me with their silliness. But the god-damned screw heads; they terrify me. And the doomed, the poor doomed: the young, the weak, the silly, they are doomed. They are somebody else's meal, and they are doomed. That's what I wanna know; what's this country doing for the doomed? I asked this question of George W. Bush and he looked me in the eye and said, "Fuck the doomed."

**AK:** How personal was EAST NASHVILLE SKYLINE? You've battled a lot of demons. That CD seemed to be your way of dealing with them. Was it?

**TS:** I'm o-11 against demons; it's just not my sport. But I love it and I love the uniforms and the companionship of it, and I try not to worry about it 'cause I know that deep down I'm a good bunch of guys.