

Music

My dinner with Todd Snider, sans the Nervous Wrecks

By Michael Corcoran

June 23, 2005

If you're driving from Austin to Gruene Hall and San Antonio's Tower of the Americas dots the skyline, you've gone too far. But you can't really blame Jerry Jeff Walker for overshooting his exit by about 25 miles on the way to a gig in March. Riding shotgun was protégé Todd Snider, one of those virtuoso conversationalists who can make you lose track of time and distance, as he extends off-the-wall subjects with personal recollections and gets downright encyclopedic when an obsession -- Bob Dylan, the Hunter S. Thompson biographical film "Where the Buffalo Roam," Keith Richards or the 1977 Portland Trailblazers of Bill Walton -- comes up.

But he's also a great listener and when you go off on a tangent, such as how heroin and compliments are alike (initial euphoria is eventually replaced by a dependence whose only effect is a negative one when the drug/praise is withheld), he'll follow you every bit of the way.

My interview with the Nashville-based singer-songwriter was like "My Dinner With Andre" without the tip, stretching to two hours with nary a clumsy pause. Unfortunately, precious little of what we talked about was of use to this article about Friday's reunion at La Zona Rosa with his great mid-'90s rock band the Nervous Wrecks.

If this was a story about early influences, I could tell you that Snider's musical education accelerated at Sundance Records shop in San Marcos around 1986. The attentive clerk/owner noticed that Snider, an aimless, shoeless soul who had recently become mystified by Jerry Jeff Walker's "Gypsy Songman" compilation of stripped-down re-recordings, was buying a lot of



Attracted by the carefree life of a troubadour, Oregonian Todd Snider began writing his own songs. Snider reunites with his Nervous Wrecks on Friday.

Walker's back catalogue. The owner started suggesting similar artists Snider might like: Willis Alan Ramsey. John Prine. Keith Sykes. (So that's how amazon.com got the idea!)

High school had inadvertently prepared the athletic Snider, who played linebacker on the varsity football team, for the life of a struggling songwriter. When Snider was 15, his father's construction business went belly-up in Oregon and the once-affluent family relocated to Houston for a do-over. But Snider stayed in Portland and slept on friends' couches during his junior and senior years. "I noticed that the other kids looked at me differently," Snider says of his prince to pauper skid. "I got a real awareness that money had a lot to do with popularity."

But high school at least delayed Snider from facing the fact that he had no real attainable goals. He did have a brother in Austin, but Snider had no idea what an impact that would have on his life until he moved to nearby San Marcos and started following Walker from gig to gig. "His music just gives off the kind of carefree vibe that I was looking for," Snider says.

Overcome with a vision that the troubadour life was his calling, Snider started writing his own songs and he's never stopped. Being a fan, that is.

Surprisingly, Snider was initially reluctant to believe that Dylan is God, but one night he was about to go on at the Cheatham Street Warehouse and the sound system was playing "Stuck Inside of Mobile With the Memphis Blues Again," and that line about a guy with "Twenty pounds of headlines stapled to his chest" revealed itself to him like a bearded face in the clouds.

Here's how Snider stepped right up: He got Sykes' Memphis address from his dad who got it from a waitress whose sister was married to Sykes and in 1989, Snider just knocked on the songwriter's front door, a stranger bearing a demo tape. The two became friends and Jimmy Buffett, whose band Sykes played in, heard Snider playing at a Memphis beer joint called the Daily Planet and signed him to his new MCA offshoot. "Songs From the Daily Planet" became a minor hit, thanks to a hilarious hidden track called "Talkin' Seattle Grunge Rock Blues." Who knew college radio had a sense of humor?

MCA gave Snider money to take a band out on the road and the Nervous Wrecks, who quickly gained a reputation for thirst-inducing live shows, were born.

After two more records for MCA, Snider was dropped in 1998 and, sans tour support, the Wrecks were shelved. Somehow the beer industry survived, plus the band members went on to become in-demand session players and, in the case of guitarist Will Kimbrough, an accomplished solo artist.

After signing with Prine's label, Oh Boy, Snider started performing solo again and realized that he liked it as much as playing with a band. But he still occasionally craved that Nervous energy.

He also used his best friend's terminal illness, he says, as an excuse to get deep into drugs in 2002. (That's how the whole heroin/compliments thing came up.) But after overdosing and being revived in the hospital a little more than a year ago, Snider's sworn off the hard stuff.

Otherwise, it's been a happy-go-lucky life that, wait, I almost wrote right past the end of this article.