

Todd Snider: The Devil You Should Know Relix – The Magazine for Music

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Todd Snider wakes up early on a clear Tuesday morning in January. He smokes a little pot and sits down to write some poetry. Daylight streams through the windows of his East Nashville home. Snider walks out the front door in order to better observe the day. Things are normal, in their appropriate place. Of course, if you're a paranoid, this is always the most dangerous of settings. He notices a flock of doves in the sky and smiles. They break up over his house. One takes a dive, a suicide mission, and heads straight for Snider. Luckily, Snider has quick reflexes. He dodges the bird but is not unshaken. Every day he puts out birdfeed; he claims to get along with most birds just fine. Snider turns around and heads back into his home. He shakes his head, thinking to himself: "I don't have to stand for this. It's my fucking yard. That goddamned rogue bird has to fucking go." The door closes behind him.

At 10AM the phone rings. Snider sidles up to the phone, picks up the receiver. "Hello," he says, in his friendly southern accent. "I'm good, thanks for asking. This is Relix Magazine calling? Great. Yes, this is a good time for my interview. I was attacked by a bird this morning. I'm pretty upset about it."

Snider's sense of humor is one of his most distinct attributes. It's rooted in his keen understanding of the absurdity in everything, which is also what makes him a gifted songwriter. He observes life without righteousness, just a wry, sarcastic smile. "The world is chaos," Snider says. "What's on the radio?"

His most recent record, *The Devil You Know* (New Door Records), the title track of which depicts hell on the streets, crime and police helicopters everywhere, is a concept album about the end of the world, without tears, but with sympathy for those living out on the margins. On the opening song, "If Tomorrow Never Comes"—an up-tempo tune in the honky-tonk style of Jerry Lee Lewis—Snider nihilistically sings: "I don't claim to know what's going on around here/I don't even know where I'm from," and "If tomorrow never comes/I don't give a damn." Elsewhere, Snider introduces us to the underbelly: "Just Like Old Times" is a country tune about a hooker and a hustler who get together after not seeing each other for years—a pair that's trying to work out its own take on the American dream. "The Highland Street Incident," in the same vein, is the story of two petty thieves—written from the thieves' perspective—getting ready to rob a poor musician, which happens to be Snider, in an alley. *The Devil You Know* is populated with characters straight out of Snider's past, characters that live outside the law and are bound by nothing.

"My dad worked in construction, he was a foreman," Snider says. "I grew up around people who could quit their job and get it back the next day if they wanted to. It's because they were needed out there." A song on the record, "Looking for a Job," is about a drywall hanger who's more needed by his boss than he needs the job. "One time we were doing a radio contest, where you could call in and win tickets to our show," Snider explains. "This guy at a construction site called in and didn't even know who we were, but he won. By the time he got to the show with his backstage pass he was like, 'Shit, I've never won nothing in my whole fucking life. I quit my job on the spot. I've been drinking Jack Daniels since then.' The next day he was probably like, 'Hey, boss, yeah, I went to a concert last night, go fuck yourself.' And the boss was probably like, 'Well, you're going to paint today, right?' There's a freedom in that." Snider then sings "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

"You Got Away With It," from *The Devil You Know*, is a classic folk song. The track tells the story of three rich, party-boy frat brothers who grew up doing as they pleased, getting away with everything because of their social status and the power that status conferred. The ultimate joke comes at the end, when one of the three brothers winds up becoming president of the United States.

"One night me and my brother were staying out by this lake somewhere in Texas," Snider explains. "The three frat guys came over to us and you could tell they wanted to fight, and we didn't want to. Then this one guy just ran up to my brother and hit him in the jaw, broke his damn jaw. Years later George Bush came on the screen. It was like, goddamn, that's what the three of them fucking guys looked like! He wore the same smirk they had on their faces when they came over." Might they be behind the rogue bird from earlier this morning? "I'm certain of it," Snider says. We both laugh.

Snider is stumped. He's just received a tough question: How long have you been married to your wife? "Umm," Snider stutters, "eight, nine years? Hang on," he says. "Let me ask my wife. Honey," he calls out to her, "how many years have we been married? Oh. You don't know either, huh? Wait. What's that? Seven years? You think seven years? Okay, honey." He comes back to the line. "Seven years, she thinks. It's confusing because we've lived together a long time, forever," Snider says. "It was, like, in the fall, I remember that, and it was in the yard..." In the liner notes to *The Devil You Know*, there's a sweet little folk song, "All That Matters," dedicated to Snider's wife. How, I wondered, did an earnest love song make it onto the album? Snider takes a second, breathes deeply. "I was trying to imply that the only real solace I've ever found from the chaos, well, was my marriage." Good answer.

For a fleeting moment I try to get Snider back on the subject of politics. I want a provocative quote about the leader of the free world. Snider thinks for a moment. "Let me see if I can think of a good quote for *Relix Magazine*," he says. "Well, you know, he owes me money for blow. It's the truth. This is way back from the '80s. In fact, until that difference between us is settled, I can't even consider his politics."

"Seriously though," Snider continues, "the funny thing is that I don't really follow politics that much. I try to present my opinions in a way that suggests that I'm not even sure there's such a thing as knowledge on earth."