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A Conversation With Todd Snider

He's an "Alright Guy" With
Something to Say
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◀ (Eric England)

For those who have been following Todd Snider's career for the last 10 years, *East Nashville Skyline* is the album you've been waiting for. On this record, he nails the conversational personality he adopts on stage, and his writing remains as witty as ever -- whether he's reliving the scandalous days of "Louie Louie," tagging along with Mike Tyson or putting the blame on "Conservative Christian, Right-Wing Republican, Straight, White American Males."

Over hot drinks at an East Nashville coffee shop one morning, Snider considers his fondness for Alan Jackson, his offstage fright and the biggest personal surprise since he introduced himself as an "Alright Guy" in 1994.

***East Nashville Skyline* seems very conversational for a studio album. What do you remember the most about making the record?**

Let me think about that. ... (long pause) What do I remember the most about making the record? I'm just trying to ask myself. ... Every time I try to think of a quick response The guy who recorded the album, Eric McConnell, he's got these really cool dogs over there all the time. ... The thing I mostly remember, though, this is the first record that I ever did where I just went and did it, and I just had a feeling the record company would be all right with it. I did it, and then I said, "Guess how much you owe everybody? And I hope you like it!" So I remember having that sort of pressure on myself rolling off. I'll always remember that.

The first song, "Age Like Wine," cracks me up, where people tell you the old stuff is nothing like the new stuff, and your new shows are nothing like the old shows. Do people really stay that to you?

People say that to me a lot. It's funny how after a concert, there'll be 30-odd people lined up to meet you -- and not all of them are lined up to say something nice to you. Almost every night, somebody say something mean, and I'm pretty sensitive. It's hard, but you just learn to deal with it. People say worse than that -- and wait in line to do it!

Do they have that perception of you five years ago, and that's all they want?

No, there's no particular piece of criticism that comes consistently. Like some nights, some guy will come up with this one record and say, "*This* was the one, man!" And then the next guy will come up and say, "I love the new one, but I didn't like the one that he liked." Whatever ... I think I'm a little too sensitive or maybe more sensitive than the others, but I hope not.

Rather than including the lyrics, you decided to write liner notes about all the songs. Did you feel like you needed to explain yourself on the songs?

I didn't necessarily feel like I had to explain myself, because I hope that even outside of the little story and the personal relationship to me, that people find different stories in there that more pertain to them. Really though, I think it was Maude Gilman who did the album art. I was telling her how I felt like this

record was about a certain little thing, but hopefully with a bigger thing. She said, "Why don't you type all that in there?" So it was actually just a suggestion. So I typed it and re-typed it and did it 50 times. It was 50 pages when I started.

"The Ballad of the Kingsmen" seems to be about how music can scare people or be a scapegoat. But I think that's the key to a really great folk song. Do you think that it's your role as a folksinger to stir things up?

Yeah, stirring shit up and creating a little chaos if you can. Or find the problem and not offer a solution and get the hell out of the bar, quick. That feels like what folk singers do, to me. I feel like one, and I like that stuff, more than anything. I like music so much, I do it five hours a day whether I'm supposed to or not. But really I would say, the chaos of the road is my favorite part of the whole thing, just being honest. I like all that. I guess that's connected to that song a little bit, just because I like that people can write me letters and say, "That's inappropriate." ... That's fun.

It means they're listening.

Yeah, that's right. That's what I say. Someone says, "You've got a bad reputation." I say, "You know who I am? All right!" (laughs)

When I was looking at the song titles, I noticed "Nashville," and I thought, "Oh no."

Here's another one, right?

I was totally expecting a song about how country isn't country anymore.

I'm sick of that song, the one you were expecting. I was hoping people were going to expect that and get the exact opposite. I'm so ... tired of that song. I'd lash out at Robbie Fulks right now. I think that song he wrote about Nashville is: a) not very good and b) not very funny. Maybe you just weren't good enough to work with [record producer-label executive] Tony Brown. There, I said it.

I think that we still make good music here, and if there is a fault or burden, it might fall on us *No Depression-y* people that are so bitter. I'm hopefully not including myself. It's one of those things where there's an underground country movement. For some of the younger people, it feels based on hatred, almost like punk rock: "We formed this band because we don't like that band." Well, I'm not interested. That's a lot of why I did that song. I was trying to make a record about East Nashville, and the thing that I think is cool about East Nashville is that it's like Austin without the anger toward Alan Jackson. You know what I mean? It's a cool little artsy-fartsy community. This may just be the crowd I run in, but we're too busy trying to find music we like to stop and talk about music we don't like.

That's why I like this job -- because I like country music.

I do, too. I like that song, [Toby Keith's] "I Love This Bar." There's always a song on country radio that love, just like every other station on the dial. And there's always a song where I hit the switcher for, too. That's my humble opinion, but I think when the people in the '70s were trying to make it, they weren't mad at George Jones. They were just like, "Hey, I just want to sing about sex because it's really happening. I think George Jones is great."

I love the Bottle Rockets, and I like Alan Jackson, and to me, those are the two sides. I like them all the same. I wish that we weren't apart or those sides weren't apart. I guess I'm kinda out of it, being a folk singer, but as a fan that lives in this neighborhood, I've got my opinions, too.

When people find out you live in Nashville, is there an expectation that you must be a country singer?

Not anymore. You know, my first year, when I went out on the road, it seemed like it. People always said, "Don't say you're country. Don't say you're from Nashville. Don't mention Jerry Jeff [Walker]." I used to do that a lot. (laughs) But I did it anyway. I don't think there's anything wrong with being a country singer that's not mainstream. I'm kinda liberal, you know? I don't think that's a real common thing in the South, but it's enough for my lights to be on.

What is your favorite part of touring?

When the actual show is going on. That's about it. I don't know if you can tell, but I'm a pretty uptight person, but I relax a lot on stage. In the hour before it's time to play, that's my second favorite part of it. That little period when I have my radio playing in my dressing room, making a set list and maybe having a glass a wine.

I would assume that for most musicians, they're nervous about getting on stage and pretty relaxed the rest of the time.

(laughs) I was just talking to John Prine about that the other day. He said, "I noticed that about you the first time I met you, and I still don't understand why you're that way." And I do, I suffer from offstage fright. The stage part just feels easier to control. I don't know what it is, but I do know that's when I finally feel like I get to relax a little bit. It's always been that way.

I heard Gary Allan play "Alright Guy" earlier this summer and I thought about how long that song has been around, and when I first heard your version of it in 1994. What has been the biggest surprise so far, since you wrote that song?

(very long pause) You know, I got it. I say this as a compliment to both people involved and a putdown to myself. I had a misconception of Nashville especially. I got to meet Steve Earle, and he asked me about [CD product] distribution. And I got to meet Garth Brooks, and he read me some poems. Then I knew I didn't know anything about any of it, you know what I mean? (laughs) I always think of those two things and that they were going to be the other way around. Like I said, I consider that a compliment to both guys. I don't think anybody questions whether or not Garth Brooks knows if his distribution is together or if Steve Earle knows if his poetry is together. I just thought it was neat. It's taught me not to judge a book by its cover, obviously, or to round it up.

Is the music business hard for you to get a grasp on?

Yeah. I've never been very good at it. I kinda know. I probably don't get as much bread as I could if I pushed harder. I am one of those guys who travels and has a manager that says, "Now you go here." I'm about to do a new contract, and it'll be the first one ever that I'll read. I used to do the Jerry Lee Lewis school of [pretending to scribble], "Yeah, yeah, yeah ... who's paying for these drinks?" But now this one coming up, I'm going to take it seriously. But, yeah, to answer your question, it's hard. So hard I don't hardly even try. Too much math.

So, why now?

When I first got a record contract, there were two people who wanted me, and I got to choose. And then I got dropped and went right to the one I'm with now. There was nothing to it. And now, that's over. They want me to stay, but I don't have to stay if I don't want to stay. Some other people are calling and saying, "Why don't you come here?" I'm not saying I'm going to be on a big record company and be a star. I'm just saying this is the first time I've ever gotten a chance to say, "Well, I want it to be kind of like this." First, I've got to know what it is and then decide what I want. I'm going to try to be -- I probably won't be -- but I'm going to try to be a little more involved. By now, I've been around long enough to know stuff I'd like.