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Todd Snider Q&A
By Richard Skanse

At 37, Todd Snider isn't quite yet the "old timer" he professes to be in "Age Like Wine," the opening track on his new album, *East Nashville Skyline*. Indeed, lines like "five and dimmer" suggest more of a portrait of his longtime friend and outspoken fan Billy Joe Shaver, who unlike Snider has been through five (at least) different record labels. Snider's only on his third, and that's counting the label that dropped him before he even finished a record. But everything else in the song rings true to Snider's personal experience, capturing in just under two minutes the better part of half his life and his entire career. "I've met every fool that ever signed their name upon these walls in the backs of all these beer joints and concert halls," he sings at one point, and there's no reason to doubt him. Even before he became a touring troubadour, Snider was a wanderer, drifting all over the country first as a child and later as a young adult. Collecting and making up stories along the way and turning them into song just happened to be an industrious use of his rambling time and wit.

By fate and circumstance, the Portland, Ore., native just happened to be in Texas for a spell when he decided to pick up a guitar — inspired by a fellow wandering spirit originally from out-of-state by the name of Jerry Jeff Walker. But while Walker made Texas his home, Snider kept on moving, and it wasn't until he got to Memphis and Atlanta that his career took off, beginning with his 1994 MCA debut *Songs for the Daily Planet*. Featuring the minor hit (a hidden track, no less) "Talkin' Seattle Grunge Rock Blues," as well as the loser's anthem "Alright Guy" (since covered by Walker, Gary Allan and — almost! — Garth Brooks), that record still holds up today, dated pop culture references and all (anybody remember Madonna's *Sex* book?) And though he admits in the new "Age Like Wine" that "My new stuff is nothing like my old stuff was / and neither one is much when compared to the show / which will not be as much as some other one you saw / so help me I know I know I know," the fact is that the six albums Snider's released since his debut, including 1998's straight-up rock 'n' roll record, *Viva Satellite*, and last year's *Near Truths and Hotel Rooms Live*, have just found him getting better and better. Along the way, he's picked up fans like Shaver, Walker, Jimmy Buffett and John Prine (whose label Oh Boy Records has released Snider's last four records). He's also, as any true Snider aficionado will tell you, one of the best live acts you'll ever see; both Walker's wife Susan and his son Django swear that Snider's the most entertaining just-a-guy-with-a-guitar performer they've ever seen ... apart, of course, from Jerry Jeff.

On top of all that, he's also got one hell of a memory. While talking to Snider via phone at his current home in Nashville, I mention in passing that I interviewed him one other time, six years ago, in New York City. "I remember that," he says straight away. "I can see your face right now. In that office at MCA. We were sitting at that big table that was supposed to have like 12 people at it ..." He also remembers, with perhaps a little more good humor than I remember him displaying back then, my appraisal of that year's *Viva Satellite* as a really good Tom Petty album in all but name. Clearly I wasn't the only one to call him on it. He would later write a song called "Vinyl Records,"

for 2002's *New Connection*, in which he name-checks seemingly every dusty old record in his collection, culminating with the line, "And as some of you might have guessed already / I've got piles and piles and piles of Tom Petty!"

Not every Snider song comes with a punch line that good — or a punch line at all, as in the case of songs like *New Connection*'s wrenching "Waco Moon," his unflinching tribute to the late Eddy Shaver — but you can always count on that level of no-bullshit and often self-effacing honesty. And that's the mark of a genuinely great songwriter ... not to mention, as he says himself in his best-known song, an all-around "Alright Guy."

The last time we talked, you said that your dream was to write a full-blown concept album in the tradition of Willie Nelson's *Red Headed Stranger*. You said even *Viva Satellite* was supposed to all be about your time living in Memphis, but you didn't quite have the attention span to tie it all together. By contrast, *East Nashville Skyline* seems like it really does have a unifying concept, but I can't quite put my finger on what it is.

Yeah, this one feels like the most conceptual one that I've ever done. I was hoping to maybe paint a picture of the side of Nashville I live on and the opinions that me and some of my friends have and the things we go through. I live in this part of Nashville that's like the hippie-used-clothing-store-bookstore-funky-bar part of town. And it just so happened that while I was working on the record, the main character in my neighborhood — this friend of mine who everyone called the Unofficial Mayor of East Nashville — died. That sort of sent me off on a long depression, so it felt like while I was making the record I was also pulling myself out of that depression. The whole neighborhood, we all helped each other out. All the bars in this part of town have the same picture of this guy. I could talk to you about him for hours. So the whole record does feel like a story to me ... but I haven't quite figured it out yet. I'm just now really listening to the record, too.

I got to interview Rodney Crowell in Nashville not too long ago, and we talked about the whole anti-Nashville trip some artists in Texas like to go off on. He basically said, "Yeah, you can point out the bad things about the industry in this town, but I live here because I have access to some of the best musicians in the country." And there's certainly a lot of great writers there in addition to the whole Music Row lot. I thought you captured that same sentiment perfectly in your song "Nashville," where you give props to Memphis and the Texas scene, but you're like, "there ain't nothing wrong with Nashville ... there ain't nothin' wrong that we can't fix in the mix."

Yeah it's all right. There's some parts of town that I don't like to go to, where everyone talks about publishing and stuff like that. But there's other parts of town where you can hang out in a bar and talk about, guitar strings or something. Like for every corny country song here, there's a kid in Texas trying to be Pat Green with an awful song about the Rio river or some shit too. Every state, every place I've been to, there's parts of it I like and parts I don't like. Same with every station I turn to. I think it's natural. I do think Austin people tend to hate Nashville, but I think it's more of a fun joke for them to tell when they're drinking. But I'll tell you what — when they're here in town, they don't tell those jokes. But I think they're harmless.

Did you ever subscribe to the anti-Nashville prejudice?

Probably when I was a kid and I lived in Texas. But by the time I got to Memphis ... well, people in Memphis didn't really like Nashville, either. But when I finally got here, I just liked it more than I thought I would. I live on the East side of town, which is the more blue-collar rock 'n' roll bands side-of-town. And I don't ... like sometimes, Chris Cagle came over here the other night, and he talked about his units and shit, and it was embarrassing. But he's all right, you know? Fuck. I don't know what to say about that. [Laughs] I mean, things happen here. You can sometimes get a cut on a record just by going to the grocery store. I was standing at a bar one time and somebody told me they were doing that Chris Gaines record for Garth Brooks and he was looking for songs. And the next thing I know, I was getting a cut. He was going to do "Alright Guy," but it got sunk — he told me his mom didn't like the reference to pot. Fair enough. It was actually an honor to get to meet the guy. He was really nice; he read me some poems and shit. He wasn't what I expected.

How long have you been in Nashville now?

Five years maybe? I was living outside of it during Viva Satellite, I was living like 40 miles away. And then when the girl I was seeing moved in — we're married now — well, she paints, and this gallery picked her up here and she had to go into town everyday and it was just too far for her to drive so we bought this house here. But it's cool though.

What's the longest you've ever been in one place?

I guess maybe seven, five years, something like that. I want to keep moving. My family always did it, and I'm going to try to keep doing it. Now I want to find a place where there's water. Although I really love this house we're living in now, and it'd be fun to keep it.

You've moved around so much in your life, is there any place that feels like home when you go back to it?

That's a good one. Yeah. I have a few places. Like Portland, definitely. Austin. Memphis, and now Nashville. And New York now, because of my wife's family. And then there's other towns, like Santa Cruz. There's a hotel there I wish they'd let me live in, but I can't afford \$350 a day all the time.

Musically, you got your start in Texas. That's probably why a lot of people here still think of you as a "Texas artist." Same as with Lucinda Williams. We're suspicious of outsiders, but if you're good and you spend some time here or get off the ground here, you're kind of in the club for life.

Cool. I'll take it! I did get my start in that San Marcos town. And I like Texas. But you never can tell. I mean I hear you say that, and I say 'Good,' but you don't know ... [Laughs]

Before you came to Texas, did you have any notion of becoming a musician?

Yeah, in the back of my mind. I went down to Santa Rosa, Calif., from Portland ... there was just

this time in my life when I lived in California where it felt like I could do anything I wanted to do. And I made the decision that I wanted to be a musician. I think I was 18 or something like that. And I started trying to play the harmonica. I liked Creedence Clearwater, and Lynyrd Skynrd and the Rolling Stones. That's what I knew at the time. And I think maybe U2, or maybe I just thought Bono was cool. I was really young and I didn't have anything else to do. I couldn't afford to go to school, and I didn't have a dad who was going to give me a job, or anything. So I thought, fuck it, I can try anything I want. My brother kind of talked me into it. He said, "You should try to be a singer." Because I was always good at words ... or at least that's what the teachers said.

In concert, and on your live album, *Near Truths and Hotel Rooms*, you tell the story of how you came to Austin, crashed on couches and discovered Jerry Jeff Walker. That changed everything.

When I came to Texas I had it in my mind that I wanted to be a lead singer who came up with the words. And I went to see Jerry Jeff, because my friend Trogg was playing me all this Jerry Jeff and I was into it. So I went to see him play, and he was alone with an acoustic guitar at Gruene Hall. And I saw that and went, "That's what I want to do." I didn't even know how to really play guitar yet, but I saw his show and went and got one. I just didn't know that you didn't have to have a band. And I loved his songs. Him and John Prine I probably copy more than anybody. When I was a kid I used to do my shoulders like Jerry Jeff during my whole show. You know he does that little, dink-dink-dink-dink-dink with his shoulders? [Laughs]

Tell me about Cheatham Street Warehouse in San Marcos. That's kind of where you got your act together, isn't it?

Yeah. I lived in San Marcos, on Aquarena Springs Drive. I was the busboy at Pepper's, which is now something different — maybe a Crab Shack. And the bands there would let me get up and sing with them, until eventually one of them took me aside and said, 'Hey listen, you gotta go to an open mic or something ... you can't just keep getting up for someone else's show.' And he told me that Cheatham Street had open mics on Tuesdays. I was living on someone's couch at that time. I had just got to town, just got a job and was just starting to save for an apartment. And I went over there, and Kent Finlay, who owns the place, he heard me sing this song about when they changed the drinking age from 19 to 21, and he liked it, and then he let me stay at his house until I saved up enough money to get an apartment. And then he gave me a gig, and played me Kristofferson, and Guy Clark, Jerry Jeff, John Prine, Shel Silverstein. All those people, I'd never heard of them. Most of the people that I guess I pattern myself after I got from sitting around listening to them at Kent Finlay's house.

Do you remember the other people coming up at Cheatham at the time?

Yeah, I was just talking to somebody about that. There was a guy named Al Barlow, who I loved. And Hal Ketchum was there, James McMurtry ... nobody had a record or anything. John Arthur Martinez, the guy who almost won the TV show [Nashville Star], I've known him for almost 20 years now. And Bruce Robison told me he was there, but I didn't know him at the time. And Terri Hendrix. She seemed really young. She worked at Pepper's too.

She always credits you with talking her into going to the open mic for the first time.

Yeah, I really like her. I'm a big fan of hers too. That's cool. I see her when I'm in town. I'll still go there, like if I'm not doing anything for a few days, and I'll stay at Kent's. I think his son Sterling is fantastic. I love his songs. He was in a band called River Train, but I think he's going to go out and just be Sterling Finlay now. I'm looking forward to hearing what he does.

So how did you make the jump from Cheatham Street to MCA records in 1994? You had already left Texas, hadn't you?

Yeah. The reason why I left Texas was because my dad had overheard in a bar in Memphis where Keith Sykes lived. And I was a big fan of his because of Kent. So I went to Memphis and went right to Keith's house, and he let me stay there too. He just let me in that afternoon, him and his wife. They were kind of drunk at the time. He tells me now, "You just wouldn't leave!" I stayed there until eventually I was playing in Memphis and had my own apartment. That went on for probably three years. And three years into it I got to where I could really make a good crowd show up, and the Capitol Records people wanted me to make an album. So I signed with them but then they didn't like what we did, so I got fired. But by that time Jimmy Buffett had started his own record company [Margaritaville Records, an imprint of MCA], and one of his people saw me at a bar and they had me go out and open for Jimmy so Jimmy could watch. And when I got off stage he said, "Do you want to go make a record?" I said, "OK." But then when I got home I found out I still had to go play for [producer and former MCA bigwig] Tony Brown. So I went to his office, and I guess he was the last guy to go, "OK."

They were really great too. I went in and I said, "I've got these songs I want to put on an album." They wanted to hear some others, but I said, "I just want to do these songs." And they thought that was funny, and they said, "OK, do it." I had a ton of songs, but I just knew which ones I wanted to put on the record. That's what I thought had blown my deal with the guys at Capitol. We started arguing over which songs and this and that. So that was all I asked for; I said, "I'm going to be the one who decides what the songs are." Well, that's not true ... I also wanted my own little bar band to play too. But they were great about it. I've never had anybody try to tell me what to do. I've been lucky.

You did three records for MCA: Songs for the Daily Planet, Step Right Up and Viva Satellite. You seemed to really be on the old fashion artist-development path, where they knew you weren't selling truckloads of records but they stuck by you. How did that relationship come to an end?

There was a show right before Viva Satellite came out in Los Angeles where I said all the wrong things to all the wrong people right into the microphone. I had just gotten out of one of those hospitals that you go to when you've taken too many drugs or you're acting like a jerk or just crazy. I'd been in there for like a month, and I came out and I was on the road. I don't know why I said all that stuff. But they wanted me to go back into this place, and I didn't want to, and I think that was probably part of it. I remember it was around that point that some guy said, "Look, we're just going to have to let you go." And I thought that was all right. I thought it was inappropriate to say what I said, but I said it, so I must have meant it.

Two years later, you came back with Happy to Be Here on John Prine's Oh Boy label. When did you first meet him?

I met him before my first album. He was doing *The Missing Years*. He had about four songs, and he wanted Keith Sykes to maybe produce the record. So they made some demos, and Keith hired me to be the guy who would go get John at the motel and get him cigarettes or vodka or whatever he wanted. And ever since then, if he had a concert, the tour manager would tell me I was on the guest list and I could come and say hello to him. And as soon as he heard that I had a record contract, he asked if I wanted to open some shows for him. So I was getting to know him and his manager all that time. And right before *Viva Satellite*, I asked his manager if he'd manage me. I'm still in that camp.

I guess you met Billy Joe earlier on in Texas?

No. I met him when I lived in Memphis. I called him and asked him if he would come do my *What the Folk Festival*. I knew how to get a hold of him because of Kent Finlay. He was somebody I was obsessed with. And then I met him and his son Eddy. And when we went to make my first record, I think Jimmy Buffett and Keith Sykes were fighting or something, and I wanted to use Keith on guitar, but Tony Brown said, "You should get somebody else while these guys fight." So I said, "Can we get Eddy Shaver?" And when he came to play on the album, Billy Joe came too. He came in every day for about an hour or so. And during that time I got to know him.

I don't get to see him that much, but we do talk on the phone sometimes. He's kind of become the guy where I watch what I do because if it gets back to Billy Joe, I don't want to be in trouble with him. You know? He's sort of parental. Which I appreciate. I don't know if he told you that story about when we went to that bar and that guy pulled a gun on me ...

Yeah. You insisted on needing to use the bar's phone but they wouldn't let you, and the owner didn't take too kindly when you called him "dude." Billy Joe tells that story all the time at his shows.

He was so mad at me!. I've heard him tell the story and it sounds like it was fun. [Laughs] And looking back, I guess it will be. But it wasn't that funny at the time. I was mad too! I was pissed.

How close are Billy Joe's facts?

The guy pulled a gun on me. Billy Joe always says, "He pulled a hog leg out." I don't know what a hog leg is, but I didn't know "dude" was a bad thing to call some guy, either. I knew that there was probably some sort of drug deal going on on the phone, but my wife was calling, so it was like, "fuck you!" That was my stance on the deal. And then the guy pulled out a gun. And I was like, "What, you're gonna shoot me? You're an idiot." And then Billy Joe stood up and jumped in between us and said, "Look, just let us get out of here." And the guy said, "Maybe I'll let you get out of here." It seemed like maybe they all knew who he was. But I don't know. I've been back there since. The guy told me never to come back, but I went back and he didn't recognize me.

On the subject of great stories, your fans look forward to your stories as much as the music at your shows. Do you work those up the same way you do the songs, or do they all originate off the top of your head?

Well, the talking part, Jimmy Buffett showed me how to do it. I mean I've always done it, but Jimmy Buffett showed me how to do it the way I do it. And I'm not trying to sound like ... I don't want to pass that thing on, because he asked me not to. That sounds so name-dropping and exclusive or whatever, but it's the truth.

There's definitely an art to it as much as songwriting. Like Ray Wylie will tell the same bits every night, but no matter how many times you've heard 'em, you'll laugh every time because it's all in the way he tells them.

Yep. Prine does that too. He does it the same way Jimmy does. And I try to do it too. I really ... well, that's that. I really can't say anymore about it! [Laughs] But I love that part of it. But I don't know, I may stop doing it so much ... maybe I'll come up with something new to do.

Like not talk at all?

Yeah, maybe I'll do my real grumpy stage. And I'll just play piano like Dylan. Nah, I don't know what to do. I've got a bunch of shows coming up, and I've got no plan.

It's hard to imagine you as a really grumpy songwriter. I mean, there are subjects you touch on on this record — like rock music being blamed for really bad things on “The Ballad of the Kingsmen” and, well, as the song itself is called, “Conservative Christian Right Wing, Republican, Straight, White American Males” — that clearly rub you the wrong way. But you never come off like an angry protest singer, because you temper your frustration with humor. Is there actually an angry protest singer inside of you, clawing to get out?

Maybe. I've always tried to ... this will sound funny, but remember the Schmenge Brothers? [aka SCTV sketch comedians John Candy and Rick Moranis] Great polka act! Well, they had this motto of putting the aspirin in the ice cream, and I try to do that. I definitely watch TV and sing about stuff from it, but I try to communicate my ideas in a way that won't make me preach to the choir all the time.

Like, say, the route Steve Earle seems to have gone down.

Right. And I like him and I like his talent, but that's exactly the route that I'm ... I wouldn't say that I'm avoiding it, I just don't think it's my calling to be that way. I just enjoy the John Prine/Randy Newman way of doing it. I think if you're not afraid to be funny sometimes, you can sometimes say things that you couldn't say without that and have a chance of it not landing on deaf ears. My problem right now is — and Texans won't like this — I'll vote for Kerry, but even he's not liberal enough for me at all! Nobody is. Nobody's preaching for the Cheech & Chong set. I'm not a target market for anybody. Nobody's for gays getting married, nobody's for drugs,

nobody's for nudity. But I don't know ... I actually hate it when fucking singers try to tell me how politics work! I mean, I'm a liberal, but I'm a Libra too, so I'm one of those Liberals who's gonna vote for Kerry but who doesn't hate George Bush. Sometimes he really pisses me off, but it's not like I want something bad to happen to the guy. I dig him. I hope he has a good life. I'm just not going to vote for him. But I think he's done some cool shit. I mean, hey, I'm for guns and shit, too.

Except for when they're pointed at you.

Yeah, that was a bummer. And another guy hit me with one once and called me a bitch. I think the bitch part hurt the most!

When was that?

It was in Memphis, a long time ago. I went out to get some cigarettes on my break, and two guys came up to me with bandanas held up over their faces. I didn't have any shoes on, so I kinda giggled at first. I thought, "C'mon, this must be your first day on the job, because if you think that I have money on me, you're wasting bullets, boys." But they were serious about it. It was scary. Changed my life.

On that note, you talked earlier about spending a little time in the hospital a few years back. Have you since gone the clean and sober route? Or just cut out certain things?

I don't take any kind of pills anymore, which is really what sunk me. I'm bi-polar, and I got to where I was taking like 12 Oxycotin pills a day. It felt like it was getting to be too much for me. And these pills I was taking, there's no high other than feeling like you just ate Thanksgiving dinner all the time. So I thought, fuck this. I told my shrink lady, "I think I'm as happy as I'm supposed to be." I've been to so many of those shrinks in my life, and I'm just tired of it. So now I just smoke pot. I don't sleep too well, and I used to have to take 50 fucking pills a day just to sleep a little bit. So if I can just sleep a little bit now — and not make violent threats to AT&T — just by smoking pot ... I ain't hurting nobody.