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*"You know, a lot of people don't have food on their table but they've got a lot of forks
aaaannnnndddd knives and they want to cut something."* Todd Snider, [Talkin' Seattle Grunge
Rock Blues](#)

TODD SNIDER INTERVIEW

Rocker at heart; poet by nature

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When Jeff McMeans and I hitchhiked from Santa Monica to the Newport Folk Festival and back in 1965 I had \$20 in my pocket, a guitar with no case and a 30-year-old suitcase that was secured with a piece of rope strung through the handle. It was a three-week trip fuelled by will power and dependent on the good will of people who were willing to stop along a busy highway, sometimes in the rain at rush hour, to help a college student with a "Newport or bust," sign, or to proselytize, get relief driving or in some cases to offer money for sex. The worst part of the trip was on my return I found that Tracy Weed's parents had given away my dog they promised to care for because he trashed their drapes. The diary I kept of those travels has long since been burned.

The next year, Todd Snider was born and he started hitchhiking two decades later. His musical diary is a poignant, funny, maddening selection of stories and songs he has written over the years about underage kids trying to get beer; getting busted in Tillamook County, Oregon; suicide; almost getting shot outside a bar and more recently about becoming an old-timer. By comparison, losing my dog was a blessing.

Mr. Snyder's travels continue – the singer/songwriter says he has been on the road more than a decade – but he seems to have shifted into overdrive these days if that black Mercedes SUV parked out front Milwaukee's Shank Hall and surrounded by 500-pound bouncers during a recent performance is any sign.

We interviewed him by telephone at his room at the Dyersville, IA Comfort Inn.

Q. You've been traveling around for years, haven't you?

TODD SNIDER: Oh, sure, 15 years' worth.

Q. So this city is familiar with your music; your sound, the lyrics. But tell me, are you growing?

TODD SNIDER: It really amounts to changing, [and] you know I change; I change the way I do things sometimes. But, that's more just to stay amused. So I don't know if I'd call it growth, but I, change the way that the records get made. And, I don't really look for, like, a correct way to do it, or a pattern. Or a system; I'm not looking for that. I never really got into it for the success end of it. I never asked myself what other people wanted to hear. I just figured I'd do what I wanted, and deal with however many people liked it.

Q. By "growing," I guess I mean that you probably began strumming, then you went to finger-picking, then you pick another instrument. Do you see some development in your musical ability separate from lyrical stuff?

TODD SNIDER: Sure. I hope so. I've tried to keep practicing guitar and keep growing on guitar and learn piano and feel like I've learned a lot about recording. And as the years have gone by, I do try to get better. I play lead a little now and I play electric now. I've learned a few instruments since I started. I didn't even play guitar on my first records because I didn't have rhythm. I didn't have very good time and in those days you couldn't just fix it.

Q. Do you consider yourself a songwriter, a performer, a musician? Do you play music because it gets your words across, or is it a natural combination?

TODD SNIDER: I like it all. I would say that the first thing that I showed interest in as a young person was writing words. And rhyming, I wanted to be a writer. My first way into it was as wanting to be a lyricist. And then the other parts of it grew the further I got into it. And the further I've gotten into it, the more I feel like a grifter than any of those other things. Because as much as I like it, it doesn't work if you don't do it from your heart, so you don't even have to. The motive just doesn't ever come into question. It just always felt like as a young person the combination of those three things presented themselves as a way of life. I was busing tables at this bar. And I was just learning a couple of chords. And I would get up, and sing these songs I made up. And that just seemed to be this thing that just worked all the time, you know. I did better at than busing tables. It just seemed like a natural calling.

Q. I know that when I write I'm trying to express something. Either outrage, or interest, or curiosity. When you write, are you expressing something separate from what the words say? I mean, are you channeling something?

TODD SNIDER: Sometimes maybe I think I am. And then, sometimes when I look back on my life and when I look back on songs I made up I really thought there was a point; that I had a lot to do with it. And then, as the years have gone by, it feels like it

was just this lucky day because I make up so many, and use so few of those. I don't really make up songs as much as I used to though this last batch was sort of a, it felt like a bit of an ending period. I don't know what I'm going to do next. It feels like a little bit of a break. Like I think I'll change the way I do it or something.

Q. Do the songs come naturally to you, or do you have to sit down and think about what you want to write?

TODD SNIDER: Oh, it comes natural for me. It's just something I do. Ever since I was 20, I get up in the morning and start messing with that. And it's always something coming out. The best way I've, I've heard it put is that you just open your heart, and see what's in there. Or sort of accept what's in there, and accept that that's your song for the day. Or, or the week or whatever. And then, but then, I have lots of songs coming and going all the time, and certain ones will sort of me think that I should record it or something. And then I'll wait until I make up 30 songs to get a pile of 10 that I think I should try to record. And the other twenty may be just for the person they're about, or something.

Q. When a song comes to you, does it come to you as lyrics and then you come up with the music afterwards? Or do you, or do you have tune in mind?

TODD SNIDER: I'll say every way in my life. Sometimes I just have something I want to say. And I'll write the words and then spend, you know, months trying to figure out the chords or the music. And then sometimes it'll be a piece of music that takes a long time to get words. I wouldn't say they come together at the same time very often. But sometimes, sometimes it'll just be in the middle of the night, and I'll tell them, pick up a guitar and sing a song and then go out. It's kind of done.

Q. By then, do you know the way the meter has to be, and then on the front end create it knowing that there's going to be music coming?

TODD SNIDER: Right, yeah and sometimes you don't need any music to hear that melody, you know you can just be working and there will be a meter that sort of presents itself with whatever the thought was that made you [write it]. Sometimes for me if it's in a bar I'll hear myself say something vulnerable or honest and I'll write it down in however many syllables that is, you know sort of take the next line will be that many syllables too, or if it's shorter you make a little chart. This guy taught me how to make these little almost puzzley looking things, and sometimes I'll do them one line at a time on a card on my wall and I'll fuck with the lyrics for months. The last few albums I messed with the lyrics for months; for years in some cases.

Q. A lot of people get tattoos and a tattoo sort of fixes itself in your life. And you may go on but that tattoo is there. Are there some songs that are like that with you, that they

were indicative of some time in your life that you're not really there anymore; where you've moved on, but the song is still there, people still want to hear it, and you're stuck with it?

TODD SNIDER: Yeah. I've got lots of those, especially from my early days, where I feel like I made up a song because I liked the riff, and didn't really wait until there was some honest emotion coming out. And so I just made some words about some fictitious girl that I really wasn't thinking about. I have a handful of those from my first few records, [like] where it would be an argument with a friend that sort of inspired the song. And, and then that resolves itself. And I don't necessarily like to go back and sing that song because it's not a good memory. A few like that. Or there's a few that came from some really sad times. So you hear someone yelling for it, and you go, like "Why? I'm having so much fun right now. Let's not do that." But, I don't mind doing them.

Q. Can we imagine that the songs you sing are about who you are now?

TODD SNIDER: I feel like each of those albums I can look back and think that was sort of where I was at the time when I was thinking. And this last one sounds to me like the last few years of my life.

Q. What's on your iPod?

TODD SNIDER: I don't have any stuff like that.

Q. I was going to ask you what you're listening to, and what you have on it.

TODD SNIDER: The Stones, I just listen to the Stones and Dylan pretty much. Or old rock and roll, like Chuck Berry. I don't really listen to my heroes anymore but I like my main guys when I was young and wanting to be a singer more like Kristofferson and Prine, and Billy Joe Shaver, and Jerry Jeff and Guy Clark, and that's what I studied. But now I don't really listen to that anymore. I know it all so well, and I've heard it so many times. And for some reason, the Stones I've heard a million times too but they're my favorite of anything.

Q. Are the Stones honest, the way you like to make your art reflect life?

TODD SNIDER: No, I think what they do is a whole different thing. It's just more sexual, a beat driven. Sort of a more primitive and to me deeper than what I do, because it's more about just sex. I talk about shallow things like politics.

Q. When you play for a crowd in Iowa or Milwaukee as opposed to say, Nashville, do you play a different set? I mean you want to be yourself and you want to be honest in your music but I don't know if in Iowa they want to hear your political ideas. Maybe they do, maybe the crowd that you draw is the crowd that agrees with what you have to say, but do you find yourself tempering what you say?

TODD SNIDER: Not usually. Most of the times, I'm going to be booked on Hippie Street. Even if it's Waco. They got 90 stoners, and that's who I'm going to be in front of. I mean, there's the odd person that, you know, might have come in because of [Beer Run](#). And I got some people that I think disagree with me politically. And I try to always be really respectful of them. And I always say before the show starts that I don't get to share my opinions 'cause they're smart. I get to share 'em 'cause they rhyme. And I think that's true. And so I try to be cool about that. But I do think it's okay for a folk singer to share their opinion, and then, also, he has to be cool if somebody heckles them because of it. And so I do. That's my stance on it and I don't really change the shows. Um, the way that I change the shows is that I keep track of them. Like, tonight, I'm in Cascade, Iowa. And I think I was here last summer. So, when I get to the dressing room my tour manager will have last summer's set. And if I talked, he'll make notes. And then I don't, I didn't try to make sure not to repeat that.

Q. So to some extent, it is a business.

TODD SNIDER: Not for me. I managed to stay out of it since I've got a bunch of people to do that stuff for me, and every once in a while I have to go to the meetings, but not, not really. I have a manager, and to him it is, I guess. And like, my bills don't go to my house and stuff. I've been pretty lucky with that.

Q. You live in East Nashville, but Nashville itself is something else The fashion and the hair, and the music

TODD SNIDER: It's a weird place, it is. East Nashville's a little different. It's more hippied out, it's more like Austin. You know, and it's more Americana singers. And then, my theory on that is that, Nashville is like music for really popular people, or people that were on the team and went to the prom. And they don't think of music as art. They think of it more like sports, and it's about going to the top and succeeding. And, and there's a place for all that. But, I guess, you know, in my opinion, that's not what music was started for. It was started for people to fuck, and people to show their frustrations. I like Metallica crowds, and AC/DC crowds, and "I'm mad at my step dad" crowds and I don't think country music's there to appease them. I think it's there to appease the already popular, and the normal, and the people that want to fit in like, they watch CMT [Country Music Television]. Music was mostly, though, created for people that didn't want to fit in. And I'm still sort of into that. I like the Stones, like I said.

Q. So you have an underlying rhythm of your own. Does your fan base require you to articulate or create in a certain way in that it's what you do for a living? Do you play classical music or something on the side? Is there some other thing in you in that's different?

TODD SNIDER: Yeah, I do. I'm glad you asked. I have a band, we usually only play like three nights. Elmo Buzz and the East Side Bulldogs and we made an EP called Shit Sandwich. And what all we play is like 50's Rock or like the sound of sort of like 56 to 63 and the Sonics are our favorite band. And we do "Wooly Bully" and "Hanky Panky," and "Hang on Sloopy." I never was in a cover band. I got my start in a folk house, so I always felt like I missed out on playing covers as a young person. And so, in Nashville, we're under the name Elmo Buzz. I have a band, and we have, like 2 guitars, bass, drums Bobby Keys from the Rolling Stones is our saxophone player. And Elizabeth Cook, the country singer and a DJ is "the girl." She just sort of dances and chews gum and sort of looks at me like she's like that chick in Eddie and The Cruisers kind of thing. That's her.

Q. How do you feel when you play that music as opposed to when you're playing your stuff before the stoner crowd.

TODD SNIDER: Well, I like 'em both. I look forward to doing both things. Then I also like doing solo shows sometimes. I get into all of it and I would say that my main love is probably the music that I'm going to do tonight. It's sort of roots rock. And then this other thing is my favorite kind of barbecue music, I guess. In my mind, I created this alter ego that hates. His name's Elmo Buzz and he hates folk music. And he loves Bocephus. And he's got a band that only plays party rock. We don't do any slow shit, and we don't talk. And we don't do any politics.

Q. What kind of guitar do you play?

TODD SNIDER: I got an Epiphone electric, which I've actually been playing on this tour. I'll play a little electric, but it won't be that kind. It'll be more like what we do. More like the record.

Q. Isn't there a set group of songs that you have to play?

TODD SNIDER: Some of them. Maybe. You know, I would say I more fall into it. I get mad at myself sometimes for not playing more of the songs. And falling into the ones that I know the best. And I think that happens because those songs have become ones people sing along to and know because I'm always playing it. I don't know which came first, though. I don't know if I think they liked it, and then I had to play it. Or I played it so much, they're like, 'Yeah. Do that. I know that.' But I wish I had the wherewithal to broaden it out a little bit. I don't know that people would like that or not. I haven't ever been able to [indiscernible]. I've always been working on an album. I wanted to take a break from making albums to learn some of the songs on some of the albums.

Q. What is your favorite song that you've written? Whether you like it or not now, I guess you probably do.

TODD SNIDER: I wish I had a favorite. I'm kind of hard on them all, really. You know, I just went on the road in '94, and just stayed. And, um, most towns are kind of like that. You know, some are bigger, some are smaller. But most places we go, there's some people that are there to help us, or cheering us and stuff. My favorite is I like to boogie. I like to do Chuck Berry type shit and I do that in both bands. In fact, my side band is just all of that with kind of DB Coopers stuff, or no sort of story songs. Just that blues based um, rock and roll. That's probably my favorite thing as I have gotten older.

Q. So that's the musician side. That completely different from the songwriter's side, which is the part that you are known for.

TODD SNIDER: I agree. It's funny when I started out, lyrics was my favorite thing and I thought that "the answer's blowing in the wind" was the heaviest thing to say. And the older I get the more I start to think that "A-wop-bop-a-loo-mop-a-wop-bam-boom!" is the most profound thing that you can say. It started off with the idea that words got me excited. And I, probably falsely so, thought that there was something interesting or something that you could do with them. But the older I get . . . I think if I go back Chuck Berry is my favorite. I think when I found him, I always liked him but I was in my late 20s when I decided that, that wasn't what I thought was probably the best. Now I see him in the airport every once in a while though and tell him how much I love him and he doesn't know me. And one time, I was playing in his club and I was sitting in the dressing room and he came back in there and said, "Are you the kid playing tonight?" And I got so excited because I thought he was coming to see me, but he just wanted me to move the van so he could move his car.