

The role of the wiseass will be played by Todd Snider



PHOTO COURTESY OF TODD SNIDER

The modern-day troubadour returns to Portland, no doubt with a story to tell

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Beaverton-native Todd Snider may just be the most honest person in the music industry.

If you are a conservative, Christian, right-wing Republican, straight, white, American male or female, you may find his honesty irritating. That is the point.

If you have heard him play a live show, you know that he can tell a story that is three times as long as the songs he plays on either side of it and full of social commentary.

Snider's comedy rivals that of one of his idols, Bill Hicks, drawing on an uncanny knack for bringing to life rich characters who tell the stories of our society's underdogs.

Snider, a walking, talking version of one of his own characters, can turn that microscope on himself and be self-deprecating. He now lives in East Nashville, and should anyone care to ask, he will answer in a slight drawl — which he must have developed since his time in the South — that he is “a complete fuck up.”

Sue Zalokar: *You've said “I didn't set out to be original, I set out to be Jerry Jeff Walker.” You seem like you are all Todd Snider now.*

Todd Snider: I hope so. Or at least I feel like that's where I'm headed. It was when I met him and John Prine I learned that the only way I was really gonna get to be like them was to be myself, which is what they were being. I had already made some records by then, so I was lucky that I got to

learn that lesson a little late and still hold a job.

S.Z.: *You are an epic storyteller ...*

T.S.: Well thank you. I made up a book. In fact I was just reading it when you called. I've got to make up a title by Friday. I have a few that I'm going with.

S.Z.: *I can't wait to read it. What are some of the titles you are considering for the book?*

T.S.: “How to Stay Warm for the Rest of Your Life,” “How to Write Songs That Won't Be on the Radio,” “Notes on Obscurity,” “I Was High When I Wrote This,” “How to go Crazy on Purpose,” “Safety Third: The Pretty Much True Stories of Todd Snider,” “Todd Snider Rules and Other Humble Stories,” “Born to Win and Other Stories of Failure,” “Making Up Someone to Be,” “The Bull Crastinations of Todd Snider, Imagineer,” “Aimless, Inc.” and then “Topsy Gypsy” gets thrown around too.

And a friend of mine took a photo of me playing the trumpet that I'd like to use [for the cover of the book]. I don't play the trumpet, but I look cool. You wouldn't know that I wasn't kicking its ass. It's making an awful squawking noise in reality, but it looks like I'm laying it down.

S.Z.: *The late comedian, Bill Hicks, is one of the people who inspires you. You've said “Hicks was three chords from a folk singer.” What is the importance of humor in what you do?*

T.S.: If there's anything to bring to that conversation, it would be that humor is not any more important than another emotion on, say, the emotional scale.

I like to think, and some of my heroes have offered to me too, that all the emotions should be available to you in any situation. If you are making up a song about a funeral and you think of something funny, that's OK. And if you are making up a song about something funny and all of a sudden you want to say something very heartfelt or angry or anything, I let it fly.

S.Z.: *When you were in Portland last year, you told a story about encountering a busker playing “Mr. Bojangles” while walking with Jerry Jeff Walker (the musician who wrote, Mr. Bojangles).*

T.S.: Forgive me, but I kind of ramble. It's a weakness.

We went up to Santa Fe to have some fun. On this night we closed down this bar and it was like three in the morning and nobody was on the street but us. No cars, no nobody and there was this guy. I don't think he was drunk, but he was impaired in some way that had him standing on the street alone, with his hat on the ground, singing “Mr. Bojangles.”

There was no chance of anyone coming by. Me and Jerry Jeff heard the music and we went to go find it, 'cause we could tell it was his song and when we found him, [the scene] was angelic. It was almost surreal. We stood there and we watched this guy

sing this song and I felt like one of us was gonna tear up. We didn't, but you could feel it. It was palpable. Jerry Jeff didn't tell the guy that he wrote that song. Then he gave all of his money to him and just said, “That was beautiful.” I don't even think the guy really looked up. And then we walked off. I remember saying to Jerry Jeff, “That might be the highlight of my life,” and he said, “Pretty boring so far then, I guess, huh?” Which is funny because I said that very thing to him when I met him 20 years ago, and his answer was the same then too.

S.Z.: *You recently made a documentary that involved a two-day session of eating acid?*

T.S.: It was five days.

S.Z.: *Five days of eating acid on film? What was that like?*

T.S.: Well [laughter], in one sense it was great because I got to go see a movie and I was in it. And I had no idea what to expect.

First, there was a movie named “Peace Queer.” That was like six years ago. These guys, the Barnes Brothers made it. They wanted to make a documentary again. They were coming to town to see their friends anyway and they have their cameras with them all of the time, and so sometimes we just do funny skits and make little movies that we just show our friends. We weren't sure exactly what we were going to do, but we started partying and making the rounds. And they had their cameras going.

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