

Todd Snider 'workin on my masterpiece'

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If the opening track of *The Devil You Know*, Todd Snider's latest effort, comes off a bit raucous for someone so often described as a folk singer, that would more than likely be why Snider put it first.

His life's work, Snider says, has been trying to filter his folk through the reckless abandon of early Chuck Berry.

"He's probably my favorite artist ever - painter, actor, singer, anything," Snider says. "But I'm a folk singer so I've always been trying to fuse that. And I think the last two records, I've gotten kind of close to something that might . . . I won't call it original but boy, it makes me feel like maybe if I can keep trying to mess with those two things, I could be onto something. I'm like Dewey Cox, man. I'm just workin' on my masterpiece."

He's met his favorite artist twice.

The first time, Snider says, "I was yelling his lyrics at him and creped him out I think. I started yelling 'Campaign shouting like a Southern diplomat . . . ohhh, man!' and 'Coffee-colored Cadillac, I love that.' He was just like 'That's good, son. That's good.' He was walking away from me kind of like 'Leave me alone.' So the next time I saw him, I got off the plane in St. Louis and he was just sitting there waiting, I talked in a normal tone. I said 'I just wanted to tell you you're my favorite artist of any kind' and he said 'Thank you, son.' "

He got to sit next to another hero, Randy Newman, on a flight last summer.

As Snider recalls with a laugh, "I told him 'I could probably recite most of your lyrics to you'. And he was like, 'Oh man, I hope you don't do that.'"

Given Snider's darkly comic sensibilities and tendency to crawl inside the heads of society's castaways, it's no surprise to hear him talk about his love of Randy Newman.

"The thing I always liked about him is that he ain't afraid to take on the villain in the first person but not as a monster," Snider says.

Snider took the same approach to *The Highland Street Incident*, a song on *The Devil You Know* in which Snider assumes the character of the people who once mugged him in an alley.

"I thought 'If you're gonna get hit in the head with a gun in an alley, Jim Croce would make a song out of that. You've got to get a song out of that.' I worked on it forever but it

didn't start to work until I tried to have some empathy for my attacker. All the sudden, every word I tried to rhyme worked."

Snider first mentions the mugging by way of explaining his warm embrace of gallows humor.

"Most of the time when I laugh in my life, it's because something's wrong," he explains. "Like the time I got mugged, I was laughing, just as an instinct. I couldn't believe it was happening. I felt like Jerry Seinfeld. I was like 'I can't believe you guys are robbing me. This is hysterical.' Then whang, I got hit with a gun."

That tendency to laugh when things are going badly is reflected in the working title of the album he just finished.

It probably won't be the title, he says, but for now, he's been calling it *Crank It . . . We're Doomed*.

"I think that's sort of the theme of a lot of the crap I do," he says. "Like Bob and Doug McKenzie, when the brakes went out and the one looked to the other and said 'Well, the brakes are out' and the other guy said 'No sense steering now.' It's like everything's going to hell in a bucket. Does anyone have some Led Zeppelin CDs we could crank up?"

As for the sound of *Crank It . . .*, Snider reaches for another icon of the Zeppelin era.

"You know how Fred Sanford dances?" he says. "All the songs on the album, he could dance to them."