

EST

American songwriter

the craft of music

1984

Todd Snider's
Hard Working Americans



Todd Snider was close to tears when he cut “Wrecking Ball,” the Gillian Welch tune that closes out the debut album for the Hard Working Americans.

“You had me repeat that first verse, which Gillian doesn’t do,” Snider told bassist and producer Dave Schools, that day in the studio. “And when I started singing the first verse again, it’s like every fucked up thing I ever did in my life hit me.”

*Look out, boys
I’m a rolling stone
That’s what I was when I first left home
Took every secret I’ve ever known
And then headed for the wall
Like a wrecking ball*

If you know anything about Snider’s career, which includes an ample dose of hitchhiking, couch-surfing, chemically-induced excess, and even some jail time, you get the picture. Snider is, after all, the Pied Piper of modern folk music. He flies the Freak Flag at full-staff and makes no apologies for it. He champions outcasts and hippies, and would urge your daughter to quit law school and follow Phish if given the chance. His new supergroup—the ironically titled Hard Working Americans—brings together a confederation of all-stars from the so-called jam-band scene, and the results are delightful and unexpected. The album is a hard-rocking, hard-partying affair, and its partygoers are blue-collar types that still feel the need to rage on a Saturday night, despite the grim realities that Sunday morning brings.

“Wrecking Ball” is the perfect ending to a record that can be heard as the soundtrack to an Average Joe’s life. “It was cool to have that song as the end-cap and realizing that the journey starts over,” says Schools, who is best known as the bassist for the Athens, Georgia-based band Widespread Panic. “You can lose it all at any second or you can do something wonderful with it.”

Snider’s concept for the Hard Working Americans stemmed from his idea to marry the poetics of some of his favorite songwriters with the funky, party-loving vibes of some of his favorite instrumental wailers. Because, let’s face it: the jam-band scene has never been a breeding ground for great lyrics.

“God, if some guy can make a great solo and has all these great tones, why the hell do we pressure him to try to work on poetry every day?” Snider says.

So, with that in mind, Snider enlisted Schools (whom he calls “a musical and ethical leader of his generation”), Neal Casal (Chris Robinson Brotherhood, Ryan Adams) keyboardist Chad Staehley (Great American Taxi) and drummer Duane Trucks.

For material, the band settled on twelve tunes from a who’s who of roots-rock songwriters, including offerings by Will Kimbrough, Bottle Rockets, Kieran Kane, Randy Newman, and Drivin’ N’ Cryin. All of the songs came from a pile of 40 tunes that Snider says he’d been assembling for years—tunes that, he says,

he remembered all the lyrics for after hearing just once. “I felt like I was in this unique position to be [sharing] these songs that I personally—for what it’s worth—considered perfect and thought other people would, too, and actually witnessed them moving audiences, written by people that I either opened for or opened for me.”

The album has a very cohesive feel, almost as if the tunes had been conceived by a single songwriter. And though they tell tales of the down and out, the tone is celebratory.

“I know from experience that nobody parties like poor people party,” Snider says. “I’ve partied in the biggest goddamn houses you can imagine and in the smaller ones, too. And there’s a freedom that comes with a lack of control that can’t be accessed by rich people.”

Hard Working Americans also touts a left-of-center patriotism, one that is promulgated by anarchists like Walt Whitman, and of people like Snider, who make documentaries about themselves rolling down hills in their late 40s while tripping on acid at 9 in the morning.

“I had been thinking that it would be fun to have a band that tried to be patriotic in a way that would upset the people that normally exploit patriotism,” Snider says. “[I wanted] to steal flag-waving back for the weird who, in my opinion, are the ones that should be waving flags and chanting ‘U.S.A.’”

God bless the Hard Working Americans. ★

“I know from experience that nobody parties like poor people party.”