

01/10/2014

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## Hard Working Americans Know How to Get the Job Done, Seriously

[Todd Snider](#) was rummaging through his mail during a three-way cross-country phone conversation in early December, when Christmas apparently came early.

"Holy shit, I think someone just sent me a bunch of drugs," the funky folk singer-songwriter announced from Nashville. "That's mushrooms."

[David Schools](#), Snider's quick-thinking partner in the [Hard Working Americans](#) who's also the formidable force behind the Modulus Graphite bass as one of [Widespread Panic](#)'s founding members, didn't miss a beat on a separate line from San Francisco.

"Interview's over."

Just another day in the life of a well-traveled troubadour served as quite an introduction to what could be one of the most intriguing configurations of 2014, a jelly-and-jam band with folk-you-up tendencies and Workingman's Deadhead blues moves.

Hopefully, this will be the start of a beautiful friendship. These five original Hard Working Americans formed in mid-2013 to quickly record their deliriously dynamic [self-titled first album](#) that will be released January 21. Spending five days in Bob Weir's [TRI Studios](#) in San Rafael, California, they put their own stamp on reworked versions of 11 of Snider's favorite cover songs, with similar themes by roots artists as varied as Gillian Welch and Drivin' 'N Cryin'.



They followed up their inaugural get-together by rehearsing a few days in Boulder, Colorado, ahead of their historic first live appearance, a benefit performance that was sponsored by George Boedecker, the man behind their new Melvin Records label. (*David Schools, left, with Todd Snider.*)

Then they blasted through a loose, energetic show, modifying, extending and improvising while playing every album cut and more at the sold-out Boulder Theater on December 20. Standouts included "Another Train," written by [Will Kimbrough](#), and "Stomp and Holler" by [Hayes Carll](#), who opened the show with the Greencards' Kym Warner, then joined his brethren for the show-stopper.

"We're gonna work hard for ya," Snider repeatedly vowed in a raspy voice that somehow crossed the best of Steve Earle with Peter Wolf during a 105-minute set (including three encores) that they cleverly billed as The First Waltz. The benefit for the Foothills Flood Relief Fund was filmed under the direction of Justin Kreutzmann (son of Grateful Dead drummer Bill Kreutzmann), with the intention that it will one day represent the start of something big.

Yet, Snider sees this carefree cast of characters reacting more like the Faces than the Band. "I can't see anybody freaking out if something went wrong," he said, relating to the British bad boys of the '70s led by Rod Stewart and Ronnie Wood. "They had a good humor about themselves."

At the very least, if these band members mesh as well as Snider and Schools did during this freewheeling interview, party-hearty fans from the Bowery Ballroom to the Troubadour will be in for a treat over the [next month](#). Hard Working Americans will attempt to ROCK in the USA beginning January 23 in New York. After stops in Boston and Philadelphia, they head to Falls Church, Virginia, about 100 miles north of Schools' hometown of Richmond.

Morphing folk songs into dance tunes might be messing with a sanctified entity (just consider the huffy lot that didn't appreciate *Inside Llewyn Davis*), but "the idea that someone would get laid at my show without having to talk a lot" makes Snider laugh.

And temporarily leaving behind his regular band "that's part of a genre that is accused of not being able to write songs," Schools gets the chance to prove a point, too.

Snider sees the potential of turning "my buddy Will Kimbrough's 'Another Train' " into "a big Black Sabbath jam," adding, "I hope we just rock harder and harder. I want parents to be bothered that their kids are coming to see us."

Hoping for the best and preparing for the worst during this initial phase, he said, "In music, it doesn't feel like it's good to have" any expectations.

"I kinda just jam on and just try to be prepared to be pelted with shit," he said. "Just stay ready to be booted. That's my thought. If they turn on me, I'm not gonna be a jerk about it and blame them. ...

"But my hope is that we just always have this as an artistic outlet and we can always do this when we're free. And as we want to. And if it caught on and became something we want to do more, I would love it."



Snider and Schools, the record's co-producers who have known each other since the mid-1990s, also recruited guitarist [Neal Casal](#) (Chris Robinson Brotherhood), keyboardist Chad Staehly (Great American Taxi) and drummer [Duane Trucks](#) (Col. Bruce Hampton) to become members. Tulsa's [Jesse Aycock](#), who'll be the second guitarist on the tour and has his own album, *Flowers & Wounds*, also coming out January 21, performed onstage in Boulder, and he fit in seamlessly with Casal, whose electrifying solos kept Snider and Schools constantly captivated.

The Hard Working Americans idea germinated in December 2012 with a one-off performance by a makeshift trio at the [Uptown Theatre in Napa](#), Calif., that also included Cake drummer Paulo Baldi. Playing his own songs, Snider hit it off with Schools.

Of course, Snider already worshiped the bassist's "behemoth" jam band. Right after the (alleged) drug shipment, he pointed out a lyric in his song "Conservative Christian, Right-Wing Republican, Straight, White, American Males," in which he proudly proclaims he's "a Widespread diggin' hippie."



Schools (left) eventually was sold on recording a collection of what he said Snider "thinks are perfect songs," leading to putting together "this dream team of people we've always wanted to play with." Snider, who primarily has been a solo act for most of his musical career, seemed genuinely excited about the long-term possibilities for this group, and just before the interview was testing out some new material that he was eager to share with his cohorts.

"I always think I can do it better," he said. "It's ridiculous. It never changes. I'm like, 'This time I'm gonna get it perfect.' "

Making it clear that his priority remains Widespread Panic ("It has to be") and that manager Buck Williams initially suggested Snider for such a project, Schools, who attended the University of Georgia in Athens, took a thoughtful approach to creating something from scratch.

"It's like a stew," he said. "You know you can look at all the ingredients and you can see how good they are. The question is, 'Are they still gonna taste good together?' And a band's the same way. You can look at all the players on paper ... it's also like a sports team. You look at these guys and what they can do, and the question is, 'Are they a team? Can they work as a unit?' You know, a studio process is a really telling environment to discover whether or not you can work as a unit. And we really did."

Even before the quintet started to rehearse for their first live show, Schools observed, "It sounds like a band that's been playing for a long time."

"I can't wait to play, man," Snider offered. "I know all my lyrics, I know that. I can't wait to play."

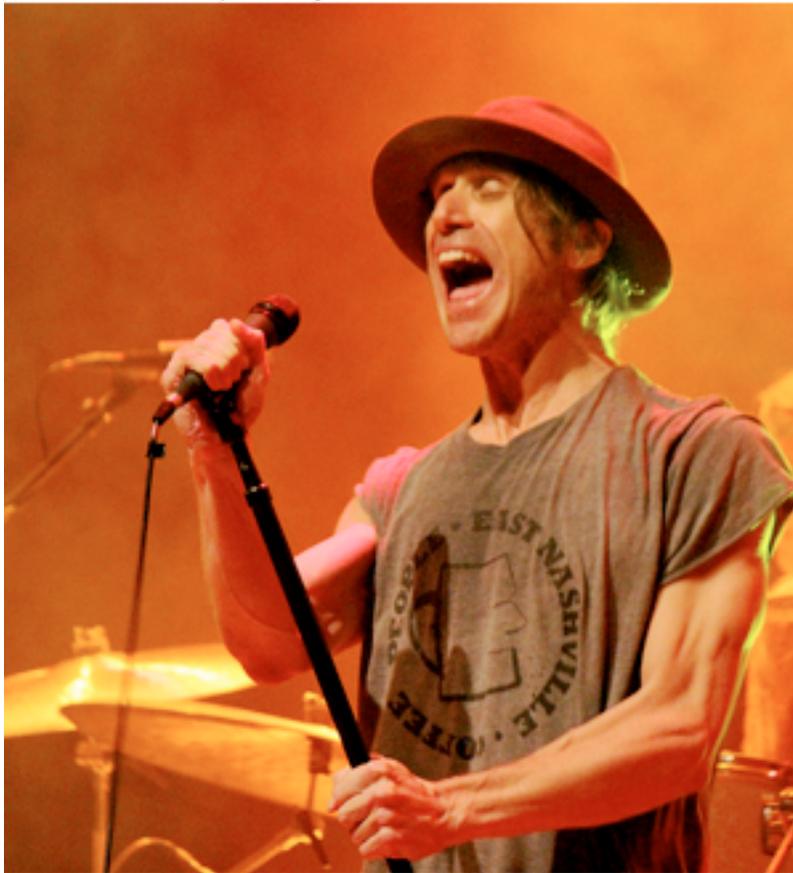
Though he's the lead vocalist and an enthusiastic, harmonica-playing, [toenail polish-wearing](#) showman, Snider left no doubt who's in charge. He certainly sounded eager to please Schools during this conversation in which the interviewer sometimes felt more like an entertained eavesdropper.

Regarding the birth of the band, Snider said, "I sent David some songs and he gave them the hard-working treatment or whatever you'd call it. And with that, that stemmed the idea of taking these songs I had saved in my life that I knew. And I regret calling them perfect. I should have finished that and said 'perfect for me.' (Schools laughs)

"But my favorites, the songs that I learn really quickly and feel like they speak for me, they moved me in some way. I always kept the list hoping someday there would be some excuse to use them. I thought it would be when I was old, producing some cool, young person but ... "

With another laugh, Schools broke in to add his perceptive perspective.

"Well, you just bet the farm with all your songs."



Unfazed, Snider (right) forged ahead.

"I just hope it keeps going on. I have a whole ... there were 10 or 12 (songs) left over. I have a new way of doing a Robert Earl (Keen) ... hey, David, I don't know if you know 'The Road Goes on Forever,' but if we do it in A minor, man, that's a bad motherfucker. ... But I also am making up a CD today to bring of new songs for you to sift through."

"Terrific," Schools responded. "Because that's the next logical step. We put this band together 'cause it was fun and we recorded a bunch of songs that work great for Todd and work great for the band.

"What's the next step? This is how you answer the future-plans-for-the-band question. Well, the next step is to begin writing our own material. And we have a terrific songwriter. In fact, we have a couple of terrific songwriters in the group already."

## Mutual admiration

Schools doesn't recollect the moment, but Snider won't let him forget it. Even now.

Though the details are hazy, Snider remembers being "star-struck" when he first went on the road as an opening act for Widespread Panic. Thinking it was in 1994 in Cincinnati, Snider said he watched from the wings and couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"There was this moment where, just people going crazy like a total release and the music was going a certain way. ... David did this thing. ... And the whole band, just everything changed on a dime. Like that moment the crowd roars, and it seems like a magic trick. Because you're standing there 10 feet away trying to figure out, there's no way they counted all of that. I still don't know what he did. And I asked him and he wouldn't tell me."

Schools countered: "I tell you one thing, there's no counting going on in Widespread Panic."

"How did everybody know?" Snider marveled. "It was like a James Brown moment, with a fucking, just with a small head nod."

Schools recalled another time and place when Snider got his attention while leading the Nervous Wrecks, who were touring with Kimbrough's Southern bar circuit band called Will & the Bushmen.

At the Cuthbert Amphitheater in Eugene, Oregon, Schools said, "I thought Todd was a folk singer. Well, this band was like a garage rockabilly ... just gutter greatness. Just completely interrupting this bucolic scene of outdoors and ducks on the lake, hippies swirling and twirling. ...

"He did the 'Talkin' Seattle Grunge Rock Blues' song and, you know, that line about 'I guess I'll just grab my guitar and move back to Athens,' it just seemed so appropriate at the height of everything that was going on. It probably was '93 or '94. All you had to do was wear flannel, which I had been wearing since I was in prep school because everyone wore L.L. Bean. All of a sudden people were like, 'Oh, you're just trying to copy that grunge fashion.' I'm like, 'No, I'm just trying to stay warm in this shirt, really.' But, yeah, Todd, it struck me. This songwriting thing is a really rare gift. And I know it's a craft that has to be honed and it's like any muscle, it has to be worked. But some people have a gift more so than others. And Todd has that gift. And it really hit me standing on the side of the stage watching those guys do that. It was a great band, you know. And there's a million of these great songs that Todd has in his own pocket."

## Who are these guys?

Obviously, the band is led by two strong and colorful personalities. But how did the other talented musicians fit in? At one point, North Mississippi Allstars Luther and Cody Dickinson nearly came on board, and Snider sought out Jeff Austin, a singer and mandolinist in Yonder Mountain String Band who is one of his closest friends.

"But then as soon as it started, and not in a negative way about anybody, I just thought, 'Oh, this is the perfect storm. Everybody here is kind of on the same page really quickly,' " Snider said. "Two more people might have been too many. Yeah, they're welcome to come play anytime. Technically, they're still Hard Working Americans but they just aren't in the band."

Staehly, the Colorado-based musician who has previously worked with Snider, suggested that his friend, Taxi producer and Portland, Oregon native start [spending more time with musicians](#) closer to his own age of 47 after bonding with legends such as Jerry Jeff Walker and John Prine.

Now that Snider and Schools have gotten to know their band mates, they were asked to play along and provide quick snapshots by characterizing the others in the same way teen mags used to identify the Beatles.

**The smart one:** "Oh, *them*," Snider joked. "I feel comfortable saying David is our leader. I don't think anyone would argue with that. We're all big admirers of just what he's done with his life, and wanting to learn from that."



**The funny one:** Duane Trucks (left), the bandana-wearing drummer who's engaged to the daughter of Widespread Panic guitarist [Jimmy Herring](#), performed in King Lincoln with Herring's son Carter and is the brother of part-time Allman Brother and guitarist extraordinaire Derek Trucks. "(Duane) will be the guy, if our band stays together, he'll wreck cars into trees for us and get in the paper that way," Snider said. "Yeah, that's gonna bring the police to the hotel. I could possibly be in the room at that time."

**The quiet one:** "I have to say that Neal is the quiet one, even though he's the guitar player. It's usually the guitar players that are the loud ones," Schools said of the heavily bearded Casal, whose "Superhighway" from *Roots & Wings*, the ninth of his 10 solo albums, likely will appear on upcoming set lists. Playing smooth and precise licks reminiscent of Jerry Garcia, it's no wonder that, according to Schools, the former member of Ryan Adams' Cardinals now living in Southern California is a wanted man by performers such as ex-Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh.

**The cute one** "Oh that's me, man," Snider said, adding after Schools concurred, "Thank you. Fuck, yes." That led to this exchange:

**Schools:** "Let me tell you something. When Todd took his jacket off in the studio and he was wearing a T-shirt with the sleeves ripped off, every single one of us in the band being *devout* heterosexuals, gasped and said, 'My God, that man is cut.' "

**Snider:** "Oh, no shit? All I do is smoke dope and drink coffee."

**'We're gonna save the country'**

Hard Working Americans will bring a message to their fellow Americans. Just don't plan to take it -- or them -- seriously.

During an animated diatribe in which he bashed the nation's two main political parties, Snider closed tongue-in-cheek with, "And we're gonna save the country if you buy our album." After a brief pause, he added, "That was David Lee Roth's. ... Dude, I'm gonna be great as a frontman." When the laughter subsided, Snider asked if he could get serious, then went stream-of-consciousness deep. "As much as I like to not get into politics if I can stay out of them or at least be uncommittal about them with my own music (his most recent album of original material was titled *Agnostic Hymns and Stoner Fables*), it seems like we are at a time in our country where the disparity between the rich and the poor is getting so vast and the discussion about it is getting so buried underneath it ... I mean I hate to rant but it just seems like a good time, at least if it's a kick-ass Saturday night-take-your-tits-out way to say something about it, that seems like it would be appropriate for a band, even as a humble gesture to just the few people that might be listening, to try to speak up for some people that are not disappearing, actually they're growing in number. And if I wanted to go on and on, which I always do, I would say that the young black man in America hasn't budged. And almost is ... people are turning their eye the other way because he's got a president. Like, '*Oh, the president is black, so these kids are fine now.*' And they're not. I don't know, as a band it would be nice to embolden or inspire or at least make some people who feel like they're getting 'shit on' have a good Saturday night. I guess that's the best you could hope for."

Schools agreed, but used his example of Rage Against the Machine as a "great fucking band" that managed "to pull off never getting overshadowed by their political message. It seemed apropos," he continued, "but in the wake of those guys, it seemed like you weren't taken seriously unless you had some message of some social import that came along with your music.

"And I'm sitting there going, 'You know, I hear about this shit all the time. I live in a college town. People are talking about it. It's all over the news. The news is on for 24 hours a day. Can't I go see a band and forget about this shit for a while?'"



There is a serious tone to tunes such as the Bottle Rockets' "Welfare Music" and Kimbrough and Tommy Womack's "I Don't Have a Gun," which was weighted down during the live show by Snider's drawn-out history lesson and social commentary about "paying dues to a military industrial complex." He should have considered saving some of that 7 minutes to introduce the band, especially since it was their first public performance. (*Neal Casal, right, with Todd Snider.*)

Otherwise, he and they stayed on target. While Randy Newman's "Mr. President, Have Pity on the Working Man," worked better as a singalong message song, don't expect their concert to self-serve as a full-blown protest rally.

"Our message is really simple," Snider said. "Poor people kick ass, rich people suck, but don't take us seriously because when you come to our show, we want you to take your shirts off and shit."



Reminded that some of their fans might come from well-to-do families interested in supporting causes such as the Boulder benefit, Snider quickly backtracked.

"I was gonna say, 'Maybe I need to work on the message.' But the back part of it, where it's like, 'OK, we're for working people, not for people that oppress them.' Now that's the end of the lecture. Let's get our tits out. Or let's get high and fuckin' hula-hoop and all that shit."

Asked rhetorically by Schools if the Hard Working Americans will break up when they're no longer taken seriously after selling millions of records, Snider might have written the opening lines to this group's next original song:

"What are you gonna do? I'm against rich people unless I become one."

Concert photos by Michael Bialas. See more of [Hard Working Americans at the Boulder Theater benefit on December 20, 2013](#).