

Ted Nugent: Off his rocker?

The Robert Chalmers Interview

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He owns 350 guns, wants to nuke Iraq and makes his friend George W look like a liberal. Now 1970s heavy metal star Ted Nugent has his sights set on a new target: entering US politics

During the private inaugural party at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, in 2000, President George W Bush glanced across the room and recognised a man who - by his own account - has urinated on a nun, soiled his trousers for a week in order to avoid the draft, and been detained on a charge of indecent exposure, after experiencing difficulties with his loincloth in Little Rock, Arkansas. The President confronted him as a matter of urgency.

"When he noticed me," Ted Nugent recalls, "he was surrounded by these huge bankrollers from his campaign. He literally swept past all of them and said: 'Laura! Look who's here! It's Ted!' Then he hugged me and took me by the shoulders. He said: 'Just keep doing what you're doing. Don't think that we don't know what you're up to out here. Stay on course. You're doing great.'"

Like Jesus, Gandhi or Hitler, Nugent tends to inspire this kind of extreme reaction. He rarely gives interviews to the British press; the last time he did, some years ago, he managed what is possibly the most extraordinary achievement of his remarkable career - proving too right-wing for the Daily Telegraph.

Ted Nugent, 57, best known for his 1977 hit "Cat Scratch Fever", has sold 40 million records over four decades. The Detroit-born guitarist, once described as the missing link between Iggy Pop and the White House, used to perform dressed as a Neanderthal - a prophetic gesture, some would argue, given his emergence, in middle age, as an arch-conservative National Rifle Association board member, and obsessive hunter. Nugent, who has personally slaughtered all the meat he's eaten since 1971, hosts two reality shows from the 300-acre ranch - just up the road from Bush's compound in Crawford - where he lives with his second wife Shemane and son Rocco, 15. In 2004, while filming *Surviving Ted*, in which city dwellers strive to replicate his uncompromising lifestyle, he almost severed his (omega) leg with a chainsaw. The musician, who owns seven other properties in the US, arranged to meet me at a truck-stop café in the centre of this one-street Texan town. Famous for songs such as "My Baby Likes My Butter on Her Grits", "Pussywhipped" and "My Love is Like a Tire Iron", Nugent is not known for his intuitive connection to his feminine side; he arrives wearing a camouflage cowboy hat, his shorts supported by a belt housing a **Glock revolver**. I don't, at this stage, notice the .22 which he will discharge in 45 minutes' time.

We sit down to coffee, eggs and grits. Ted is 6ft 3in; to get a sense of his general

demeanour you could do worse than imagine the body of John Wayne possessed by the spirit of Ian Paisley in one of his less conciliatory moods. He launches into a fevered monologue about how much safer Britain would be with more guns on its streets.

"Never has there been such an upsurge in crime since they confiscated all your weapons. Why don't you arm yourselves? You Limeys have a zipper that's locked in the closed position, because you don't have a constitution. You're rewarded for shutting the **** up."

He explains his political philosophy which, as I understand it, is based on extending the death penalty to a far wider range of crimes than homicide, then arming any survivors to the teeth. He owns around 350 guns himself - more than one for every household in Crawford.

British police who don't want to carry firearms are, Nugent says, "out of their minds. I say if somebody robs you, shoot 'em. I'd like all thieves killed. And all rapists. And carjackers. No more graffiti. No more..." - this next phrase is a Spoonerism, rather than some Texan term for gross indecency - "snatch-pursing."

"For an unarmed force," I suggest, "the British police have shot quite a few people. Did you hear about Jean Charles de Menezes?"

"That was horrible. An American cop would have just beat the **** out of him."

Nugent has had a Sheriff Deputy's badge since 1982, and recently assisted with federal raids, "kicking down doors and arresting people". A keen admirer of fellow-guitarist Tony Blair, he abhors drugs, including alcohol, and maintains that he has never used such substances. He considers homo*****ity morally wrong. He speaks about Muslims in a way which, were he to repeat it on globally networked television, might endanger his life. Nugent is aiming to run as Governor of Michigan in 2010.

"If Yusuf Islam is a threat to world peace," I tell him, in response to his anti-Islamic rant, "I'll run your campaign myself, wearing cactus shorts."

"Only the guilty need feel guilty," he replies. "These jihadists want to kill us and Cat Stevens. The message to send to a coyote is: the next time I see you, I'll shoot you."

He went to Fallujah in May 2004, as part of a tour with the USO (the same organisation that sent Bob Hope to entertain on the front line).

"And I visited Saddam Hussein's master war room. It was a glorious moment. It looked like something out of Star Wars. I saw his gold toilet. I **** in his bidet."

In Iraq, he says, he was allowed the opportunity to man automatic weapons. "Our failure," he tells me, "has been not to Nagasaki them."

"Is that opinion shared by your friends in the Republican Party?"

"Most of them feel that way."

"At what level?"

"I've heard it from high-level senators and congressmen."

"How high?"

"The highest."

"Do you mean Rumsfeld, Cheney, or Bush?"

"No," he says, with a defiant look.

We get into his pick-up, which is piled high with gun cases and food for the deer that roam his woodland, and set off for his estate. I tell Nugent how, 20 years ago, having observed a slaughterhouse at first hand, I decided to stop eating anything I felt I couldn't kill myself, and have since got by on fruit, vegetables and fish.

"That's my premise too," says Ted. Then: "Hang on - are you saying you don't eat lamb?"

"Yes."

"Well, my hunting system is pure. These people who passively connive in that hideous assembly-line slaughter are in denial, yet they condemn my natural gathering system. That is a bizarre mindset." Just to set the mood, he fires the .22 out of the open cab window.

Back at the ranch, he shows me a selection of his firearms. Laid on a table in his garage are enough Uzis and AK-47s to wipe out three platoons. Everywhere you look there are Magnum pistols, ammunition cases and crossbows. In a nearby field there are battered, life-sized sculptures of animals including a wolf, a deer and a coyote. He fires at a Styrofoam bear using his weapon of choice, a traditional bow and arrow. "Straight through the heart... dead bear," says Ted, as his heavily pitted target submits to yet another onslaught. "Both lungs... dead bear." The arrows, which he makes himself, keep flying. "Dead bear... dead bear... dead bear."

If Nugent reminds me of anyone, it's the eponymous hero of Vivian Stanshall's *Sir Henry at Rawlinson End*, who defines democracy as "decency, kindness and the occasional mercy killing". But Sir Henry, who uses a recipe collection called *How To Cook Everything You Have Killed*, was a fictional character. Nugent's book, *Kill It and Grill It*, is a US bestseller, and the life he shares here with Tribe

Nuge, as he calls his family, is only too real.

The more you see of Nugent, the more the question presents itself: how did he get to be like this?

We sit down to talk on his front porch. Ted fetches iced tea, and - I think because this feels too civilised, and British - takes off his shirt.

He achieved national fame at 17, with a Detroit group called the Amboy Dukes, who had their first hit in 1968 with the psychedelic anthem: "Journey to the Centre of My Mind". "You'd grown up in a part of Detroit called Redford Township. What was that like?"

"A microcosm of the American Dream. My dad had just killed Japs and Nazis."

His father Warren was a drill sergeant who went on to become a steel executive. Ted has an older brother Jeff who is "a great guy - he served in the United States Army". The musician *****ounces this last phrase as though it's the highest praise imaginable. "As a boy," he adds, "I was inundated with discipline."

"What does that mean - the strap?"

"I saw the riding crop. A lot. I felt it, I think, just once. But corporal punishment is real good. It teaches dogs not to ***** on the couch."

"It didn't stop you urinating on that nun."

"These are legends."

"You've described that incident for publication."

"I was in Jesuit School. When we peed, the nuns would stand behind, checking on us. I had an erection one time and I peed all over the wall. I was inclined to turn round and tell the nun 'I'm just peeing here.' I didn't. I gave some hippy the interview. He got it wrong. Neither did I poke my erect ***** through a map of West Virginia - did you read that?"

"No."

He was only 16 when, with his first major band The Lourds, he was booked to support The Supremes at Detroit's Cobo Hall (capacity 11,000). His family were moving to Chicago the same day.

"That's the only time Ted's ever shocked me," says Jeff Nugent, a former intelligence officer at the Pentagon who was, until recently, CEO of Revlon USA. "He had to delay the move if he was going to play the concert. So he and his mates filled the gas tanks of the removal (omega) trucks with coffee grounds and sugar. And he played."

This was the night, Nugent recalls, when he received "the pivotal confirmation of my musical touch and my life overall. The mighty funk brother God of Thunder [Benny Benjamin, drummer for Motown house band The Funk Brothers] told me: 'Boy, keep playing like that and you'z gonna be a ***** when ya grows up.'"

This kind of language has not earned Nugent a reputation as a champion of multiculturalism. He infamously went on stage and announced that "anyone who won't speak English should get the **** out of America" - not the most generous of sentiments, though it's not dissimilar to the belief once articulated, with slightly more compassion, by Alistair Cooke during a Letter From America that discussed the national motto, E Pluribus Unum.

"I can't imagine anything lower than the Ku-Klux- Klan," Nugent says. "I've celebrated blackness throughout my career. My greatest hero is James Brown. All my heroes are black. I am assimilated. I am them. I am the most anti-racist man that ever lived."

Nugent claims that he watched the sabotage of the removal vans, but didn't participate. He also promises me that he has never taken any form of drug - I have to confess that, prior to this moment, I'd harboured certain unfounded suspicions about the man whose early recordings include: "Let's Go Get Stoned", "Why is a Carrot More Orange Than an Orange?" and "The Inexhaustible Quest for the Cosmic Cabbage".

In the late 1960s he lived with the MC5, a group which was the prototype, musically and pharmaceutically, for acts including Iggy Pop, The Clash and The *** Pistols. "I shared a house with those dope fiends. I was moved by their music."

"In February 1977, People magazine reported you as saying that you'd smoked '50 joints in the 1960s' and tried 'two lines of cocaine'." "What I actually said to People was that on an average night at the MC5 house I'd turn down 50 joints and refuse cocaine."

"It was around this time that you publicly likened the taste of marijuana to rhinoceros semen. That statement begs one question at least..." "Their entire hallway smelled of hashish. I never smoked a joint."

"And you've never used alcohol?" "In 1990 I had a little South African red wine. I developed a refined taste for that beverage, but with baby shots."

"You seem to have got into quite a bit of trouble for someone so consistently sober." "My arrest record," Nugent replies, "is practically Mother Teresa-like." [The Blessed Mother of Calcutta, by this analogy, has been booked for reckless driving, carrying a concealed weapon, and nudity in a public place.]

"You've also claimed you got 'drunk as a pig' at high school." "I got drunk once. My father let me know emphatically that I shouldn't do it again."

"Did he drink?" "Both my parents were hopeless alcoholics. In my mother it manifested itself in a certain... buoyancy," says Nugent (an unlikely master of the obituarist's euphemism). "In my father it brought out suppressed angst - memories of war, I'm sure."

Ted, like his father, has the rage. At one point, when he's describing how he gave a Crawford vandal so frightening a telling-off that the teenager had to be admitted to psychiatric hospital, he is shouting inches from my face, reliving the scene. The experience is alarming.

"I'm feeling sorry for that kid," I tell him.

"That's your Limey coming out in you." Nugent is trembling with fury at the memory of the confrontation. "I think I'm going to have an aneurysm."

He has the rage, but he doesn't have the war record. At 18, he was called up to serve in Vietnam. "In 1977 you gave an interview to High Times [the cannabis user's journal of record] where you claimed you defecated in your clothes to avoid the draft."

("I got 30 days' notice of the physical," Nugent told them. "I ceased cleansing my body. Two weeks before the test I stopped eating food with nutritional value. A week before, I stopped going to the bathroom. I did it in my pants. My pants got crusted up.")

"I never **** my pants to get out of the draft," says Nugent, good-naturedly.

"You also told them you took crystal meth [methamphetamine, the highly destabilising drug sometimes described as poor man's crack] before the medical - as a result of which, and I quote: 'I got this big juicy 4F.'"

"Unbelievable. Meth," he replies, in a tone of deep sarcasm. "Yes, that's my drug of choice. You've got to realise that these interviewers would arrive with glazed eyes and I would make stories up. I never did crystal meth. And I never pooped my pants."

"But you did dodge the draft." "I had a 1Y [student deferment]. I enrolled at Oakland Community College."

"You said then that you wanted 'to teach the stupid bastards in the military a lesson'. I'd have thought you'd have loved the army. Guns. Travel. Danger." "Back then, I didn't even understand what World War II was."

"So basically," - I admit that I have, unaccountably, started to speak Nugent - "you didn't want to get your Michigan ass blown off in Vietnam." "Correct. I did

not want to get my ass blown off in Vietnam."

"I know you do a lot of charity work for wounded veterans. Has it occurred to you that someone else may have died in Saigon because you didn't go?"

"Absolutely."

Nugent's name, as I am sure he's aware, appears, along with those of Cheney, Bush and many of their fellow Republicans, on a website called chickenhawks.com. It lists those who have evaded or abbreviated their own military service then, later in life, developed an appetite for war and machismo, either personally or by proxy.

"So has this made you..." "Certainly. Because I failed to serve in Vietnam, I feel an obligation now, to do everything I can to support those defending our freedom. Do I feel guilt and embarrassment? Yes."

"You missed your calling."

"I wish I'd understood how important America's fight against our enemies was. But did I go to Fallujah two years ago? Damn right I did. And was I in Afghanistan, manning a 50-calibre machine gun in a Chinook - ready to rock? Yes. Was I there for years? No. A couple of weeks. But I am not a coward."

We take a break. Nugent sits by a small amp and plays tunes by Chuck Berry and Jimmy Reed. Though he's sometimes derided as a circus act, watching him close up it's not hard to understand why people have likened him to Jimi Hendrix, or how John Peel came to call "Cat Scratch Fever" the best rock single of its year. His decision to restrict his berserk talent to heavy rock has undoubtedly masked his virtuosity. Not that this bothers Ted. "GOD SENT ME HERE TO MAKE SURE THESE LICKS CAME OFF OF A GUITAR. THEY ARE PERFECT. THEY ARE ****ING PHENOMENAL."

They are. But there is something unnerving about Nugent, both as a musician and a human being. I think it's to do with the way that ***, killing, and rock'n'roll seem to have melded in his mind, into one intense, (omega) primeval compulsion. Nugent tells me that, as a younger man, *** was his true addiction. Speaking off tape, he confides rather more than I need to know.

He married his first wife Sandy when both were 22. They had two children, Sasha and Toby. Sandy divorced him seven years later, accusing him of "bizarre ***** practices". She also alleged he defecated in paper cups.

"I supposedly **** in a bowl of whipped cream. God, I wish I had." Sandy died in 1982, in a car crash.

"Which was apparently drink related?"

"So I believe," says Nugent, a patron of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. "Drugs and alcohol." Arguments over Sandy's substance abuse, Nugent says, caused their divorce. "I can't imagine you were monogamous." "Of course I wasn't. But that wasn't why she divorced me."

He married Shemane - now a TV producer, then a Detroit radio reporter - in 1989.

"You have four children - the two from your first marriage, Rocco, and a child by a teenage girlfriend..."

"Who was given out for adoption."

Nugent pauses.

"It's five, actually. I had a child out of wedlock 10 years ago. I suggest you include that, to show what a prick I am. Here I am, railing against people who do drugs, and I did something like that."

This isn't quite so dramatic a confessional moment as it might appear: Shemane's entertaining autobiography, *Married to a Rock Star*, offers a compassionate but frank account of Ted's struggles in the battle for fidelity, and a paternity suit was filed by the mother of his youngest child in August 2003.

I recall a music writer visiting Nugent in the late 1970s and observing that he had "never seen so many girls on one bed". ("Stick around," the guitarist told him.)

"I got that out of my system," says Nugent. "But I do believe that we were put here to breed."

I'm not sure that I've ever met anybody whose opinions and instincts are more directly opposed to my own. And yet, in some odd way, I find Ted Nugent impossible to dislike: I think because I consider him to be a psychotic - by the classic definition that he does not perceive the world as others do.

He has become sincerely persuaded that, to quote Alabama 3's paraphrase of Chairman Mao, "change must come through the barrel of a gun". Nugent says he worked tirelessly in George W Bush's campaign to be elected Governor of Texas: "I had a great communication with him then." More recently, he has criticised the President for feeble liberalism, especially concerning border controls. But Nugent remains a cherished if wayward, member of the Republican family.

"He went on a TV show with Madeleine Albright, who was Secretary of State at the time," says his brother Jeff. "She was surrounded by secret service agents. At the end of the show, she went to clasp Ted around the waist. and put her hand right on his ****. One of the aides said: 'It is all right, Madam Secretary. He is one of us.'"

"Are there NRA board members," I ask Nugent, "who believe you go too far?"
"Most of them. I say that I want the rape victim to shoot the rapist. They agree with me privately. They think stating this publicly is bad PR. They're wrong. All good people want rape to stop."

Some years before Michael Moore released *Bowling For Columbine*, his celebrated assault on the NRA, he featured Ted Nugent on his BBC show *TV Nation*.

"They sent this young Limey prick who pretended to be my friend," the guitarist recalls. "He tried to **** with me on all these politically incorrect levels. I gutted him. I danced on his skull." A few months later, he says, "Michael Moore, who I have met and debated with many times, approached me at Detroit airport - Gate 18 - after they lost that show. He shook my hand and said: 'Ted - you were brilliant.'"

He teaches me how to shoot an AK-47, and I have to admit that firing a fully automatic machine gun at a target is fun. At the same time, there's something very troubling about the way he drools over his arsenal, especially as Nugent is well placed to understand the risks of hoarding firearms. I've noticed throughout this discussion that he trims his nails with his formidable hunting knife at times of confrontation.

"Didn't your father almost die when..."

"Some jerk left a loaded Winchester in the back of his Ford. The gun went off and nicked his ear. An inch to the side, it would have blown his brains out."

"And didn't you almost shoot off your..."

"I holstered a 1911 .45," he recalls. (For Nugent, the name of any gun is like a poem.) "And I blew my hankie out of my pocket." "Your son Rocco..."

"Discharged a rifle in a gun cabinet. He wasn't hurt. Look, I know the dangers. But more people in America die in showers than from firearms."

"This would be a far safer country without weapons, and you know it." "And there'd be fewer drownings if we got rid of lakes. There will be accidents! Leave me alone!"

We set off on his small buggy and drive round the lightly forested estate to put out food for the deer and wild boar that, sooner or later, are going to find themselves on Ted's dinner table.

"Green Day," he sneers, referring to the Californian band who have repeatedly mocked him. "I've done more in terms of planting trees and personally nurturing the environment than every other band in history put together. I have a hysterical yet reverential relationship with the beast." The moment of the kill is "a kind of

aboriginal prayer. The animal barely knows he's been hit."

He mounts an interesting defence of English foxhunting. "So, they're pompous little prima donnas. So what? I say, go wild. Fox hunting may not be weird enough. Get the kings and the princes. Abolish royalty, rather than criticise some broker from Surrey who likes dressing up like a prick."

I confess to a grudging respect for the system by which he governs his land, though I'm not sure I'd like to see his reign extended to the state of Michigan.

"What do these deer think when they see you coming?" I ask him. "Here comes the nice guy who puts out our dinner? Or, there's the man that shot my brother?"

"I don't think they're capable of either of those thoughts, you Limey asshole. They're only interested in three things: the best place to eat, having *** and how quickly they can run away. Much like the French."

"You wrote a song called 'Dog Eat Dog'. You see the world like that. But we're not dogs - that's the trouble."

"Remember the movie Old Yeller? Everybody loved him. He brought us our slippers. We gave him cookies. But when Old Yeller gets rabies, you shoot him in the ****ing head. It's that simple."

"Just like Saddam Hussein used to be our friend, and the Taliban used to be freedom fighters?"

"Politics, man. I don't have to placate some Arab numb-nut because he holds all our fuel."

"Your hunting knife's out again."

"I never hurt anybody."

When he says that the US campaign in Iraq is strategically brilliant, I'm not sure even he believes it.

"What makes you think everything's going so well?"

"Well, for one thing, we haven't been attacked again, since 9/11."

"Tell that to commuters in Madrid and London."

"I don't believe those things happened because the Spanish and the Brits were in Iraq."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Are you never plagued by doubt?"

"Never. My confidence level is insane. If there is one thing I am, it's always right. I consider myself a true liberal. I am armed in order to stop good people being destroyed by bad people. Liberalism is assisting quality of life, whatever you may choose. I think that homo*****ity is wrong. I think that people who drink, smoke and take drugs are doing wrong.

"But I'll tell you how I judge people. The people that ran up those burning towers on September 11 were my heroes. And among those warriors who ran back to save their fellow human beings, you know what there were? Homo*****s. Smokers. Drinkers. People I wouldn't agree with on numerous conduct levels. I judge people on this: are they in the asset column, or the liability column?"

"When I drove up to the truck stop in Crawford this morning," I tell him, "the CD playing in my car was the Steve Earle live album Just an American Boy [the Texan songwriter's definitive statement against the Iraq war]. When I turned off the ignition, he was just about to go into the encore - his version of Nick Lowe's '(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding'."

"Well Steve Earle, you know... he did a lot of dope."

"But since we're on the subject, what is so funny about peace, love and understanding?"

"You want to know how to get peace, love and understanding?" he replies. "Who doesn't know this? The Ku-Klux-Klan? The Black Panthers? Child rapists? How do you get peace, love and understanding? First of all you have to find all the bad people. Then," Nugent adds, "you kill them."

Ted Nugent plays at the Monsters of Rock festival, Milton Keynes Bowl, Milton Keynes, on 3 June. Go to www.monstersofrock.co.uk for information