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MUSIC

After 7,000 gigs and 7,002 sacks of weed, Todd Snider finally arrives

Lifestyles of the Broke and Inebriated

by Dylan Hicks
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Songwriters really shouldn't use their little tunes to talk shop, even if they do have juicy stories about backstage necking and illegal drugs and tuning-fork mishaps and whatnot. Skynyrd freakin' nailed that bag, people, what more is there to say? Still, people keep writing such songs, and we forgive them, sometimes for good reason. Todd Snider's seventh album, last year's really great East Nashville Skyline, opens with "Age Like Wine," a surprisingly tolerable acoustic ditty about touring all the time and not being dead. "I've been through seven managers, five labels/a thousand picks and patch cables," drawls Snider, "three vans, a band, a bunch of guitar stands/and cans and cans and cans of beer/and bottles of booze and bags of pot and...."



Psst. Got any weed? East Nashville bohemian and populist wiseacre Todd Snider.

"My life story," writes Snider, explaining the song in the liner notes. "It lasts a minute and 20 seconds." The song lasts a minute and 40 seconds according to my CD player, which has gone through fewer bags of pot than Snider, but whatever. Never let the truth get in the way of a good story or a good joke. (Snider does a lot of joking and yarn-spinning during his long and often very funny between-song ramblings.)

Still under 40, Snider might be jumping the gun on the grizzled veteran bit, but he has spent an admirable and/or unhealthy amount of time on the road, and his efforts "to find a way to age like wine somehow" (such modesty--and ambition!) seem to be working. You might recall his 1994 debut, Songs for the Daily Planet, which featured a pair of minor hits: the off-to-Mellencamp "Alright Guy," and the Woody/Dylan-derived "Talking Seattle Grungerock Blues." On the latter, Snider played the leader of a band of strivers who distinguished themselves by steadfastly refusing to sing or play a note. "Silence," Snider cracked, "music's original alternative." A good joke, but as satire the song was rather toothless. The album's more serious fare mistook folksy banalities for wisdom while the rockers mistook bar-band banalities for fun.

Well, some folks arrive on the scene as geniuses and spend the rest of their career getting older and lousier and some folks plod away and get better and better. The latter trajectory is especially suited to folksy singer-songwriters, whose work often benefits from damaged vocal chords and multiple divorces. By 2000's Happy to Be Here Snider's wit and wisdom had expanded, dopey title song notwithstanding. You might also check out '03's Near Truths and Hotel Rooms Live for a decent pre-East Nashville overview, but be advised that the song called "Beer Run" is no more interesting than it sounds.

Like all of Snider's recent albums, East Nashville Skyline is on John Prine's Oh Boy Records. If the album were by the label honcho himself I'd probably call it John Prine's fourth-best album, which is high praise. So let me just try to explain why I like this thing. For starters, Snider's one of those guys that can mumble-sing off-key and do it with soul. That's tough. (He hits the right notes often enough, too.) Also, he's not a folk-rock guy in the sense of being a folkie who occasionally hires a drummer, or a folkie who thinks that (the great) Roger McGuinn really knew how to rock and roll. He's a folk-rock guy who loves Another Side of Bob Dylan and thinks that Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis really knew how to rock and roll (duh). Snider only rocks twice on East Nashville, but when he does, it's like, Ain't no half-steppin', hoss, let's tear this shit up.

Also I love how Snider writes about too-poor-to-pay-attention, have-to-put-a-milkshake-on-layaway kinda people without turning into some lame-ass sociologist or sanctimonious do-gooder. He's an empathic realist. He really likes these characters, likes their bullshit and their beauty or whatever. And they're great characters: Mike Tyson's sweet, pathetic personal assistant; the nut who just wants to hear a goddamn train song is that too much to ask; the guy on Judge Judy who talks a mile a minute and "never had too much luck with the ladies"; plus Snider himself, a "pot smokin', porn' watchin', peace lovin', lazy-ass hippie" on the front lines versus the "gay bashin', black fearin', poor fightin', tree killin', shirt tuckin'" powers that be. At the end of the Judge Judy tune, "Incarcerated," Snider actually announces his central theme--usually a better idea in term papers than in songs--and gets away with it by spitting it out with such effortless vibrancy: "Nobody suffers like the poor people suffer, nobody suffers like the poor people suffer," he repeats, like he's swatting a snare drum more than singing. In 20 years, there'll be a different administration in office--and the poor will still be suffering. Also at that point, one hopes, Todd Snider will be an even finer wine and still be humbly asking, like Blind Alfred Reed did way back in the bad old days, "How Can a Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live?"