

TODD SNIDER

Album: *"East Nashville Skyline"*

Rating: 4 out of 5 stars

Juvenile violence, a failed suicide attempt and drug addiction are sensitive subjects most musicians avoid or limit to one track out of a 12-track disc. Todd Snider doesn't think that's necessary. In his fifth studio album, he covers those subjects and many more with a tongue-in-cheek humor that leaves the listener debating whether to laugh or cry.

Snider jumps genres as quickly as subjects, testing out '50s era rock in "Nashville," simplistic folk in the ironically depressing "Enjoy Yourself" and traditional 12-bar blues in a cover of "Good News Blues." No matter which genre he's testing out, he maintains a country twang as he delivers witty lyrical stories.

"Incarcerated," a fast-paced song clocking in at a little over two minutes, has Snider imitating Jerry Lee Lewis in vocal inflection while someone pounds a single piano chord in a panicked imitation of Lewis' famous playing style.

In "Tillamook County Jail," Snider tells a true tale of getting locked up for something he claims he didn't do, worrying his wife will refuse to bail him out. Though he sounds disheartened, the lyrics leave the impression that he finds the entire situation amusing.

A moment of serious reflection arises with a cover of Fred Eaglesmith's "Alcohol and Pills," an ode to all the musical geniuses who destroyed themselves with the two addictions after becoming famous. Snider's voice sounds both detached and melancholy as he goes through the list that includes Elvis, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix.

Snider hits a climatic high with the manic "The Ballad of the Kingsmen," a rambling reality check about the contradictory messages kids receive about materialism and becoming successful. He talks more than sings, but the words have an adamant passion behind them that makes his message effective despite the moments of humor.

In an election year in which the country remains divided, Snider proves he stands on the far left in "Conservative, Christian, Right-Wing Republican, Straight, White, American Male." He shows his contempt for conservative politicians who are "leaders of mountains of shame/looking for someone to blame" while glorifying the tree-hugging, peace-loving hippies like him.

Whether he's annoyed with the moral majority or lamenting his bad luck in jail, Snider uses his humor to cover an array of difficult subjects, leaving behind a feeling of uneasiness with his vivid story-telling.

- Leslie Flynn