

Over Yonder Jamboree The Great Gordo's Guide to Music in Asheville

By Jay Hardwig

Todd Snider

Wednesday, March 30, Grey Eagle

If you saw Todd Snider's last stop in Asheville, you saw a heckuva show. Playing his trademark mix of "gospel songs, anarchy songs, and drinking songs," the gypsy Gen-X slacker stalwart turned in a typically carefree performance that mixed shaggy-dog enthusiasm with moments of naked insight. The July 2003 concert made a believer out of me: my review in these pages talked of "truths and poignancies," calling Snider "funny... caring, critical, satirical, and humane." (With a few well-chosen keywords, you can find the review in SMN's online archives.)

If you saw Todd Snider's last stop in Asheville, you also saw a man on the fast track to self-destruction, addicted to painkillers and intent on blowin' a hole in his stomach. Long known as a fan of red wine and marijuana, Snider was already a two-time veteran of rehab, and by winter, he'd be in for a third round. In early November of 2003, complaining of severe abdominal pains, Snider went to see the doctor, who found toxic levels of drugs in his system. Snider was admitted to rehab that day, and was forced to cancel the rest of his tour. An open letter to Snider's fans, written by his wife Melita and posted to his Web site, read in part:

"As many of you know, Todd has always taken drugs and drank pretty hard. He often jokes about this. What many of you don't know is how serious this has been and how long it has gone on. Privately, Todd has talked for years of wanting to quit, so maybe this is a blessing. He is doing well and getting stronger everyday."

Six weeks later, in an interview with Todd Smith of the Americana music Web site sharkbitten.com, Snider spoke about his addiction. In a long, candid conversation — you can find it posted on the Ramblings section of toddsnider.net — the singer apologizes for his cancelled shows and reveals the depth of his addiction, a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, and a determination to stay clean and sober. He still speaks fondly of red wine and good weed, but says he can't afford those hobbies now.

"If anyone wants to do me a favor, don't give me any drugs at the show. Bring me flowers. Throw flowers on the stage — any kind."

Given that history, it's a bit of a surprise, and a bit of a triumph, that Snider was able to release a brand-new album six months later. East Nashville Skyline — complete with bouquets of daisies on the back cover and another printed on the disc itself — has been hailed as Snider's strongest

effort to date. (That may be true for studio albums, but I'm still partial to the live release *Near Truths and Hotel Rooms*.) *East Nashville Skyline* is filled with Snider's usual mix of wry observation and gentle protest, as well as an increased appetite for loud guitars. "Tillamook County Jail" recounts a little time in the pen, "The Ballad of the Kingsmen" brilliantly pairs social commentary with a little Marvin Gaye, and "Conservative, Christian, Right-Wing, Republican, Straight, White, American Males" contrasts its title characters with "tree-huggin', peace-lovin', pot-smokin', porn-watchin', lazy-ass hippies like me." The album, dark in places and bright in others, reaches its climax on the penultimate cut, "Sunshine." "Sunshine" is a small masterpiece, a harrowing song about a failed suicide attempt that somehow leaves you whistling. And that, my friends, may be the best way to describe Todd Snider: as a man who has survived a lot of pain and darkness, yet somehow leaves you whistling.

Tickets are \$15 and the show starts at 9 p.m. Call 828.232.5800 for more info.

They Said It

"It felt like I was making a decision: Do you want to be a singer, or do you want to take pills and drink whiskey? It wasn't as easy a decision as you'd think."

— *Todd Snider*, on his recovery, as quoted on his Web site