



Dark soul troubadour Snider lightens up

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When folk rocker Todd Snider performs with a band, he delivers heartfelt, back-to-the-basics rock 'n' roll - but his lyrical wit, energy and substance have to compete with his stage mates as well as his own detailed guitar playing.

But when Snider performs acoustic guitar-driven solo sets, as he did before a capacity crowd of 300 at Shank Hall Wednesday night, he's not contained by any distractions beyond his own strums.

That may be the best way to take in the Portland-bred singer-songwriter, who combines the Dylan-like depth of his on-the-road tales with Rufus Wainwright-like doses of humor, keeping the mood light and the spirit cheery.

At times, Snider's performance Wednesday featured a near-genius ability to weave detailed roots-music techniques into clever rhymes, political observations and inferences about broader human absurdities. In these moments, Snider was more a down-to-earth performance artist than a traditional musician.

Much of the material came from Snider's most recent album, "East Nashville Skyline," with some of the songs a bit more somber beside his earlier material.

"I want y'all to know that a lot of people have e-mailed me about my new album, expressing their dissatisfaction," he told the crowd. "That's all right, though - all mail is good mail, I hope."

With that, Snider broke into one of his few pointed if not outright preachy songs from his latest album, "Conservative Christian, Right-Wing Republican, Straight, White, America" - a sort of love-hate ballad in which Snider pits red state pieties against his considerable blue state conceits, such as when he labels himself "a tree-hugging, dope-smoking, porn-loving defender of liberty."

A lot of the ink on Snider depicts him as a dark soul troubadour who exorcises his demons onstage. While that may be true in moments on his latest album, Snider is too self-aware and self-deprecating to go that route in concert, and his songs - as well as his lengthy between-song tales - had Wednesday's audience alternately in awe and in hysterics.

Among his occasional serious numbers, however, was "Alcohol and Pills," from the new disc, in which he roams from his physical admiration for "Judge Judy" to a tribute to Gram Parsons and Jimi Hendrix. "Tillamook County Jail" was the closest Snider came to falling into Deathly Serious Folk Singer mode.

Milwaukee singer-songwriter Jim Hoehn opened the show with a mix of traditional to Margaritaville-style confessionals and ballads, nicely setting the mood for Snider.

Hoehn is a production coordinator for Journal Interactive, the Journal Sentinel's online division.