

NO DEPRESSION

Alanna Nash

The title of Todd Snider's sixth studio record references Bob Dylan's 1969 classic album, but with an underdog twist -- if you live on the east side of Nashville, you're probably a working-class stiff or a blue-collar artist with your eye on the prize, and not necessarily the kind they revere on Music Row.

Snider, the bipolar love child of Arlo Guthrie and James Dean, pays homage to both parents on this collection of songs cast in his usual puckish, alterna-folk-and-countrified-blues-rock mold. Guthrie's spirit hovers over every hilarious line of "The Ballad Of The Kingsmen", a cracked-voice talking blues that manages to string together "Louie, Louie", Marilyn Manson, global war, and the Motown chorus of Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On".

But it's the ghost of Dean, the "live fast, die young" anti-hero who raced a silver Porsche to glory at the age of 24, who takes center stage. And Snider, who'll turn 38 in October, seems embarrassed to have let him down. "It's too late to die young now," he laments on "Age Like Wine", the album's opener. By the time he gets to the black humor of "Sunshine", the Randy Newman-ish second-to-last cut, he's mustered the courage to stand on the ledge of a building, beer in hand, poised to jump. But somehow he can't quite do it, and breaks into a devil-may-care whistle instead.

That's good news, since Snider's tragic-comedy takes on death, suicide, doing jail time and growing old not only entertain, they make us feel better about ourselves.

What Snider and the rest of us really want to do is heal, not die. That's why Snider, who started most of these songs during his second hospitalization for a drug overdose, delivers a haunting cover of Fred Eaglesmith's "Alcohol And Pills". It's also why he blazes through a memorable rendition of Billy Joe Shaver's "Good News Blues", moving past his anger at Eddy Shaver, who fatally overdosed (and was the subject of "Waco Moon" from Snider's 2002 disc *New Connection*). And it's why he finishes this record with "Enjoy Yourself", a reminder to the pre-dead to start living.

It's a message Snider himself seems to have taken to heart, sitting at home watching a new day break over, yes, a prideful east Nashville skyline.