

Rockzillaworld

Magazine

Todd Snider

East Nashville Skyline

Oh Boy Records

By Danté Dominick

You know, it's a shame so much schlep originates in Nashville, 'cause there's a lot of great stuff emanating from the storied music city/glitz factory today. In fact, there's so much good stuff, if any other city had such a concentration of creative, hell-of-an-act musicians it would be unerringly glorified and it's name would be a badge of honor for its local musicians and bards. Instead, the NashVegas crap dominates the world's attention and we apologetically give the non-laughables the introduction, "despite being from Nashville, this is one heck of a record," or something of the like.

Well, *East Nashville Skyline*, Todd Snider's fourth for John Prine's Oh Boy Records, is one hell of a record regardless of its geographic origins.

Refreshing is a feeling that keeps sweeping over me when listening. Very rootsy/Americana "whatever that is," but wait a second. That moniker most often just doesn't apply anymore 'cause we know exactly what it is: A.) Jangly guitar riffs with a whiff of twang, driven with earthy soul and Joe Singer's gravely howl. Or, B.) Hushed, introspective lyrics of struggle and self-awareness accompanied by lush, acoustic melodies that bounce inside your brain long after the last lyric has been sung. Lord, this "alt" ride that started off so free and exciting is becoming very stylized (bordering on trite) and predictable. Ahhh, not Todd Snider. Yes, this is very refreshing.

Snider opens unaccompanied with an autobiography that lasts a minute forty seconds, "Old timer, old timer, too late to die young now. / Old timer, five-and-dimer, trying to find a way to age like wine somehow." For the record, Snider is far from old; he just seems honestly surprised he's made it intact this far.

For the following number co-producer Will Kimbrough (the other co is Snider) lends perfectly delicate guitars; a light mix of simple acoustic fingerpicking, touches of tame electric and an icing of steel sweetness. A similarly sensitive score is used effectively in support of Snider on a number of these songs. But for two of the effort's three covers Snider gets his Crazy Horse on with a grungier go at rock. Fred Eaglesmith's "Alcohol and Pills," is part lament, nostalgia, rant, and sermon on the predilection of groundbreaking musicians to wind up self-destructing. Snider next offers his best vocals on Billy Joe Shaver's "Good News Blues," thanking his lady for improving his life dramatically by finally leaving.

Alas, we've come to "The Ballad of the Kingsmen," undeniably the gem of the gems. Even public radio stations fiercely opposed to commercial radio's mind-numbing insistence on ignoring 97% of the world's songs cannot stop themselves from playing this one repeatedly. Forgive them, they're only human. This nugget is done in the talkin' blues manner over top of an almost indiscernible fingerpicked acoustic riff of "Louie Louie" that eventually discovers it shares the same chords with some Marvin Gaye song. Hell, I'm tempted to print the lyrics in their entirety, but I'm showing the restraint the deejays have avoided thus far; I mean who wants to be the guy who discloses Darth Vader is Luke's father to the unknowing chap unfamiliar with the tale?

So, in my own words: the premise starts as a joke about the inability to decipher just what the hell the exact lyrics to "Louie, Louie" are and the subsequent fervor it caused among parents and school officials who were concerned with the inevitable scenario of rock and roll destroying the unblemished souls of their darling, young children. Somewhere while smiling and laughing with Snider's goof, you'll start to notice a serious social commentary boiling to, eventually, the point of eruption.

Oh man, I'm seriously fighting like a junkie not to cave in and print the lyrics. oh no; I just transcribed the entire friggin' song (no small feat). I'm itching and twitching now. OK, compromise. To prevent spilling the beans, I'll settle by offering Snider's own commentary on his song:

I wanted to make the point that teaching kids to get as much as they can all week at public school and then sending them to some church on Sunday where some old guy goes on about how wrong it is to need so much stuff and then somehow when the kids act confused it's 'cause of Alice Cooper or somebody is silly. That's what I hope this song shows. That, and that I can memorize a lot of words. And that the Kingsmen made cool records. I also hope it inspires people to have sex with each other.

Well I'll shit in my pants right now if he didn't do it all. What's more, he's being extremely humble in how strongly he fleshes out his main idea and how strongly he drives the point home; all while rhyming and wisecracking. Kudos.

If my proclamation to poop myself hasn't convinced you this record is worth listening to, nothing will, so I might as well wrap this up.

Snider's attitude and approach has a lot to do with this song-collection's success. He writes what he lives, not necessarily what's *supposed* to make good songs, just what he knows and feels. His humor has now matured beyond cute whimsy to well-placed satire. The instrumentation, varying from spry acoustic folk, alt-grunge and boogie-woogie is always a natural fit for the particular song. Snider, Kimbrough and company provide the perfect musical frame to display the textured image each song paints with splendor.