

November 25, 2004



Todd Snider: New CD comes clean, but not squeaky

By NANCY REDWINE

When Todd Snider was writing "Conservative Christian, Right-Wing Republicans" he called KPIG station manager Laura Hopper.

"I wanted to know if she thought the lyrics were offensive to either side — right or left," said Snider, who takes the stage at the Rio Theatre Saturday night. "I'd write awhile and then I'd call

her and she'd say 'you're doin' fine,' and then I'd write some more."

According to Snider, if he'd listened to his neck of the woods — East Nashville — a song about Republicans would have most likely turned out mean-spirited.

"One thing I've always loved about Santa Cruz is the good sense of live and let live — you have a good handle on being kind to people you don't like," he said on the phone conversation from a Holiday Inn in Arizona.

Snider, who has a new CD called "East Nashville Skyline," is one of those people who's hard not to like. Not only is he fun to talk to on the phone, the guy's a born storyteller, a keen observer of human frailty and a tender humorist with an unflinching grasp on the roots of barehearted country music fed by people like Billy Joe Shaver, Robert Earl Keen, Nancy Griffith, Guy Clark and Kris Kristofferson.

As his seventh recording, "East Nashville Skyline" shows a maturation that both fans and critics are responding to. Snider himself considers it his best recording, but, he said, it was hard won. Many of the songs were wrought in a personal inferno he found himself in after the death of one of his closest friends and a drug overdose that landed him in a drug and alcohol rehab center.

"I was joking with a friend that I can't keep making records like this," he said. "The research work was too treacherous."

Perhaps we shouldn't be too amazed that the songs on "East Nashville Skyline" don't wallow. Snider has long claimed music to be his therapy in a lifelong struggle with manic-depression, substance abuse and insomnia. It may not be the cure, but Snider's music ends up making a lot of people feel better.

"I'm just trying to be honest and not precious at the same time," said Snider, who has been open about his struggles since the overdose. The guys in the first three rows of his concerts, he said, knew the whole time.

"So many times our own personal story feels like the big movie. But it's not. It's just another story."

Rich with stories, "East Nashville Skyline" was meant to be a CD about Snider's adopted neighborhood and its population of "working musicians, painters and drug dealers."

"I was trying to make a record that I wasn't in," he said. "Then I was in it quite a bit, and I realized that I really was part of the neighborhood. That's the first time I felt like that."

Every song in the collection is drawn from the personal experiences of Snider and his friends, though a couple are by songwriters like Billy Joe Shaver ("Good News Blues") and Fred Eaglesmith ("Alcohol and Pills").

The site of the song "Tillamook County Jail," for example, is on the scenic route from Portland to his mom's house.

"We don't take that route anymore when we go visit," he said. "After we got in some trouble that last time."

"Play a Train Song" is dedicated to his best friend and drinking buddy and the unofficial mayor of East Nashville Skit Litz, who died last year. Litz was known to holler at musicians from the audience "Play a train song!!!"

The chorus chugs with "I am a one-way locomotive, out of my one-track mind."

Tucked inbetween a boogie woogie tribute to Nashville and a sweet rendition of a song made famous by Louis Prima, "Enjoy Yourself," is a jewel that cuts closer to Snider's experience than any other.

"Sunshine" is a quietly sad story with a upbeat and pretty melody about a man perched on the edge of a building about to jump.

"It was a real personal metaphor for how I felt," Snider said. "And it was a song that I started back when I was numb and high and then finished it sober after my drug incident."

The song takes an unexpected turn halfway through when St. Peter takes the business of suicide into his own angelic hands and the narrator wakes up in a recovery room.

Fortunately for us all, Snider seems to be waking up a stronger person and a more focused musician. If you only listen to one Snider CD, go for this one. And on Saturday don't miss the opportunity to hear a musician who loves Santa Cruz as much as he is loved here.

"I often come up with a bunch of songs there," Snider said. "And this time I'm going to try and make it to the Boardwalk."