



## Todd Snider - *East Nashville Skyline*

Oh Boy Records  
4 stars

### *Stunning doesn't begin to describe it*

You don't want to know what Todd Snider has been up to.

At least you don't want to go through it. It's been a case of the Cobains — with searing stomach pain and drug rehab — plus the deaths of some close companions, an arrest . . . stuff like that.

And now his new album is on store shelves, and Snider is calling it "a comedy record about a guy who can't even kill himself." Sounds like anything but, as he sings in *The Ballad of the Kingsmen*, "the feel-good hit of this endless summer." The thing is, I've waited a couple of extra weeks to write about it, because I keep waiting for it to turn on me. I keep waiting for it to finally reveal itself as something that's not unbelievably, undeniably stunning.

It *is* stunning, though. More so with repeated listening. Snider used to specialize in cute songs — some would say "novelty" songs — that were good for a chuckle but not always good for the long haul. Now, "cute" carries a switchblade, and there are songs on *East Nashville Skyline* that are on the level with John Prine doing *Souvenirs* or *That's the Way the World Goes 'Round*; or Dylan doing *Boots of Spanish Leather*; or Kris Kristofferson doing *To Beat the Devil*; or Tom T. Hall doing *Turn It On, Turn It On, Turn It On*; or Guy Clark doing *Instant Coffee Blues*; or David Olney doing *1917*; or Eric Taylor doing *All the Way to Heaven*.

I cannot offer a higher recommendation of an Americana singer-songwriter than that. On the level with those things, yet not particularly derivative of any of them, this album signals Snider's ascension from "this guy's fun and smart and cool" to "this guy has what it takes to stand up straight and proud in a room filled with the living kingpins of dust-bitten, literate, highly-evolved contemporary American songwriting."

Does that mean Todd Snider is all of a sudden as good as Bob Dylan? Naw. Let him stick around and do what he's doing for another quarter century, and then we can talk about all of that. For now, we can shut up and listen to Snider's first great work: this rough-hewn, strained, muddy gem of an album.

"My new stuff is nothing like my old stuff was/ And neither one is much compared to the show," he sings in the supposedly autobiographical, album-opening *Age Like Wine*. That's probably the only lie here, as Snider goes on to look unflinchingly (but never without a practiced, wry distance) at incarceration and death and paranoia and suicide. I know, it seems like that would make for a bummer of a listen, but Snider is like a classic *M.A.S.H.* episode: he's funny enough to loosen you up, and the laughter just makes the ensuing drama hit even harder.

*The Ballad of the Kingsmen* is but one example. The song starts by documenting the political furor that erupted over the hard-to-decipher *Louie Louie* lyrics, then shifting that discussion to Marilyn Manson and other supposedly culture-damaging elements of popular art. Snider's notion is that what messes up kids' heads isn't their music, but a conflicting, war vs. meek-shall-inherit, free-market vs. love-thy-neighbor upbringing that can make the world harder to understand than *Louie Louie*'s garbled verses. "The next time some latchkey kid goes wrong/ It ain't gonna be because Eminem gets to say the word (expletive) in his song," he advises.

Snider's writing is well-crafted enough that the album never feels like a rant. The subject of *Play a Train Song* (Snider's dearly departed pal, Skip Litz) is "a runaway locomotive/ Out of his one-track mind," while the narrator in *Sunshine* wakes after a failed suicide to a brighter outlook and promises to be out "walking souls into the holes of my shoes."

Recorded in east Nashville at Eric McConnell's studio (the same one where Loretta Lynn and Jack White made their recent album), *East Nashville Skyline* was co-produced by Snider and Will Kimbrough in a blurry, scratchy, rock-informed manner. Snider's voice often breaks, and there's a wrecked growl to his singing that no one attempted to fix in the mix. All the better. Kimbrough plays killer guitar throughout, and the songs end up stringing together into something like a storyline.

There are enough layers here that a full explication would require a term paper, not a review. Bottom line: somebody had better pay attention to this one.

*Peter Cooper, Staff Writer*