



Play A Todd Song

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Music is a big part of my life, especially going to see it live. It's how I like to spend most of my free time and money. But rarely does a new artist win me over instantly. And when it happens completely out of the blue, it's an amazing experience.

So it was with Todd Snider. I went to see John Prine at The Alabama Theater several years ago, and what a show he put on! But just like Prine's music always has, the opening act — the bare-foot guy telling stories, singing and playing harmonica — reached out and touched my funny bone, my heart and my soul.

A predominately autobiographical songwriter who is also a brilliant storyteller, Todd Snider is one of the most entertaining artists out there today. I see him every chance I get. This next one will make about eight shows now; every one is different, but they're all great. Thanks to my friend Tommy Womack — who opened for Todd at his last show at The Crossroads and plays bass in his band, The Nervous Wrecks — I was able to speak to Todd briefly about his upcoming show here in Huntsville. He's appearing October 23 at The Crossroads and will be playing solo this time.

Todd has made his home on John Prine's Oh Boy Records label since his fantastic 2000 release *Happy to Be Here*. After 10 years and seven albums, he said in an interview with the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, "I love it that I made 10 years — and lived." And at 37, he already considers himself "too old to die young now." His latest album, *East Nashville Skyline*, was just released, and it strikes me as a soul-searching journey through hard days and nights, love, laughter and tears.

From the first song, "Age Like Wine," you sense Todd's ability to mix comedy and tragedy, one of his greatest gifts as a songwriter. From his liner notes: "For those of you who know me and those of you who don't, this is a good introduction of who I am, what I been through and where I hope I'm going ... you know ... my life story ... it lasts a minute and twenty seconds."

"Tillamook County Jail" follows, the chorus beginning "One phone call, two Tylenol, four cold, gray walls closing in." Will Kimbrough, who co-produced the album with Todd, plays acoustic and electric guitar and provides some excellent harmony vocals as well. Some of you who hung out at the Tip Top in its glory days will remember him from Will & The Bushmen. He received the much-deserved "Instrumentalist of the Year" award from the Americana Music Association in Nashville last month.

Third is "Play A Train Song," an ode to Skip Litz, who I had the pleasure of meeting when Todd

played at the Kaffeeklatsch last year. It's my favorite song on the album, a tribute to a man who lived hard and fast, died suddenly and happy, and did exactly what he wanted to do. What more can you ask for in this life? Skip was considered the Mayor of East Nashville and is greatly missed.

"Alcohol and Pills" is next, a Fred Eaglesmith song about fame and addiction and Elvis and Hank Sr. and long years, I guess.

"Good New Blues," by Billy Joe Shaver, is a song that Todd says cheers him up. From the liner notes: "I think Billy Joe may be some sort of prophet or something ... this is one of his blues songs ... he kept me from getting shot at the Idle Hour one afternoon, and I figured this was the least I could do. A cut on one of my albums should make him dozens of dollars."

"The Ballad of the Kingsmen" tells of a band from Todd's hometown of Portland, Ore. Todd says it shows that he can memorize a lot of words and that the Kingsmen made cool records. He also hopes it inspires people to have sex with each other.

"Iron Mike's Main Man's Last Request" is about Mike Tyson. Todd says he loves to watch him fight.

"Conservative, Christian, Right-wing Republican, Straight, White, American Males" pretty much speaks for itself. And if you're a tree-huggin', peace-lovin', lazy-ass hippie like me, you're gonna love it.

"Incarcerated" sprang from a "Judge Judy" episode and is a fast-moving, funny song.

The next song, "Nashville," defends Todd's territory in style, with some great piano playing from John Deadrick and Craig Wright, and a tip of the hat to Jason D. Williams.

Of the next cut, "Sunshine," Todd says: "This is a song about a guy who tries to kill himself and blows it. I know a lot of people trying to kill themselves and blowing it ... I know a lot of people. My favorite line is 'walking holes into the soles of my shoes' ... my favorite idea is that you can do it."

The album ends with "Enjoy Yourself," a 50-plus-year-old song that Todd's executive producer, Al Bunetta, sang to him during a particularly hard time in Todd's life, and he says he never got it out of his head. It's a great song, and it sounds to me like Will inhaled helium on some of the harmony vocals.

Todd ends the liner notes by saying: "Well that's the songs. If you like it, try to tell a friend about it. If you hate it, try to keep it to yourself."

I've told just about all my friends already, so now I'm telling all of you. Hope to see you at the show, and I hope Todd brings plenty of CDs with him.

For more information, go to ohboy.com or toddsnider.net, where you can get a bumper sticker and register to win Todd's guitar as a benefit for his old friend Kent Finlay.

Jennie Mitchell is a graphic designer at Marshall Space Flight Center when she's not out somewhere listening to live music.