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Todd Snider's "East Nashville Skyline"

On liquor, rooftops and Lil Wayne's nickname for him

By Rick Cornell

"Our skyline, it ain't very high, but we love it. It says 'Discount Cigarettes, Liquor and Wine.' I think our neighborhood is a lot like our skyline. We've got great news, and we're shouting it from the highest rooftop we got." So ends "From a Rooftop," a spoken word piece by Todd Snider that appears on a compilation titled *The Other Side: Music from East Nashville* and the Snider odds & ends collection *Peace, Love and Anarchy (Rarities, B-Sides and Demos, Vol. 1)*.

Snider also visits his East Nashville neighborhood and its skyline in the more conventional—at least by his standards—"East Nashville Skyline," which precedes "From a Rooftop" on *Peace, Love and Anarchy*. "East Nashville Skyline," however, whispers its news instead of shouting, and it has a beautiful and hopeless way of going about it.



Actually, the first time I heard "East Nashville Skyline," at the inaugural Mucklewain Festival two Augusts ago, the word that first came to mind was mysterious. When Snider reached the chorus, my friend Mike and I both wore puzzled looks and simultaneously said, "Where'd this come from? It's not on the *East Nashville Skyline* record?"

I had the chance to ask Snider where it came from, and in doing so I learned that he answers questions in the same flashflood-of-consciousness style in which he writes: wondering and wandering, occasionally off-point but still somehow on target.

INDEPENDENT WEEKLY: *When was "East Nashville Skyline" written? If it was before East Nashville Skyline, why didn't it make it on that record?*

TODD SNIDER: I made that up while we were recording *East Nashville Skyline*, but the lyrics of the third verse ("so much for money/so much for big, etc.") were different, and I didn't like them. So I threw the song out. But then one night after the album was out, the new lines hit me. So I thought, 'Fuck it, I'll cut it just for the sake of completion.'

Then we almost put it on *The Devil You Know*, thinking it might be funny to have a song named after my last album. Trying this, I learned that you can't just cross-pollinate songs like that if you're a label-switcher like me. So in the end, I was just glad this little song found a place to sit.

Can you tell us more about some of the places and things that you mention in the song: the Slow Bar, Phoenix Radio, the Radio Cafe?

The Slow Bar is now the Three Crow bar, and is still cool if you ask me. The Phoenix is gone. The Radio is gone. But East Nashville is better now. We have a weenery now, and a Tomato Festival. Or tomaaato, as some say. And a cool brass-grass band called Ball Hog. Rhonda and Jonda playing at the Lipstick. Not to mention The Family Wash or The Alley Cat.

I'm reading Marshall Chapman's memoir Goodbye, Little Rock and Roller, and in it she talks about her Nashville neighborhood of the early '70s, describing it this way: "Our neighborhood was an eclectic mix of students, hippies and young professionals with young children, musicians, bemused older couples, and even some Hell's Angels. Because we knew our time together was limited—the specter of the wrecking ball hanging over us all—there was this neighborhood spirit that was unlike anything I've experienced before or since." When I first read that, I immediately thought of "East Nashville Skyline." Am I right in thinking there are similarities between Ms. Chapman's old neighborhood and yours?

I was on the road with Marshall and she pulled over into a McMansion driveway, took off her clothes and jumped in the pool. She said she could tell nobody was home somehow.

I don't want to mess with the image too much, but can you give us more detail on the "Discount Cigarettes, Liquor and Wine" sign that dominates your East Nashville skyline? Color, vintage, whatever?

There's more than one. A handful really. Lots of liquor stores. Mine is Main Street Liquor. They play country radio and cash people's paychecks, which I think makes the parking lot interesting.

It must have been incredible having legendary pedal steel player Lloyd Green play on "East Nashville Skyline." Can you talk about that experience? And I bet he has some stories.

My favorite story he tells is of making the Charley Pride live album. He played on my album cuz he was a friend of Peter Cooper's. Now he's a friend of mine. He came and picked at our Fourth of July party. The song "East Nashville Skylin'" was cut totally live, tipsy and late at night, and I remember our producer/engineer/leader Eric getting in trouble with his girlfriend that night. Big trouble. It was about 20 minutes after we cut this that chaos erupted, and we all fled.

On Peace, Love and Anarchy, "East Nashville Skyline" is followed by "From a Rooftop," and the songs obviously belong back to back. I think of the former as a movie and the latter as a documentary. Can you talk about the relationship between those two songs?

I didn't do that ["From a Rooftop"] 'til a year later when my buddy Eric Brace of the band Last Train Home set out to do an East Nashville compilation album, which is where this poem first appeared. I just made a bunch of notes about our neighborhood and picked shit at random as I finger-picked the chords to the song "East Nashville Skyline." The riff is actually lifted. Not the music riff, but the old finger-pick-and-read-a-poem riff. I got it from Jerry Jeff Walker's *A Man Must Carry On* album where Hondo Croch reads a poem about Luckenbach that I think is way better than the one I did about East Nashville.

Speaking of rooftops, can you tell us about your famous rooftop bar?

It's pretty simple. Seats four and then has a four-top table too. We didn't open at all last summer for security reasons that have since been ironed out. Next summer will be big. There's a code and light signals we use now. There will be no more crazies, no more police. The leak has been fixed.

You give "East Nashville Skyline" one of your loveliest melodies to date. You truly love that place, don't you?

It's just business. Synergy. I have a record coming out and bars where I hang out, so I just mention these bars here and there on the records, and it adds up to about 50 bucks in free drinks a year. I'm like the P Diddy of the folk-rock-country funk-gospel-blues-comedy circuit. And by that I mean I'm about the papers. You know, I met Lil Wayne in a bar one night. He calls me Rolling Papers. That's cuz i was the only white guy at the party.

Todd Snider plays The Pour House Sunday, Nov. 18. Tickets are \$15, and the show starts at 8 p.m.

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