

'Good News Blues': Snider's latest earns critical, fan acclaim

By John Lamb, The Forum

He's heard it before and he knows he'll hear it again.

With every album since his 1994 debut, "Songs for the Daily Planet," Todd Snider has heard the same comment from fans: "It's OK, but the last one was better."

The singer/songwriter wastes little time addressing the issue on his latest release, last summer's "East Nashville Skyline." The disc opens with "Age Like Wine," a two-minute bio including the passage, "My new stuff is nothing like my old stuff was/And neither one is much when compared to the show/Which will not be as good as some other one you saw, so tell me again ..."

The tide is changing for Snider, as both his fans and critics have gobbled up "East Nashville Skyline." The Fargo audience can judge for itself when the singer takes the stage Sunday night at the House of Rock.

"I was kind of saying in the song, I don't know if I've met them yet, but there will be somebody who comes up who doesn't like that record," the 38-year-old says from his East Nashville home. "I was almost thinking of REM, or the perpetual, 'Do you like so-and-so?' 'Well, I like their old stuff.' It's a real common thing to hear."

Snider admits he hasn't heard it so far this time around. In fact, what he's heard has been very favorable, even for a critic's darling with a rabid cult following.

"This record has done a lot better than I usually do," he says with a slight Southern drawl. "I never ask how much they sell or anything, I just know that everybody is real happy."

In a review for The Tennessean, Pete Cooper called the disc "stunning" and compared the tormented lyrics to Kurt Cobain.

"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."

"Cute" also travels with a bottle, a syringe and a stash of narcotics. While Snider's warm smile and kind face convey a childlike innocence, his songs embrace the darker side of life - a life often sidetracked by drugs.

"East Nashville Skyline" isn't the musical postcard the Music City Chamber of Commerce would send out. It's more a companion piece to Steve Earle's own ode to his former sin city, "South Nashville Blues."



Though critics compare him to Bob Dylan, Snider puts himself closer to singer/songwriters Randy Newman and John Prine, whose label, "Oh Boy Records," released "Skyline."

"South Nashville is still where you go from here if you want to get some serious drugs. This part of town is more musicians and not quite as poor as over there, but we're sure not rich over here," Snider says. "It feels like every town I go to has a midtown, all these houses with wood floors and book stores and that's the part of Nashville I found. I always like to try and find that part of town."

Snider has bumped around music scenes, from Houston to Portland, Ore., Austin, Texas, and Memphis, Tenn., often running into the same scenes that both spark his creativity and threaten to burn him out.

In East Nashville the singer hooked up with Skip Litz, a scenester and unofficial mayor of Music City. When Litz died, Snider went into a drug-induced tailspin, the highs and lows of which are spelled out on "Skyline." From the sprightly and suicidal "Sunshine" to covers of Billy Joe Shaver's "Good News Blues" and Fred Eaglesmith's elegy for fallen stars, "Alcohol and Pills," Snider openly addresses his demons with disarming honesty.

"Last year I just really battled it out with drinking and pills. I'm pretty nonchalant about it. I hate to sound flippant but I guess I am," Snider says. "I don't want to go in an ambulance again, so I'm just not going to do this again."

So far, so good, he says. The album even reflects his recent good fortune, ending on the positive note, "Enjoy Yourself."

While he's trying to stay on the straight and narrow, Snider has no desire to lecture on temperance or any other virtues.

"I wouldn't react really well to (that)," he says. "I'm not someone who gives people advice or someone who thinks there really necessarily is a way to have a better life than someone else. I think that's a bit of an illusion. I'm pretty accepting of my lot."

He takes on proselytizers with the musically rambling, "Conservative Christian, Right-Wing Republican, Straight, White, American Males."

When asked what he would say if he found himself face to face with President George W. Bush, Snider stands down, saying it would be a shame if the President had to spend time with a "folk singing hippie like me."

"I like the guy, but I don't understand what his problem with gay people is," Snider says. "I understand people who are into the Bible, because I'm into it too, but my main disagreement with that guy is trying to make people be that way."

So what would he say?

"I'd probably just ask him what bands he likes and try to give him a break."

To which Bush would probably answer REM, but only the group's earliest albums.

Or probably not.

Readers can reach Forum reporter John Lamb at (701) 241-5533

If you go

What: Todd Snider

When: 9 p.m. Sunday

Where: House of Rock, Playmakers, Fargo

Tickets: Tickets range from \$8 to \$15 for this 21 and older show. (701) 232-6767