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by Rick Clark  
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During the past couple of years, I've covered Music Row, Cool Springs, Franklin, Leiper's Fork and other places, but I've never addressed a state of mind called East Nashville. So this and next month, I'm catching up on a place that is vital and producing work that really matters: my neighborhood.

East Nashville inspires a lot of extreme reactions from locals. Depending on whom you talk to, it is either the coolest shamble of Victorians, bungalows and Section 8 housing populated by all sorts of artisans and bohemians, or it's a possibly dangerous place with druggies, knuckle-dragging ne'r-do-wells and a few idealistic liberals with no common sense thrown in for good measure.

I haven't been held up at gunpoint since I lived in my Memphis hometown. That East Nashville reminded me of home was more due to the vibe-y cultural mix and that most of my Memphis buddies moved here than the attraction to living dangerously.

There are at least two dozen musicians, songwriters and artists and four active home studios on my street alone. Expanded to the whole neighborhood, I would probably have a few hundred creative types and a few dozen respectable recording enterprises. The legendary Woodland Studios building a few blocks away might as well be a home studio: It is now owned by Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings and used for their projects.

Creativity is everywhere here and people are making music and putting it out. Even the guy who mows my yard has an album out and it's good stuff. A different guy who mows my music producer neighbor's yard has an album on the Americana charts. My next-door neighbor, Mark "Sergio" Webb, is a fine guitarist and songwriter who plays the Grand Ole Opry periodically and has toured everywhere — when he's not working on his house. All sorts of characters (like Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris' larger-than-life road manager Phil "Mangler" Kaufman) drop by and stay. Recently, Webb rounded up engineer Thomm Jutz to cut music for a solo project. He called me to play bass in a rhythm section that included former Waterboys and Nanci Griffith drummer Fran Breen. It was a great time.

A few blocks from my house is Eric McConnell's place. McConnell's a fine musician and people come to his home studio because they like the way he records music. McConnell likes his 1-inch 8-track analog Otari machine and a Sound Workshop Series 30-X console, and so does White Stripes' Jack White, who produced Loretta Lynn's new album, Van Lear Rose.

“Jack was a hard-working guy,” says McConnell. “The band and the drummer were great. We worked for around 10 days here and then I brought my 8-track to Memphis and we mixed it at Easley Recording.”

McConnell was also working with Brandon Henegar on mixes for Tony Joe White's next album, *Heroines*, which features duets with Emmylou Harris, Jesse Colter, Lucinda Williams, Shelby Lynne and Michelle White. It was classic, earthy White stuff.

Recently, Greg Garing cut an album live at McConnell's studio. “It's great,” says McConnell. “We didn't use headphones and he had a great band.”

Any idiosyncratic neighborhood worth its salt has got to have its characters, and Skip Litz, who ran sound at the Radio Café before he passed away last summer, was one of East Nashville's best. The Radio Café featured some of the finest talent to grace Nashville, and Litz, in many ways, was its soul and the personification of this neighborhood's great heart. Besides exhibiting a generosity of spirit, he was a funny guy. A show at the Radio Café, or any place for that matter, wasn't complete without Litz bellowing out, “Play a f\*\*\*in' train song!” Performers would often oblige, and those who didn't have one learned or wrote one for him. He was known everywhere for that: Even a bartender at the Radio sported a tattoo with a representation of Litz uttering his request.

I talked about Litz with Todd Snider, a songwriter and artist who I've known since we both lived in Memphis years ago. “Skip was my last tour manager and it was the last six months of his life. He had a ball,” says Snider. “He was funny and I loved him. He is how everybody knows everybody in the neighborhood.”

Snider paid tribute to Litz with a song he wrote called “Play Another Train Song,” which is coming out on his upcoming album, fittingly entitled *East Nashville Skyline*. It was produced by journeyman singer/songwriter and ace guitarist Will Kimbrough. The album, as with Snider's last few, is coming out on John Prine's *Oh Boy* record label.

McConnell notes with a laugh, “When Todd Snider's manager called, he said, ‘Todd wants to record at your place 'cause it's close to his house.’ The reason we got Brandon [Henegar] here is 'cause he lives two blocks away.”

“If I oversleep, they can come get me,” says Henegar, who also has a studio and plays in a hard pop/rock band called *The Taste*, whose music has been licensed to MTV for a couple of shows.

Among the songs on the album are Snider's “Age Like Wine” (an ode to survival), the acerbic “Conservative Christian Right Wing Republican Straight White American Male” (a waltz), Fred Eaglesmith's “Alcohol and Pills” and Billy Joe Shaver's “Good News Blues.”

“All of the songs on the album are about me or my neighborhood,” Snider says. “It's kind of about being a musician on the side of town that isn't rich and isn't really concerned with it. I love that about this place. Billy Joe Shaver would live here if he lived in Nashville.”

When I asked McConnell about Snider's album, he said, "Todd's record is very cool, laid-back and raw. Then again, everything we do here is a little raw." And so is East Nashville.