

Pitchfork Media

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Todd Snider

East Nashville Skyline

[Oh Boy; 2004]

Rating: 8.0



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Todd Snider is doing my job for me: on "Age Like Wine", the lead track on his seventh album, *East Nashville Skyline*, the Oregon-born, Tennessee-bred journeyman gives a little background on himself, explaining that this album follows "seven managers, five labels, a thousand picks and patch cables, three vans, a band, a buncha guitar stands, and cans and cans and cans of beer, and bottles of booze, and bags of pot, and a thousand other things I forgot." Perhaps knowing, or hoping, he'll have new listeners, he even offers an early caveat: "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." That makes any introduction I could write for him useless and redundant. Suffice it to say, Snider has released the wittiest and feistiest album of his career, one that distills the wit, melody, and bristly songwriting of his previous albums into a dozen concentrated songs bolstered by a rowdy backing band that includes long-time cohort Will Kimbrough.

As the self-assessing "Age Like Wine" suggests, Snider has been in the music business for so long that it's about all he knows: almost every song on *East Nashville Skyline* is about some other song or some other singer. While this might limit some artists' scope, Snider has thrived on commenting on the music industry-- it was the satirical "Talkin' Seattle Grunge Rock Blues" that stood out on his 1994 debut *Songs for the Daily Planet*. "Play a Train Song"-- which is set at some beer joint, ostensibly during one of Snider's show-- presents a character sketch about "the unofficial mayor of East Nashville," a hard-living guy who buys into the romance of country music: "Play a train song," he shouts at the band, "Pour me one more round/ Make 'em leave my boots on when they lay me in the ground."

"The Ballad of the Kingsmen" connects the FBI's investigation of the Kingsmen's garbled "Louie Louie" to Marilyn Manson's numerous controversies, all of which now seem quaint. The Manson reference is a little dated, but not as much as The Kingsmen, and damned if the Columbine reference doesn't have the force of a gut punch as Snider describes the folly of blaming musicians for such atrocities. He insists he's not preaching, though, and ends the ballad by singing "Let's Get It On"-- a pitch-perfect punchline on several levels.

As "The Ballad of the Kingsmen" makes clear, Snider's songs can be surprisingly complex, doubling back on themselves to deepen and complicate their meanings. "Nashville" purports to defend the city against its detractors, but the song rolls along on Craig Wright's Memphis boogie piano and extols the virtues of Texas country music and Bluff City piano player Jason D. Williams. But "there ain't nothin' wrong with Nashville," Snider sings, "that we can't fix in the mix." Similarly dodgy, the timely "Conservative Christian, Right Wing Republican, Straight, White, American Males" (that title just sings itself) isn't just about how those extremists blame "tree-huggin', peace-lovin', pot-smokin', porn-watchin' lazyass hippies like me" for the country's problems. Instead, Snider's point is that both sides settle for easy answers to complex problems, finding their solution in pointless blame-placing and muckraking. And Snider has a laugh making his point.

Snider's closing cover of "Enjoy Yourself" seems to sum up the most valuable lesson he's learned in his long career-- and, fittingly, it's tempered with a little grim humor: "Enjoy yourself/ It's later than you think." Even though he's not going to die

young, Snider knows he's still going to die. In the meantime, he's looking forward to all those "cans and cans and cans of beer, and bottles of booze, and bags of pot."

-Stephen M. Deusner, December 15th, 2004