



**“Chief Justice Willie Nelson”
Has a Lovely Ring to It**

**A Dispatch From the Sports Desk
By Bryan A. Hollerbach**

The press kit to Todd Snider’s new disc features accolades from Kris Kristofferson, who likens him to John Prine, from Prine himself, who likens Snider to Steve Goodman, and from Billy Joe Shaver, who likens Snider to...well...Billy Joe Shaver. Those disinclined to believe a trio of the finest songwriters of the past three or four decades should by all means avoid **Off Broadway** this **Thursday, December 2**. The rest of us, meanwhile, should by all rights pack the Lemp Avenue odeum that night to attend the release party for *East Nashville Skyline*—it’s a breathtaking CD, and Snider should give a breathtaking performance.

In photos, the singer/songwriter in question often appears barefoot (he reportedly takes the stage likewise) and radiates a slacker charisma the average Music Row himbo would kill to have—he’s all five-o’clock shadow and shit-eatin’ grin. File that observation under “Books and Covers”:
Snider, in his music, strikes with the deceptive force of Thomas Carlyle’s iron hand in a velvet glove, leavening with a laconic presentation and easy humor lyrics by no means laconic or easy. Of the 12 tracks on *East Nashville Skyline*, from Nashville’s Oh Boy Records, three-quarters come from Snider himself. (“Alcohol and Pills” from Fred Eaglesmith, “Good News Blues” from Shaver, and the closer, incongruously but enjoyably, “Enjoy Yourself” from Herbert Magidson and Carl Sigman constitute the other quarter.) Listeners who relish those nine tracks in particular should likely do so while they can; if Snider strikes with an iron hand, he definitely leads with his left, so in George W. Bush’s America, some sort of latter-day HUAC summons and censure undoubtedly await him.

Given Snider’s dreadful clarity of vision, in fact, Vice President Cheney should probably just dispense with the formalities and task a black-ops squad to dispatch him, at least as soon as all available personnel have dealt with that secessionist Springsteen, that little slut Maines, and all of those other klieg-lit commies. Snider’s obviously been thinking doubleplusungood thoughts. As he confesses in the liner notes to his new disc, his seventh, its title and his viewpoint in general derive

from East Nashville, his current home, “the part of town people leave so their kids won’t have to go to shitty schools.” Even among local liberals, that line should resonate with any St. Louisan who’s ever crossed the Poplar Street Bridge to Carl Officer’s fiefdom. “We’ve kinda given up on the vice president position over at work,” Snider adds directly. “We just pray for work.”

Beyond such shameless liberal piffle, just the title to the eighth track on *East Nashville Skyline* likely guarantees Snider a protracted investigation from the Department of Justice and 23 other federal agencies: “Conservative, Christian, Right-Wing Republican, Straight, White, American Males.” In the liner notes to that song—a social critique so lazily hilarious it would make Karl Rove’s head explode if ever Rove listened to anything but “*Das Horst Wessel Lied*”—Snider writes, among other things, “I think Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan should be on the Supreme Court.” In that regard, he may actually need attention before Springsteen and Maines.

Even a less provocatively titled track like “The Ballad of the Kingsmen” suggests the degree to which Snider deserves a visit to Room 101; that song opens with a brief history of the Portland band who scandalized the nation in 1963 with “Louie Louie,” thereafter argues (persuasively) that Marilyn Manson doesn’t warrant unequivocal scorn, and then really kicks into overdrive. On “Sunshine,” meanwhile, Snider focuses on a failed suicide and a vision of St. Peter at once benevolent and bad to the bone—a singularly unlikely song, it nevertheless works, in a singularly unlikely fashion. Otherwise, regarding the uproarious, propulsive “Incarcerated,” Snider’s liner note tells the tale: “I did this song one afternoon in the hotel room trying to keep up with the guy’s explanations on *Judge Judy* about how whatever happened did.”

The most memorable number on the disc, though, elegizes a friend of Snider’s whose death reportedly inspired *East Nashville Skyline*. With electric guitar and background vocals from Will Kimbrough (who co-produced the disc with Snider and who’s scheduled to visit Off Broadway with him) and locomotive percussion from Eric McConnell (who also provides bass and steel guitar here), “Play a Train Song” celebrates that friend’s bravado and brio in a heartbreaking combination of pain and love. “And though I tried with all of my sadness,” Snider sings, “somehow I just could not weep for a man who looked to me like he died laughing in his sleep.” Each of us, frankly, should rank not only so true a friend, but also a friend able to pen so wrenching a tribute. It’s golden.

In short, *East Nashville Skyline* should sit amicably in the same rack as the 1969 Dylan release whose title it echoes. Other echoes exist. Toward the end of “Age Like Wine,” the disc’s opener, Snider catalogs the life of a troubadour, for instance. That scarcely qualifies as innovative, naturally: “Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re just a singer in a rock ’n’ roll band, and I’m a newbie with the MSD—my heart bleeds for ya, pal, when I’m wading through raw sewage.” Snider’s catalog, though, approaches the Dylanesque: “I’ve been through 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’ve forgot—I thought that I’d be dead by now.” He pauses then, for less than a heartbeat, before adding, gently but tellingly, “But I’m not.”