

## Todd Snider/Oh Boy bio

Todd Snider's *East Nashville Skyline* is shock therapy. It's a collection of bold, sometimes unsettling, often funny songs about death, suicide, going to jail and growing old. Mostly, it's a bunch of heartfelt tunes written and recorded in response to the death of Todd's friend Skip Litz, an engineer and musician known as the unofficial mayor of East Nashville, where Todd lives with his wife Melita. They're the kind of songs that make you laugh while hitting you in the gut. They're about laughing in the dark while looking for the light.

Journalist Michael McCall, a fellow East Nashvillian, sat with Todd at a bar on the nicely shaded second-story porch of the Snider home. The sun was shining, a soft breeze was blowing, dogs were barking, and lawns were being mowed. Melita graciously poured the wine as they talked.

Q: We're here in East Nashville, so the album title is a good place to start. Why *East Nashville Skyline*?

TS: We cut the album in East Nashville at Eric McConnell's studio. It's an amazing place – it's where Loretta Lynn cut her album with Jack White. Will Kimbrough came up with the title. We were sitting on the porch one day, and I said I wanted to come up with a title as good as Dylan's *Nashville Skyline*. Only I wanted it to be about East Nashville, something like *East Nashville Skyline*. So Will said, 'Well, why not that – why not call it *East Nashville Skyline*. I said, 'Good idea!'

Q: What is it that makes people who live on the eastside proud of it?

TS: Part of it is the whole underdog mentality. It's not the part of town people come to unless they live here. But it's got all these artists and songwriters and painters and musicians and other funky types, and it's mostly the kind of musicians who don't really care about what's happening on Music Row. They respect that stuff, I respect that stuff, but we're not a part of it. It's not what we do. We don't talk about publishers and charts and who's cutting what kind of songs. We just talk about what kind of songs turn us on. East Nashville is as different as night and day from Music Row, but nobody outside of Nashville knows that. Everyone thinks Nashville is one thing. Nothing against that thing or any thing, but people in East Nashville know that more goes on here than commercial country music. We respect those guys, but we're doing our own thing over here.

Q: You have a song that's a tribute of sorts to Nashville. Why?

TS: People who don't live in Nashville think that we sell more starch in our community than any community in America. And we don't. Country music over the years has gotten the reputation of being exclusively about being successful. I don't believe that's true. In fact, I even think that commercial country music is about to be something that I'm going to enjoy. I think it's not long before some kid comes along doing Tim Carroll songs and Tommy Womack songs. I'm a country music fan.

Q: Have you played the song in Texas or other places where Nashville is sometimes looked down upon?

TS: No, I have not! (laughs) I don't know what's going to happen. That's a fight I haven't gotten drunk enough to pick yet. But I will. I will. And Jack Ingram and Jason D. Williams, who I mention in the song, those are two of my favorite entertainers in the whole world. I love both of those guys. They're great. And they're living in the two towns I moved away from – Austin and Memphis. I still love those towns. But mostly I just think if you're putting a town down or putting somebody down, well, that makes me want to poke you a little bit.

Q: Talk about the song 'Age Like Wine,' since it opens the album?

TS: I was going to put it as a hidden track, but my friend Will Kimbrough said, 'Put that first.' When I recorded that, and I sang, 'I thought that I'd be dead by now, but I'm not.' I was going to sing the chorus, but at the moment I sang that, I said, 'That's it.' Everybody looked at me and said, 'You didn't sing the chorus.' And I said, 'I know, I thought it would be better not to.' So that's why it ends that way. And I did think I would be dead by now. I thought that I'd be way dead by now. I'm not trying to be dramatic, but that was the plan. I fucked up.

Q: It includes a comment about how people always tell artists that their new songs aren't as good as their old ones.

TS: I hear that. Don't think I don't hear it. I can hear the bathrooms through the dressing room wall. I think most people hear that. Your new stuff isn't as good as your old stuff. Your new show isn't as good as the last show. You get used to it. I have a friend in California who says, 'It's like surfing. You choose the day, you choose the board, you choose the beach, you choose everything, but you control none of it.' That's how I look at the singing and writing songs part. You catch a wave, and you hope for the best. But if you don't like crashing too, you should quit.

Q: You have to be around for a while for people to start talking about you in those terms.

TS: I have been around a while now. I'm proud to have made it this far. I'm still here. I still do good, and I still tour my ass off and sell out rooms that people who had hits in my time can't play anymore. I can still sell out rooms where people told me to my face that I was a nobody. I still sell out rooms that, if you look at the list of acts playing there, everybody on there is played on the radio or is in *Rolling Stone* or *Spin* except for me. But I'll sell those rooms out. That makes me feel good.

Q: That's been true of a small group of artists over the years, and those are probably the same artists that you like.

TS: That's true. My heroes have always been people who have been secrets. Jerry Jeff Walker is this great American secret. John Prine is this great American secret. Not to me, but to a lot of people. I heard someone ask John if it bothered him that he never made it, and I about imploded. I was ready to jump off the roof.

Q: Joe Ely once told me that early in his career it had bothered him that he didn't have greater success, but he came to think it was the best thing to be on the level he was, that it gave him more freedom. A big hit song or album can lock you into a certain sound and image forever.

TS: That's right. When we made that 'Talking Seattle' song, I wouldn't do a video. I told them when I started that if they were looking for someone to be on the radio, to keep looking. I knew that when I was 25 years old. I told (record executive) Tony Brown that I've been listening to the radio all day, and I've not heard John Prine. If I hear myself, it's going to be a problem. I wanted to be like Nanci Griffith. I think Tony Brown is one of the heaviest people in our town because he gives people like me an opportunity. It takes some big balls to give someone a contract when you know they're not going to go platinum. It's like giving them a government grant.

Q: By opening the album the way you do, it sets a tone for the rest of it – that this is going to be a bold album, sort of 'Todd Unfiltered.'

TS: I hope so. I think of it as this tragic-comedy record where somebody tries to kill themselves and can't even do that. That song kind of introduces the main character. There's a theme that goes through it that I'd been thinking about while writing these songs. Most of them I came up with in the hospital – or finished them there.

Q: Now I have to ask you why you were in the hospital.

TS: That's OK. Well, I shot this guy, and he shot me back. (Laughs in a way that says he's kidding, then his voice gets more serious). Twice I've been in for drug overdoses. I'm trying to be frank. What face do you make when you say that, you know what I mean? The first one I don't remember at all. I just woke up, and I was in the hospital. When I got out of the hospital, it happened again. Now it hasn't happened. It's been awhile. (Laughs at himself). It's been a good week since I O.D.'d on drugs! Nah, I'm not trying to make light of the matter. It's been months ago, though. I lost my best friend. (Voice breaks as he refers to the death of Skip Litz, an engineer and musician). So I guess when you lose your best friend, you double up on your medicine. You start drinking two for one. This time I was old enough for it to be too far. If I was 28, I don't think anything would have happened. But this year I think my body was like, 'Nah, it's time to learn to face shit.' This will be the last time where something like that happens.

My friend Libby found him. Libby, my wife Melita, and I were there, we all found him. It's a sad story. It's not a sad record – it's kind of a pathetically funny record. I think it's funniest when things get the darkest. That's what this record is about, to me.

Skip was the mayor of East Nashville. His picture is in every bar on this side of down. He'd drive that black Cadillac around and have all the drugs in the trunk. No license plate, no driver's license. I'd love to ride in that Cadillac because it would drop my jaw. He'd be going 75 miles-per-hour in a 35 mile-per-hour zone, and he doesn't have a license plate, and he does have a trunk full of drugs. I would think, 'This is better than Disneyland rides' as far as an adrenalin rush. It wasn't like he was selling crack. He was selling pot to all the musicians. Everybody knew him. If you saw that black Cadillac, people would stop and go find him.

Q: Sometimes you have an angel on your shoulder, if you don't get caught at things like that.

TS: He was that way. We used call this the Buddha bar (he says of his second-story porch with a makeshift bar set up.) Now we call it Skip's. We used to spend most of our time up here. And most of the songs on this album, the first verse was written here. He'd be sitting there, and I'd be trying to come up with things. He was a good friend.

Q: There's a lot of harsh stuff on the record, but it's presented with humor and a sunny melody.

TS: I like Randy Newman. Bob Dylan's my favorite comedian. I think he's funny as a motherfucker. I also like Bill Hicks a lot. He always wanted to fuse music with his...I wouldn't even call it comedy. He's a hero to me, and I sometimes think that he started digging a hole and I'm part of a team of people still trying to dig it -- Paul Thorne and Fred Eaglesmith and Robert Earl Keen Jr. I think every style of music goes back to Bob Dylan and Neil Young, and those are two of the funniest people I've ever seen.

Q: A lot of what you're talking about is being bold enough to say what you're really thinking or experiencing.

TS: Yea, what you're really thinking or what you've really lost. I hope people take my shit that way.

Q: At the same time, it's provocative. With Bill Hicks, people would walk out on his shows.

TS: People have walked out on me. And I've walked out on them. And both things are going to happen again. I like those types of performers. I'm never going to be professional.

Q: On the other hand, what's more professional than being able to walk out by yourself and entertain a thousand people.

TS: I don't do it very professionally. (laughs) It's the only thing I'm pretty sure I know how to do. But I'm liquored up half the time. I don't remember most of them. I've played a lot of shows in my life.

Q: There's a song on this record where a guy is standing on the ledge of a roof of a tall building thinking about jumping. And there's humor in that song.

TS: I'm glad you noticed. That's my Randy Newman song; I like Randy Newman a lot. But how was that a question?

Q: Where did that song come from?

TS: I was going to kill myself. I'm sure everybody's thought about it. And I changed my mind. Then I started whistling. I whistled the chorus for a long time trying to figure out the words. Then Melita came up with it. She gets credit for the chorus.

Q: What pulls you back from the ledge at those moments?

TS: Jeez, now we're getting heavy. Why would somebody not want to kill themselves today? Lots of stuff. Not rainbows or AA groups or hugs. I'm not going to stay alive to hug people. There's just a few things that I like. And you know what, I don't know what's on the other side, and I'm scared. That's why I didn't kill myself.

Q: You once wrote a song, "Waco Moon," that's an angry letter to someone who did kill themselves. You've gave a lot of reasons why he shouldn't have done it.

TS: Eddy (Shaver) really made me mad. I felt let down by him. But for some reason that doesn't even compute. I can't make those things go together. I can't think of some person who would be mad at me – God willing there would be.

Q: There would be.

TS: I thought Eddy Shaver was the best guitar player in the world. He was my favorite. Will Kimbrough is my favorite now.

Q: Talking of the Shavers, there's something you do in some of your songs that Billy Joe Shaver does. You start one place, but by the second or third stanza, you're someplace completely different that often has nothing to do with where you started.

TS: I love how Billy Joe does that. To me that's fearless. He lets his songs go wherever they go, and he doesn't care what you think, because he's singing his songs to make himself feel better. They're written to heal. I've had conversations with him about that. I've got one of Billy Joe's songs on the album. After we recorded Fred Eaglesmith's "Alcohol and Pills," I told Will that we needed to do something fun. We did "Good News Blues" in one take. I love the line about smiling on a rainy day and the line, 'My woman left me and I'm so glad she did.' I love Billy Joe's style. I think he's got a lot of layers.

Q: Talk about the Eaglesmith song. Why that one?

TS: When I was in the hospital, it was from pills and alcohol, and all of a sudden I was thinking about that song. I always liked that song of Fred's. He name drops people that I'm not going to try and put myself in with. But it felt like I was making a decision: Do you want to be a singer, or do you want to take pills and drink whiskey? It wasn't as easy a decision as you'd think. That song kept running through my head.

Q: Part of the subtext of the song is that people think fame will make them happier, Then you become successful and realize it doesn't. That's not the answer.

TS: Essentially he's singing about how if you don't love yourself, you're in trouble. I've always liked that song, because it's cool and clever. But it hit me in a different way when I was throwing up.

Q: How did you end up in Nashville? Unlike most musicians here, you don't really have to be here to do what you do.

TS: I was living in Memphis, and I just didn't want to be there. My brother found me a place in Fairview, which is not too far from here. Then I met my wife, and she moved out there. And it was just too far away from things. So she found this place, and we bought it. But I can't really say why we're here. There are parts of Nashville I really like. When I get to hear a new song by Amy Rigby, I think, 'God, I live in the coolest city in the world.'

When I have to hear about song publishing by some jackass in a bar, I wish I lived somewhere else. I wish I lived in a town where everybody doesn't know the name of your manager. But there's bars in East Nashville where people don't talk about that.

Q: Let's briefly run through your story, for those who don't know it.

TS: I'll do the quick version. When I was 15, my family went bankrupt and moved to Houston from Portland. I ran away from Houston with this kid named Garth Curtis. I went all the way back to Portland. I got out of high school and went to California, where I learned to play harmonica. I thought I was going to go to junior college. But my brother had a construction job in Austin, and he sent me a ticket. He thought that if I could play harmonica, I could find a job in Austin. When I got to Austin, I saw Jerry Jeff play a solo show, and it had never occurred to me that you didn't need a band. That night I thought, 'Well, that's what I'll do with my life.'

Also, I loved Jerry Jeff's whole gypsy trip. I felt like I was one. I felt like I'd been raised around them, and that's what my dad felt like to me. This was the only world I'd ever seen it celebrated in. He was singing songs about sleeping on the couch, and he was singing it with pride. He's saying that like he's free, not like he's poor. So I started seeing that I wasn't poor, that I was free, and that made me a billionaire.

Q: You have a series of songs in the middle that seem to go together because they're about pop culture in a way. The 'Kingsmen' song, for instance.

TS: I worked on that song for a long time. I think it was a book I read about how they had investigated that song. It's my favorite song on the record because there's no musical structure to it. I tried to write it like that. It's a really long song. I hope the song makes people have sex with each other.

'Iron Mike,' which comes after it, is a song I took out of the shop and re-did. I really like Mike Tyson a lot. He's one of my favorite entertainers. I hope he's champion again one day.

Q: It's interesting how you look at someone who's one of the hangers-on and how that colors the whole relationship.

TS: I came up with all that, it just sort of fell out, without realizing what I was doing. Then I was listening to Randy Newman, and I thought it reminded me of that song I'd written about Mike Tyson.

Q: Not many songwriters will write a song from the point of view of someone who's not a good character. It happens in movies and books but not too often in songs.

TS: Randy Newman does it all the time. He takes the bad guy role all the time. That person in my song is a jerk, and I hope that comes across. I hope it comes across that I think Mike Tyson has been used pretty badly.

Q: Then there's the one about the conservative Christian...

TS: I worked on that for a long time, too. I've said that a lot – that it's conservative Christian right-wing Republican straight white American males who decide what the rest of us get to do. And I think that's the truth. But I also wanted not to bash that person so bad – I like to have some levity in there. I'm a hippie, and I smoke pot, and I've met some pot-smoking hippies I'd like to punch out just as fast as some jarheads if I could. If I had any fist-fighting ability at all, there'd be a lot of people getting their asses kicked on both sides. For the most part, though, I'm for everything. I'm for the legalization of everything. If I had a child, I'd want to make sure one of his teacher's was gay, and that one of them was square. I wouldn't want him only to be taught by white straight people, because that's not what the world is like.

Q: Most of your songs, even the ones with strong points of view, also include a place where you make fun of yourself. It's as if you want to make sure people don't take you too seriously.

TS: I'd have to say, I dislike most stuff, and I really dislike myself quite a bit. Of all the people I can think to say shitty stuff about, I've got myself down. I've met some idiots, but none like me. It doesn't bother me. I didn't come up with the idea of me. It's not my fault. I'll pick on anybody I don't like, and I'm at the top of that list.

Q: Humor is hard to pull off in songs, though.

TS: I always feel like when people say my songs are funny, it's like there's an asterisk. But then I met my wife, who's a painter, and her work is like Randy Newman to me. And I decided that I wasn't going to let people make me think that a funny song deserves an asterisk. I feel like I can get to subjects with comedy that you can't get to without comedy. There are some dark places that you can go to and help people explore and give them a release from that pain if you make them laugh, too.

Q: The album end with 'Enjoy Yourself,' which might be unexpected. But it's another of those songs where it sounds like the happiest song in the world if you don't listen closely.

TS: Right before I went into the hospital, me and Al Bunetta were having this meeting, and he sang that song to me. And he said, 'Don't tour, let's just go to the hospital now.' I was like, no, I'll make it. He sang it to me to try and tell me not to go on tour. Part of me was touched that he cared about me, but part of me was like, 'Man, those are some cool words, did you just come up with those?' I went and got the song off a Louis Prima album and recorded it for Al. Then I found out afterward that it was my mom and dad's favorite song.

Q: It makes for a good ending for this album.

TS: This last year was probably the hardest year I've ever been through besides the one before my first record came out. It's just been a really hard year.

Q: If you listen to the record, you can hear it. But the songs are also positive in a way.

TS: I hope people like it. I've put out so many that I try to be Zen about it. If you like it, tell somebody. This is all I know how to give to the world. This is all I can offer. I'll probably just keep making records and touring until I drop. What else am I going to do? I can't roof.