

The Rough Edges: Todd Snider, November 8 at the Capitol Theatre

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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On Todd Snider's 2009 record *The Excitement Plan*, the song "Greencastle Blues" details the singer/songwriter's bust for marijuana possession, and it features his signature dark wit: "The number one symptom of heart disease is sudden death," for example, and "Some of this trouble just finds me / Most of this trouble I earned."

But in the performance and the words, there's also a complicated melancholy: "How do you know when it's too late to learn?"

In a recent phone interview, the 43-year-old Snider -- who co-headlines a show with Robert Earl Keen on Sunday at the Capitol Theatre -- made light of the bust. "I'm too old to be caught smoking pot," he said. "I don't think I'm too old to be smoking it, but too old to be caught smoking it."

Snider's songs tend to be like that -- funny, but rarely *merely* funny, with humor aspiring to truth.

He's been shockingly honest about his drug addiction and rehab (ToddSnider.net/fr_rj10.cfm),

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and he admits that he has very little recollection of making 2002's *New Connection*

. And that life is evident in his songs.

The Excitement Plan features "Doll Face," a skid-row companion to the Schoolhouse Rock song "I'm Just a Bill," and the downbeat, spare island vibe of Keen's "Corpus Christi Bay," in which the narrator documents a life lost to drink with clear eyes but some nostalgia. (Snider's performance nails the song in a way that its author's doesn't.) The *L.A. Times*

music blog called the record "a lively, beautifully individualized collection of observations about the perplexing journey that is life on Earth" and compared Snider favorably to John Prine and Tom Waits .

The album was produced by Don Was and recorded in two days, but the writing process was arduous, Snider said.

"I recorded about 18 or 20-some songs and mostly wasn't satisfied with the words to the songs, and then also the way I was recording the songs," he said. "I was kind of overdoing it, I thought."

So he asked Was to produce, and the pair bonded over a baseball game in Milwaukee. They "talked about why anybody would make records," Snider recalled, "and decided that there was no real good reason, and as long as we were agreed on that, it would be fun."

So after rewriting the songs, they went into the studio and knocked it out.

"It took like two and a half years to come up with the songs and also think of how I wanted to make the songs sound, and then once we made that decision, it took two days to make the record," Snider said. "I don't know if I could ever do it another way now."

The result is a casual, straightforward roots album in which Snider sounds and writes like the son of Lyle Lovett and Randy Newman.

The roughness of *The Excitement Plan* is genuine, he said.

On past records, he said, "if the bass player makes four mistakes, we'll fix three of them and leave the cool one. ... Even the rough edges are thought through and placed. Whereas with this style, the rough edges really are the rough edges."

Letting that happen, he said, was a matter of letting go. "I know a million musicians that love [the Rolling Stones'] *Exile on Main St.* ... But very few of those musicians will let you leave something that's not perfect."

Snider's sense of humor was evident early. On his 1994 debut *Songs for the Daily Planet*, the throwaway country-folk "bonus" track "Talkin' Seattle Grunge-Rock Blues" aimed at an easy target: "Hey, hey, my, my / Rock and roll will never die / Hang your hair down in your eye / You'll make a million dollars."

That's as far as many satirists would take it, but Snider knows something *Saturday Night Live* has never figured out: The joke has to progress. In this case, Snider's narrator has an epiphany: "We decided to be the only band that wouldn't play a note / Under any circumstances / Silence / Music's original alternative / Roots grunge."

And: "Then we got asked to play *MTV Unplugged* / You should have seen it / We went right out there and refused to do acoustical versions of the / Electrical songs we had refused to record in the first place / Then we smashed our shit." And that's the *middle* of the story, which only gets more absurd and manages to lyric-check not just Neil Young but Kurt Cobain and name-drop Eddie Vedder and Mudhoney.

There's a similarly funny bit opening that album's "My Generation (Part 2)" -- "Verse 3, Chapter 4, Jackson 5, Nikki Sixx," Snider says -- in which he skewers that classic song simply by removing its lyrics from a musical context and speaking a variation on them: "Did you know that there are people who put us down for no other reason than the simple fact that we get around?"

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I doubt Snider has anything against The Who; he takes music seriously, but at nearly every turn he makes sure that it's entertainment. "I don't think songwriting is precious or special," he said. "I think it's worth about 18 bucks a head."

But beyond the humor there's a skilled and human writer. His debut's "You Think You Know Somebody" starts like a golden-hued remembrance of childhood and friends growing apart and then together again, but like his grunge send-up, Snider follows the story -- in this case to a bleak but natural end. Crucial information is hidden in the opening verses, but it's there.

Snider is plenty self-effacing. "I've never been a careerist," he said. "My whole trip was to be like suspended adolescence and all that crap. I never watched my career arc."

Yet his latest album shows that he's grown into an adult songwriter. He's less direct than he used to be but sharper. He remains a jester, but he's also pretty damned mature.

Todd Snider will perform on Sunday, November 8, at the Capitol Theatre (330 West Third Street in Davenport). The show starts at 8 p.m., and the bill also includes Robert Earl Keen and Bruce Robison. Tickets are \$25 and available from TheCapDavenport.com.

For more information on Snider, visit ToddSnider.net or MySpace.com/toddsnider.