Todd Snider lacks new spark on Viva Satellite

BY RHONDA REINHART
Staff writer

With an opening track called "Rocket Fuel," you might think Todd Snider's newest album, *Viva Satellite,* would start out with a bang. But the song and the rest of the album fizzle faster than a wet bottle rocket on the Fourth of July.

Viva Satellite has the same high energy that is Snider's signature, but this latest effort lacks the rugged spirit that exploded on 1994's *Songs From The Daily Planet.* Snider has managed to sand the rough edges, but at the same time, he has filtered out most of the impurities that gave his music the rowdy barroom soul that many fans have grown to love.

It almost seems that Snider has given up his rugged individualism for slick, formula melodies. Several of the tracks on *Viva Satellite* sound like regurgitated tunes from early Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. There is also a cover of The Steve Miller Band's "The Joker" that is barely tolerable. Somehow, I don't think that even a barroom of drunken baby boomers could appreciate this blast from the past.

In all fairness, *Viva Satellite* does have some redeeming qualities. Although the sound of the songs has suffered, the lyrics haven't. Snider's ability to mix quirky metaphors with heartfelt emotion is just as prevalent as ever. In this area, Snider is in top form.

On "Can't Complain," he provides an anthem for those struggling with the cards life has dealt them, but he does it with the backdrop of a baseball diamond. "We're all waiting in the dugout/ wishing we could pitch / But how you gonna throw a shutout / if all you do is bitch?" The setting is a little unorthodox, but he makes his point.

"Once He Finds Us," perhaps the best track on the album, is a tender ballad about getting in touch with one's spiritual side. "I don't know how I found Jesus / I don't care now, he's in my heart / And once he finds us / he ever ever leaves us/ no matter how far we fall apart." With lyrics like these, angelic background vocals and an electric guitar, Snider creates a pleasant blend of gospel soul with a dash of rock 'n' roll. "Once He Find Us" is certainly the standout track on *Viva Satellite.*

From love songs to up-all-night party songs, Snider covers his musical bases on Viva Satellite. But no Todd Snider album is complete without a tune like "Doublewide Blues." This tribute to the trailer park community is hilarious, yet troubling. "V-neck T-shirt with a mustard stain / rollin' up a hose outside in the rain / He's been my neighbor since '79 / course he was in prison most of that time."

Much like his 1994 ode to Seattle grunge rock, Snider's "Doublewide Blues" paints vivid portraits of eccentric characters. He exaggerates their social imperfections in a way that makes us laugh, but at the same time makes us think.

Unfortunately, neither the quirkiness of "Doublewide Blues" or the sincerity of "Once He Finds Us" is enough to blast *Viva Satellite* into a realm of quality, original music.
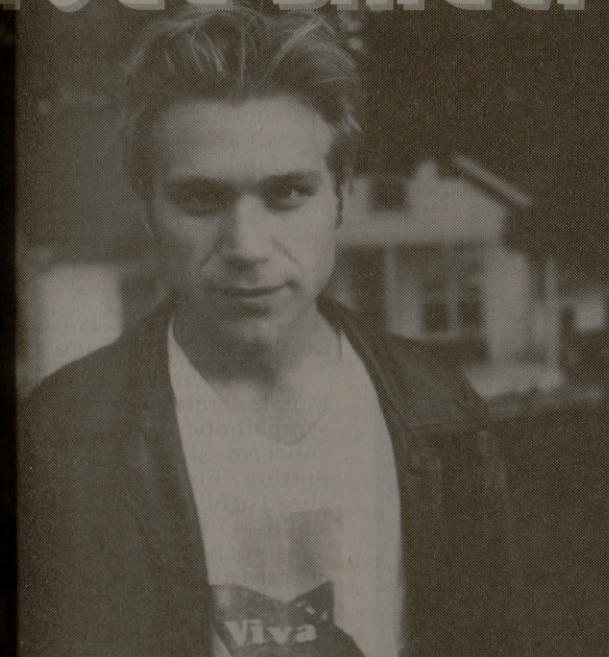
Let's hope Snider's next effort is an album with all the necessary ingredients — or his next quirky song might be about a washed-up rock singer playing seedy hotel lounges for the price of a couple of drinks and a pack of cigarettes.

Viva Satellite

Todd Snider

MCA Records

Critique: C+