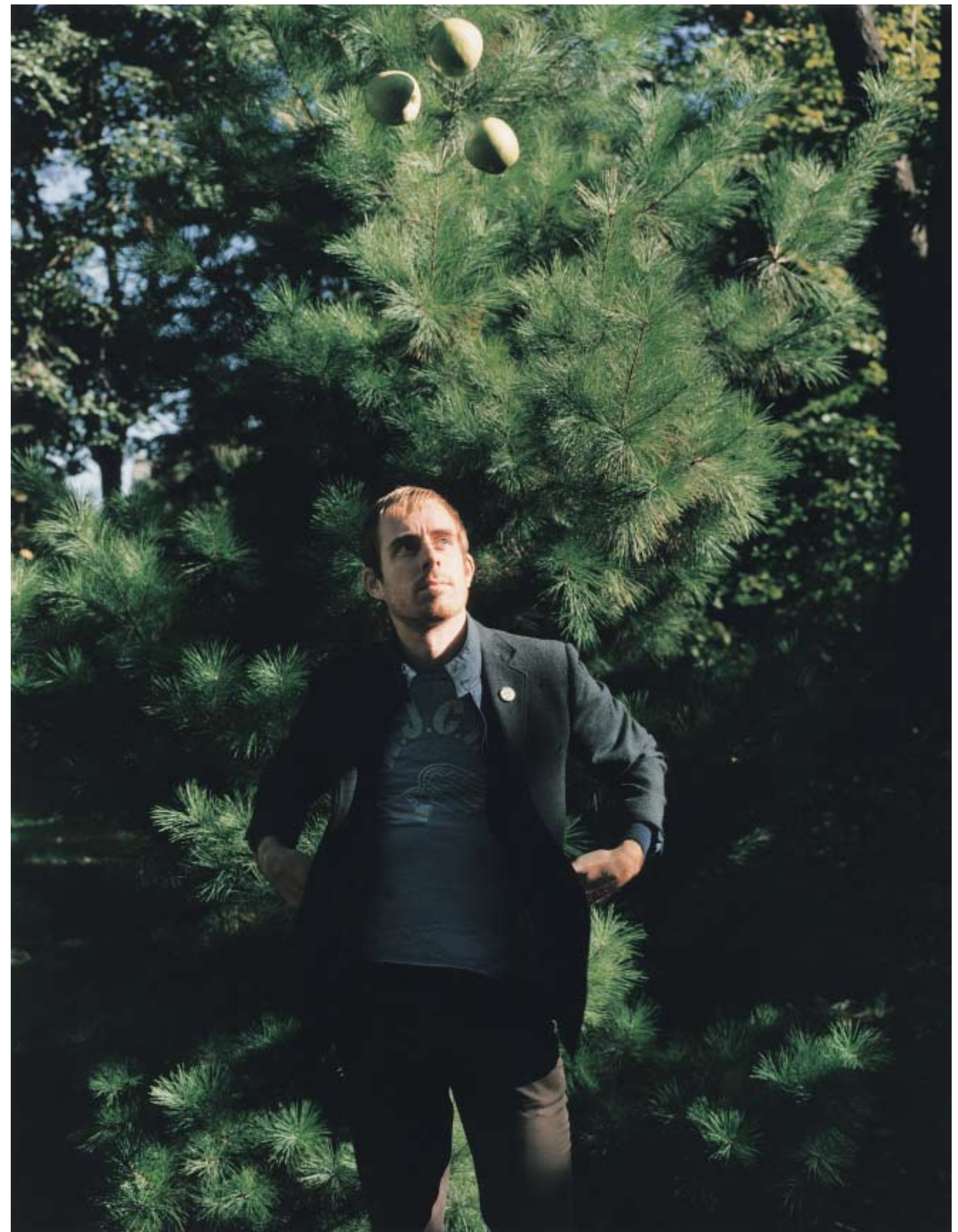


*TED LEO STILL
BELIEVES IN THE
GOOD OLD YOUNG
IDEA*



THAT'S EDUTAINMENT

Ted Leo ponders the unbearable lightness of being.





Leo is drawn to challenging what it means to be a punk rocker by bringing Jamaican dub, Motown R&B, Clarks desert boots, UK two-tone and the Byrds

into the conversation.

Ted Leo: punk rocker and style icon. Holler at those socks. Holler at them!

The first time I saw Ted Leo I had a vague idea that he was in bands lots of older college kids liked—but the first thing I noticed about him was that he had great shoes. He seemed like a guy I could relate to at the time in my life when I started to wear black button-up shirts and cuffed jeans instead of black hooded sweatshirts with hand-screened patches I'd sewn on. He arrived by himself to the small Jersey clubs and coffeehouses that billed him as “ex-Chisel”—his old band. He sported a green army parka, drainpipe trousers and a beat-up guitar case that clued me in to the fact that he had “been around.” Leo (who was performing under the name Tej Leo at the time) plugged in his guitar and ran it through a mess of reverb and delay effects that confused both his melodies and the handful of kids who came to see him because a trusted older friend said they should. Much of what he was trying to convey was lost on me; my transition from punk rocker to whatever I was becoming was far from complete. My black shirt just wasn't as sharp as Ted's.

When you're young, it's the micro rebellions that matter. Not because they can get you beaten up by people you can't stand or fired from a job that you don't want anyways, but because they're life preservers in the sea of youthful junior level alienation. A simple badge neatly tucked into the lapel of your jacket or a sharp crease that forms a clean line with your scuffed up Clarks is the calling card for someone, anyone, who might care about the same things that you do, to find you. And when another person picks up on your codes, you believe that everything—your world and the real world—can be changed. When we feel silenced, what we are often looking for is a new language. To Ted Leo's fans, he's the guy who speaks their language. And although he's connected to specific sub-cultural movements—mainly punk and mod—that have their own vocabularies and codes, he communicates the same way any significant songwriter does, through catchy songs and melodies and verses that end up meaning a number of things to a number of people. But Leo's not hitting a career high today because his fans remember how he challenged the American underground

punk scene of the 1990s with the well dressed, hook-heavy sensibilities of British rock or the socio-personal lyricism of Elvis Costello and Billy Bragg. Most of the people who buy his records or come out to his shows are too young to have experienced any of it firsthand.

I was eight when his thrash band Citizens Arrest was playing at the NYC punk clubs like Downtown Beirut and the ABC NO RIO community center on Rivington Street. When I was 13 and studying up on Black Flag because Nirvana said they were cool, Leo was fighting it out in the basements of the hardcore punk underground with the mod/pop band Chisel, trying to expand the dirty, fast, loud and angry DIY punk scene by introducing melodic smart bombs and lyrics about personal politics, girls and the moments where the two often meet.

“The young idea” was how he described it in his lyrics at the time. “When I was in Chisel and I got the urge to have a Byrds-like guitar trill or a Beatles harmony or a James Brown rhythmic staccato guitar part I didn't feel like a maniac who still had to play basement hardcore shows,” he says. “I would look around and say that most kids at those shows don't remember the Jam or the Clash, so I said fuck 'em. I wanted to show people in my community that this was valid music with a soul.”

Chisel was met with confusion, and in some cases, derision—but the band's confident blend of punk and blue-eyed soul found fertile ground in Washington, DC. At the time, DC musicians were shifting away from hardcore roots and exploring a jacked up “Stax on crack” R&B sound espoused by Leo's housemate Ian Svenonious, who fronted the gospel-punk group the Make Up. “As emerging artists, it was important for us to learn about the craft and history and the cultural theories and cultural implications of music as seemingly pedestrian as the Beatles,” explains Leo. “The concept of ‘edutainment’ means everything to me,” he continues earnestly. “A Beach Boys melody can be a beautiful thing, but how much more awesome is that high falsetto melody when it is sung by Curtis Mayfield who is injecting politics into it and actually speaking to a community?” Communication with the community remains vital to Leo. When I first started to go to his shows in the late '90s—a time Leo refers to as his midlife crisis—even



the unfocused, trippy music he was making as a solo artist still reflected his need to connect. As an artist, Leo is drawn to challenging what it means to be a punk rocker by bringing Jamaican dub, Motown R&B, Clarks desert boots, UK two-tone and the Byrds into the conversation. That he can still do this—that he can still perform music rooted in punk—during a time in which Ashlee Simpson publicly refers to herself as punk and top 40 bands are having a musical necromantic lustfuck with the work of Green Day; that a middle-aged vegan mod on an indie label (Leo) can get positive reviews in *Entertainment Weekly* doesn't seem to phase Leo. "From what I can discern, there's less of a divide now between bands that play basement shows and the bands who sound like them who play at the VMAs," he observes. "In terms of fan's perceptions, I've found that people often don't often understand that I'm not in any sort of comparable position to the Strokes or the Killers. They read your name in the same magazines and they hold you in the same esteem."

"I appreciate it at this point. For fifteen or more years of my life, the important part of most nights of my life has been talking to people who come to see me play. I am decidedly not a kid anymore and I want them to know that there is an older dude out there who is doing his thing in an authentic way. I want to be a voice to that audience."

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"Me And Mia" is the first track on and the first single from *Shake The Sheets*, Leo's new album with his current band the Pharmacists. It starts off like "On Warmer Music"—the impossibly catchy first track on Chisel's first album: Leo singing over a chugging palm-muted staccato guitar riff, his vocals galloping over two chords while he briefly pauses in between each line to catch an audible breath and leave space for you to insert your own meanings—something I've spent a lot of time doing—before the chorus erupts and drummer Chris Wilson and bassist Dave Lerner come out swinging in a storm of attack rhythm with Leo on the hook: *Fighting for the smallest goal to/Get a little self control...* I was thinking perhaps the song

Ignore the child's play—Leo is decidedly not a kid anymore.