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## Ted Leo & the Pharmacists and The Weakerthans



Ted Leo

### **Punk's Eclectic Family Tree** **By Kevin Chesser**

Punk music is a contentious arena, to say the least. What may or may not be dubbed 'punk' in many circles is contingent on its adherence to certain hallmarks of a tradition. Impurities in this art form incite anger, debate, reverence, and dismissal like few others. But all of the squabbling aside, certain realizations are almost totally inescapable: when we talk about punk music, we're not speaking of a static entity.

Look at the evolution of the punk tradition. From the simple, teenaged scope of the Ramones came the viciously satirical politics of the Dead Kennedys; from the brusque social conscience of Minor Threat came the plague of angst and introspection that was Rites of Spring, and so on. The original tradition of punk music has spurred more offshoots and illegitimate children than one can easily count their immediate appendages; look at any '80's post-punk band, '90's post-hardcore band, the Fat Wreck Chords crew, modern day street punkers like The Unseen; and hell, those are the close relatives. Sitting around in the upper rungs of the independent music scene nowadays, we see two of punk's distant relatives flourishing: Washington D.C.'s mod-rock kings Ted Leo & The Pharmacists and Canadian pop-poets The Weakerthans.

There are a lot of ways that I can sit here and argue that these two bands are, in fact, the torch-holders for the punk tradition as it struggles to live on, now over thirty years removed from its explosive birthing ritual. But the argument feels uninteresting. The echo of the great punk tradition rings loud with these two artists: often disillusioned, punchy, driving, and anthemic, but in the end, their deviation from the origins of punk music invigorate the tradition just as much as their adherence to it.

Punk music has a tendency to be... blunt. It's a fine way of saying what you need to say, but in the territory traversed by The Weakerthans & The Pharmacists, there's a considerably greater deal of poetic subtlety and literacy. Ted Leo, perhaps more so

than The Weakerthans, often leaps abruptly back and forth between his introspective and outraged sides in this manner. Of course, Leo's influences run a wide gamut, displaying everything from 60's pop music & 77 punk to London Calling era Clash and the one & only Elvis Costello. Of course, this is a testament to the punk tradition in itself: thirty years later, we find its descendents co-mingling with all sorts of odd bedfellows, and with exciting results. Take a more obviously punk moment of his, like "Bomb.Repeat.Bomb" off of The Pharmacists' latest offering, *Living with the Living*. The song pops out of the gate cantankerously, faintly recalling the fury of the Dead Kennedys. "And when the dying starts, you won't have to know a thing about who's dead. This is your mission: pretend it's television, where the good guys always win," with the anthemic refrain of "Bomb! Repeat! Bomb!" But Leo's versatility in tone and thought keeps the listener guessing from album to album. Leo's first release, *The Tyranny of Distance* was marked by songs like "My Vein iLin", "Under the Hedge," and "Timorous Me": upbeat, coming of age rockers. *Hearts of Oak & Shake the Sheets* were considerably different stories. In the first lines of "Ballad of the Sin Eater" off of *Hearts*, Leo vents his frustrations about learning his place as an American in the global landscape:

"Today I woke up uncertain, and you know that gives me the fits,  
so I left this land of fungible convictions  
because it seemed like the pits.  
When I say, "conviction,"  
I mean it's something to abjure  
and when I say "uncertain,"  
I mean to doubt I'll not turn out a caricature."

It's a driving, punky sort of song, but lyrically, it's a couple worlds off from those idyllic, fledgling days of punk. Not that one is necessarily better than the other, but simply different. "Heart Problems" off of *Shake the Sheets* addresses the issue of American healthcare with a specificity that is quite alien to many older punk bands. And how many artists in recent memory, punk or otherwise, have been able to incorporate the word 'ossify' and 'apostasy' effortlessly and catchily into the lines of a chorus?

Likewise, The Weakerthans find themselves at the forefront of rock n' roll literacy, now standing atop a catalogue that's four proper albums deep. On their earliest (and arguably punkiest) release, *Fallow*, we hear something totally unexpected breaking through the seams of the familiar power-chord jaunts and palm muted chug-a-lugging. On "Confessions of a Futon-Revolutionist," singer & lyricist John Samson declares: "Hang our diplomas on the bathroom wall. Pick at the plaster chipped away, survey some stunning tooth decay, enlist the cat in the impending class-war." Disillusioned and raucous, sure, but there's a gentle sort of introspective sarcasm that makes the tone of the Weakerthans' songs something altogether unique. It's by far more fragile and less brash than the punk origins from which the Weakerthans have derived their music. Samson also creates an inter-album narrative between their third release, *Reconstruction Site*, and their newest one, *Reunion Tour*. Entitled "Plea From a Cat Named Virtue" and "Virtue the Cat Explains her Departure." These two songs follow the path of its despondent, drunken protagonist through the eyes of a cat. In the first of the series, the cat promises to arrange a dinner party for their owner, as to uplift them from the muck of their current existence: "We'll pass around the easy lie of absolutely no regrets, and later maybe you can try to let your losses dangle off the sharp edge of the century. We'll talk about the weather, or, how the weather used to be." The Weakerthans' music is chock full of these offbeat, glorious moments of poetry,

moments that one wouldn't expect from the former bassist of anarcho-punk band Propagandi (Samson's gig prior to the Weakerthans), or most other artists that seem to demonstrate the influence of punk's younger years. For the most part, it seems that there's more ink than spit on Samson's microphone.

These artists not only distinguish themselves from their predecessors with their lyricism, with the liner notes to their albums reading like a transcribed discussion in a sociology class or a collegiate poetry reading. Indeed, both Leo and the Weakerthans have their hands firmly dug into a rock & folk buffet of sorts, where the echoes of punk music are usually the salad dressing rather than the greens. Leo's guitar playing alone can set the Pharmacists apart from that tradition. It's all at once bluesy, hyperactive, and mesmerizing, and at times, even skirting that strange, vine cloaked lane some would call math rock. Even when Leo & company find themselves bolting down the road with the punkest of punk rhythms, Leo's hands do more fret board dancing than anyone, old school punker or otherwise, really know what to do with. A song like "The Gold Finch and the Red Oak Tree" from *The Tyranny of Distance* shows Leo dabbling in subdued, minimal folk. "St. John the Divine" (also from *Distance*) is 6-minute-plus long of piece of smokey psychedelia, and "Bridges, Squares" from *Hearts of Oak* dishes out a reggae-streaked breakdown in its second half before reverting back to its emphatic, Elvis Costello-ish stomp.

The Weakerthans share this stylistic antsiness as well. Throughout the course of their catalogue, you'll find a plethora of traditions and styles employed almost unpredictably at times. Their first album, *Fallow*, smacks of bands like The Promise Ring and other '90's emo bands, but on *Reconstruction Site*, their break-out album, one finds songs like "A New Name for Everything," a shimmering piece of pop-infused alt country. We hear the near dance-punk "Our Retired Explorer (Dines With Michel Foucault in Paris, 1961)," the cloudy electronica of "(Hospital Vespers)," and on the album's last half, the tenderly bitter folk of "One Great City!" Their latest release, *Reunion Tour*, opens with "Civil Twilight" a sweeping pop anthem about a bus driver. Samson & company even try their hand at an experimental, spoken word piece, "Elegy for Gump Worsley." The effort is commendable, but this writer is inclined to say that not all experimentation necessarily works out well. Between The Weakerthans and The Pharmacists, one gets not only a strange reconstruction of the punk tradition, but a broad of survey rock and folk music that makes either artist nearly impossible to pigeonhole.

Well, look at that. We've officially lost hold of our inner tube, succumbed to the riptide, and now the aged shore of punk music is just barely a sand-colored sliver on the horizon. But, I mean, it's sure as hell out there, isn't it? And perhaps the idea of drifting away from the shore isn't a half bad analogy for all of this business. The great tradition of punk music is turning up in some pretty odd places nowadays, even if it's only turning up as a near-invisible vestigial trait or fleeting chirp between beats 1 & 3. Punk music has given rise to an endless number of disparate movements and artists, and for sure, Leo & the Weakerthans have chosen to cast off from the shore. But these deviations from the punk tradition do not defile it, though. Rather, they are testaments to the broad expanse of eclectic music that such a primal, basic art form has inspired. There's a lot of ocean out there to explore, but you'll never be able to let go of the mainland that set the journey in motion.

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