

## Ted Leo lets music speak for itself at Granada

POP REVIEW: The banter's spontaneous, but band keeps songs coming

04:02 PM CDT on Monday, April 9, 2007

By **CHRIS VOGNAR** / Staff Critic

If Ted Leo wanted to make like so much of the music scene and take a dip into fame for fame's sake – if he wanted to cash in on his golden ear, chameleon-like songwriting skills and political views that fit the times like a glove – he surely could have by now. Then he might draw more than the few hundred fans that showed up at the Granada Theater on Friday night for a scorching set that touched down everywhere from punk to soul.

But he doesn't seem too interested in any of that. Instead, the East Coast stalwart keeps touring like a madman with his backing group, the Pharmacists, and cranking out under-the-radar albums as remarkable for their melodic eclecticism as their stubborn individualism. Guys this talented don't stay out of the limelight unless they have an instinctive distaste for the limelight. This distaste makes Mr. Leo a happy anomaly in a pop world trained to thrive on style.

Mr. Leo, by contrast, is a roiling cauldron of substance. Amiably tearing through a 90-minute set dominated by his last two albums, *Shake the Sheets* and *Living With the Living*, he acted and looked as much like a graphic designer or a general contractor as a rock star. He wasn't taciturn; his bantering was funny and spontaneous, and he greeted most applause with a quick "Thanks." But he acted like his primary concern was churning into the next song, which usually followed the previous song without a pause, like pieces of a rock 'n' roll mix tape.

Guided by drummer Chris Wilson's swift time changes, Leo and Co. worked from propulsive punk rhythms to dense walls of sound, hard rock beats to ska- and reggae-inflected romantic laments and socially engaged folk, à la Billy Bragg. He grew out of '80s New York hardcore bands such as Citizens Arrest and Animal Crackers, but the only song on Friday that sounded pure punk was "Bomb.Repeat.Bomb.," with its buzz saw guitars, spoken verses and shouted choruses.

Mr. Leo comes from the school that teaches punk isn't just about a sound. It's also a means of expressing disgust with the state of things, which helps explain why he's been in such robust form of late. "In every cradle there's a grave now," he sang on the deceptively catchy "Army Bound." "In every master there's a slave now."

Mr. Leo doesn't air his grievances between songs; that would distract from the music, which speaks for

CLICK IMAGE  
TO ENLARGE



Jason Janik / Special to DMN

Ted Leo and the Pharmacists worked from punk rhythms to ska- and reggae-inflected romantic laments on Friday.

itself. And just when you thought things were getting heavy, he ramped up "The Unwanted Things," a romantic lament redolent of a reggae-fueled Clash cut, complete with raunchy dub guitar work.

When he got excited, which was frequently, he turned his back and frantically danced in gyrations in front of his amp. When he talked a little too much, and a fan let him know, he responded with the admiration of one who knows his audience is his bread and butter. "That's a good heckle, less talking, more singing," he observed. "Because it reminds me what my job is. And I love my job."

That much was obvious.