

ISSUE MARCH/APRIL

THE DISSENTER LIVING LIKE TED LEO

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DRUNKEN
UNDERBELLY
OF EPCOT CENTER

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D+T PICKS THE
OUTBACK'S BEST

CAN HOLLYWOOD MAKE
SOMETHING WE HAVEN'T
SEEN ALREADY?

PLUS

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IN THE SKY**

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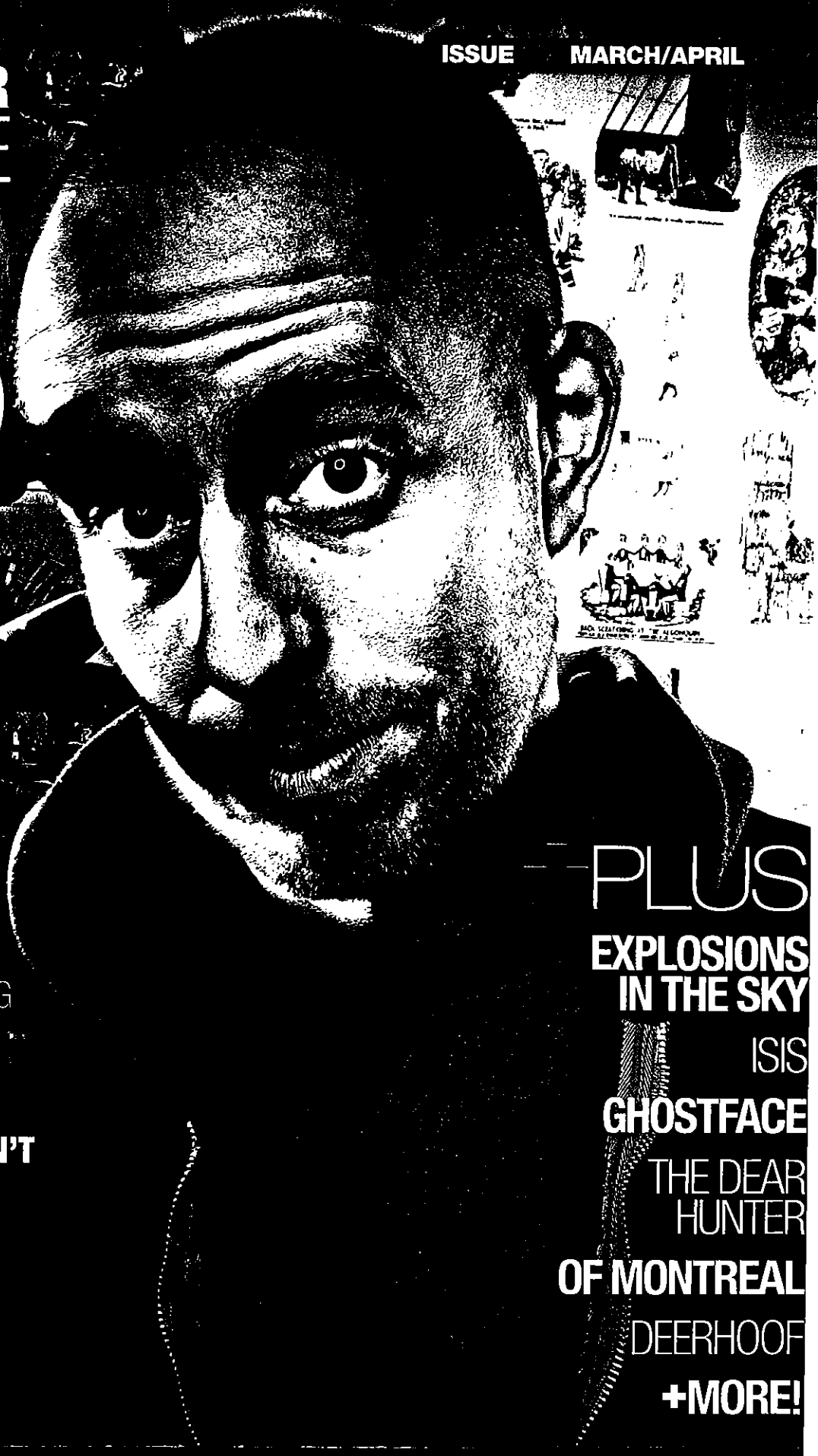
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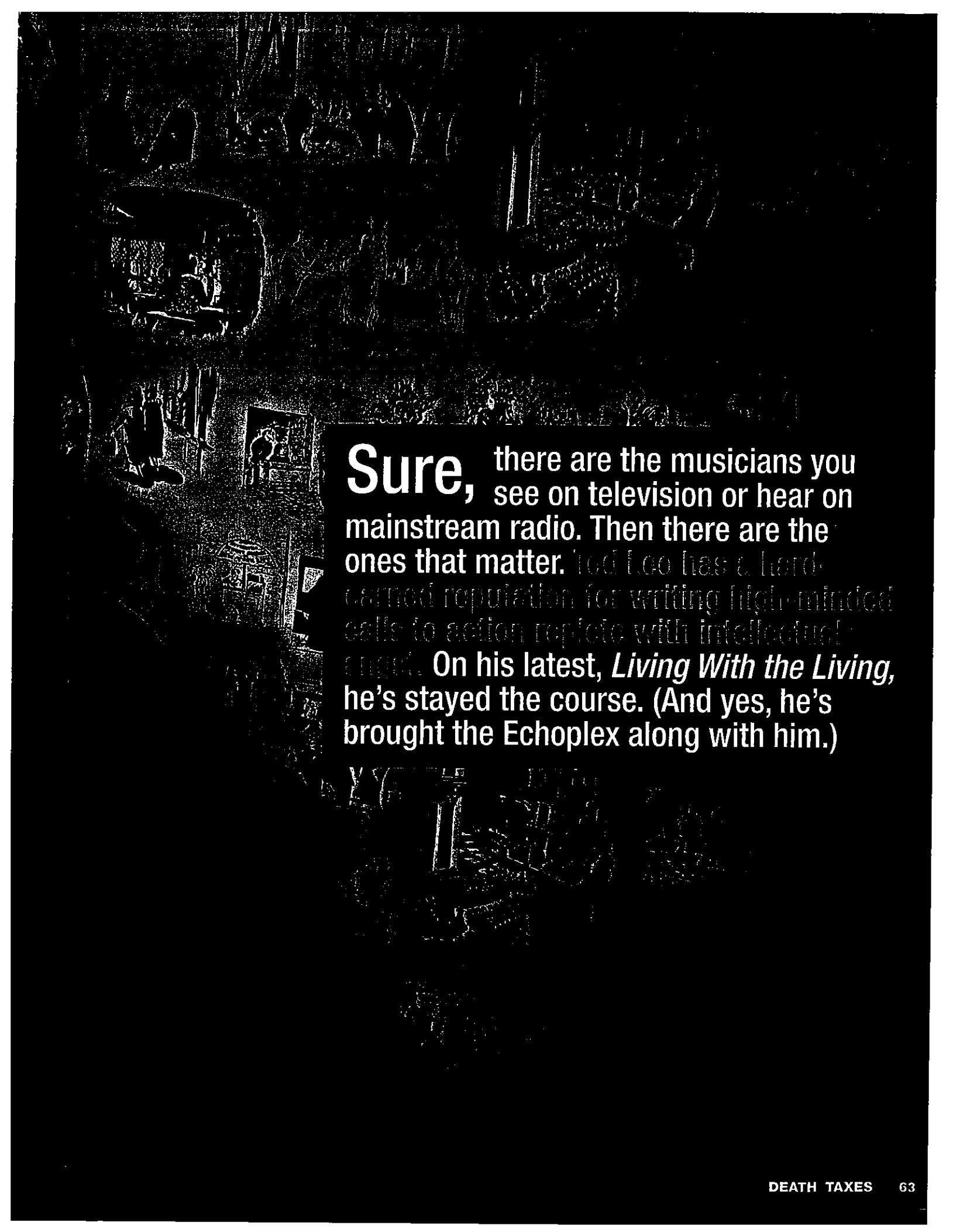


FULLY



**LIVING
LIKE
TED LEO**

By Nate Landry
Photos By Bo Streeter



Sure, there are the musicians you see on television or hear on mainstream radio. Then there are the ones that matter. Ted Leo has a hard-earned reputation for writing high-minded calls to action replete with intellectual angst. On his latest, *Living With the Living*, he's stayed the course. (And yes, he's brought the Echoplex along with him.)



The L, New York City, 2006

“When I play drums, I play vegan drums; when I walk down the street, I do it as a feminist; when I lie in bed and read, I do it as someone who's Irish and Italian and distinctly American. I'm not saying that I sloganize everything I do, but that our politics are our own and they're integral to who and what we are.

Even if those politics are pointedly apolitical or blissfully ignorant, they are outward conceptions of something inner. They are practical solutions to actualizing nebulous concepts.”

-Ted Leo, 1999

It's rare to hear a socially conscious American speak so urgently. But Leo has always linked the “personal” and the “political,” borrowing from the framework laid by both the feminist and civil rights movements, as well as the hardcore and (what I will shittily call) “early emo” scenes of the late 80s and early 90s. (We're talking about Bikini Kill, Born Against, One Last Wish, Embrace, etc., alongside lesser-credited but equally crucial bands like Moss Icon and Shotmaker, and pretty much everything released on Gravity and Ebullition in the first few years of the 90s. Plus more.)

Since 1999, the approach Leo has taken, executed by his ambitious and insatiably curious musical talent, has resulted in what he calls unimaginable success for himself and his band, the Pharmacists. Bassist Dave Lerner and drummer Chris Wilson have been with Leo since 2001's *The Tyranny of Distance*; former Pharmacists include James Canty of the Nation of Ulysses and the Make-Up, Amy Farina of the Warmers and the Evens, and Leo's wife, Jodi Buonanno. After three records on Lookout!, in February of 2006 Leo made a move to stalwart Chicago label Touch & Go, whose own continued influence and success is undeniable. *Living With the Living*, the Pharmacists' freshman debut on Touch & Go, is produced by Brendan Canty and will be released in late March.

Touch and Go is one of the most esteemed and successful independent labels in America and has contributed hugely to independent alternative music over the years. How do you see yourself in relation to other artists on Touch and Go, particularly those with whom you might share a convergence of views or ethics, such as The Ex?

More so than any other situation I've ever been in, label-wise, this time it's a little intimidating! Everything that I have done in the past has always been with people who are kind of direct contemporaries. And even if my mind was blown by them on a constant basis, and I was feeling inspired by them, they were *still* my contemporaries.

You've joined a label with an influential history of charismatic front men: David Yow, Steve Albini, Jon Langford, but also—through the connection with Quarterstick Records—a label with a direct link to some of the best and most mature and understated music being made in America at this point—on the current roster, Tara Jane O'Neil comes to mind. With such a variety of sounds already there, it seems like somewhere you

could carve out a space for yourself.

When you have to *choose* a label, obviously you're going to want to find something that's going to work in your favor, and certainly all those things you mentioned are a big part of why I chose Touch and Go. It's funny: In a lot of the circles that I run in at this point, people treat me like I'm some “elder statesman,” and now I'm like a little kid on that stage! Not because of age, but because of influence.

When you left Gern Blandsten, you had nothing but the best wishes for them. Same thing when you left Lookout! You've been very careful—admirably so, I think—to separate the people who work at those labels, and the work that they do in support of independent alternative music in America, from the more general and impersonal demands that you as an artist might have.

For sure. With Gern, for example, it just got to the point where we had each kind of gone as far as we could without one or the other making some kinds of changes. It was in my power to make a change for myself, so I did. I went to Lookout! I would not have left Lookout! had circumstances not dictated that they stop putting out new records. It was a good time to go through a reassessment, and think about what I could do within my parameters of comfort in the record industry that could help me grow it a little more and take it a little higher. It seems like the move to Touch and Go is beneficial in that regard.

There is a sense of you sort of outgrowing the outlet you could have at a particular label, and that the move to Touch and Go is a culmination of that: a widely distributed, widely successful label.

I think that, in the independent label world right now, there are a couple of other labels that are doing the same thing that Touch and Go is doing, at the same level, and that's pretty encouraging, especially considering the fact that the major-label world at this point seems to be falling apart.



I want to talk about DC a little bit. I want to talk about the three-piece Pharmacists a little bit. The three-piece Pharmacists have pretty much been entrenched over the past three to five years, since James Canty left after supporting *The Tyranny of Distance*.

Right. Well—actually, those guys were part of the James Canty band as well so the two of them have been with me for a while.

Any chance of this changing? What are the benefits of the Pharmacists' line-up, as it stands? I mean, I always think of it as the three of you plus the Echoplex—

[Laughter] Absolutely!

—but aside from that..

James is an amazing multi-instrumentalist, and we were able to do things live that, obviously, we can't do now; Drew is an amazing guitarist, Dorian was great on keyboards. But I know that it's my name, and my project. And I drive a pretty hard work ethic. Everybody I've played with yet that hasn't remained with the band also has their own things going on, you know? So in almost every case, it's been, I gotta do my own thing!

You're not leaving anybody in the dust.

Exactly. And that's been the policy since day one. I want to work with the people that I've asked to work with me. And

“All of the efforts that have led up to this very second, just this very second, can be made something positive, and so it’s impossible to see the entire course of history as something primarily negative. And therefore, very simply, that has to bode some sort of hope for the future.”



certainly over the years Dave, Chris and I have really cohered. At the same time, you know—and not to be too emo and lofty-ideally about this—ultimately, I would really rather be able to stop working with someone and be able to not have resentment about things later, than to try to hang on to someone. If someone needs to go do their thing, the door’s open.

But when it came to the point where—well, it kinda actually happened really quickly, and in deep isolation for me. When I was writing songs for *Shake the Sheets*, the nature of the songs—there wasn’t much room for anything other than the three of us.

There’s a definite sense of you having stripped-down, especially over the last couple of records.

Shake the Sheets, as a record, really dictated that it just be Dave, Chris, and I. One sound, start-to-finish, almost like a live band, just blasting through it.

I mean, we’re talking a year between releases, so it’s harder to work more things in anyway, even if you wanted to.

Beyond that, I think it was just, to use a really overused word, that there was an urgency to have the three of us. And once we spent a few months on the road as a three-piece, we started to realize the benefits of slimming-down your entire operation. It just gets easier.

To use a terrible term, it’s probably more cost-effective. You’re able to work more quickly and productively with people you’re familiar with.

Exactly. For example, on *Living With The Living*, there’s a lot of acoustic guitar underneath a lot of the electric stuff that I think adds a really nice texture to it. That and the back-up vocals have started to make me think about finding somebody who might be able to step in and fill those gaps live. But it’s a tough question, because I still really enjoy playing as a three-piece. There’s something just so immediate about it. And I see bands that I love, and that are totally moving, but who are much more orchestrated, and it’s a very different experience I think, being a full, like, seven-

piece. It sounds amazing, it totally fills it all out, but you just don’t get that thing of three people getting up there and going [*makes noise of a small bomb exploding*].

It’s like that preparation that goes into it takes away from the immediacy of the live show. You can still add in whatever you want in the studio: extra guitar tracks, percussion-- Right. And melodica, piano...

I’ve seen you play shows that I’m damn near certain you can’t play again, given the exposure that you’ve gotten now. You just got back from a tour with Death Cab For Cutie. This is all somewhat bewildering, right?

I mean, a little bit, yeah, absolutely!

For those of us who have been following you for years...

It’s bewildering, but—not to be too old and crusty about it—I think I have enough of a perspective on the entire arc on what a band does and can do at this point to be able to take those absurd leaps a little bit in stride.

Anyone who’s ever seen you play knows that you’ve got the goods, and that you bring them on a regular basis...but could those of us rocking out Backstage at the Black Cat [in D.C.] six years ago ever have foreseen anything like this? What would you say to those people?

The thing is, it’s not that much of an immediate leap. My entire thing since I started playing under my own name has really been a long, slow, pretty organic progression, I think. Like you say, that was six years ago, and in that time we’ve gone from, you



know, filling the Backstage, to half-filling the upstairs, to filling the upstairs, to filling the upstairs two nights in a row, to playing the 9:30. So, step-by-step, I think that it makes a certain amount of sense. The only amazing thing is that time does fly so fast in other aspects, and of course I remember like yesterday playing the Backstage shows—but I still think, Wait a minute, wait a minute—when did all of you...who told you about this?! When did all of this happen?

Also, I'm over playing the game for those big leaps towards stardom. Like, fucking *years* ago. And I very methodically and consciously do things in small steps. So I thought, Ok, we can sell out upstairs at the Black Cat. I'm not sure I wanna do the 9:30 until I'm really sure we can do it *again* at the Black Cat. So, we do it two nights at the Black Cat. "Ok, maybe *now* it's time to move on..."

That's very humble. I mean, it's practical, but it's also—

Well, you never know! But, to play devil's advocate for myself, there's also—well, not playing devil's advocate but providing a more self-interested counterpoint—the music world is really fickle. And it's a bummer to have expectations for something dashed. So I try to not have expectations. The last couple show's we've played in New York have been at places like Webster Hall. But I wouldn't have done that if I didn't feel pretty confident that we could do it.

***Shake the Sheets* and *Hearts of Oak* are very heady negotiations of headier events and issues. You allow room for the inevitable despair that anyone in progressive America is used to by now, but you definitely maintain a very independent, populist/grassroots base. As the lights start to dim on every stage, from the local to the international, is this participatory**

message harder to keep up?

It absolutely is. And it's funny, for me, you know, *Shake the Sheets*—a lot of people saw it as a sort of rallying cry. *Hearts of Oak* was a more banner-waving, rallying cry for me, and for *Shake the Sheets*, I felt that I was *already* out there, that my face was already being stepped on in the dust. It was more about *just* managing to get yourself off the floor. People always talk about how—because it did come out just before the election—that was "the election record," but for me, it was already the day after.

I think that your songwriting is really much more nuanced and thoughtful, and more difficult to pinpoint in such a way.

I appreciate you saying that. The thing behind that is simply that, you know, I don't think I'm a politician. I just have a lot of shit that I need to work out, and I feel like other people probably feel the same way, so it's more like a conversation. I'm not trying to completely obscure it by just saying that "the personal is the political"—obviously, I am dealing with some really specific things—but it's really hard to stand on the simple-minded approach of, "this is good, and that is bad." I say this; you do that. I always feel like I'm at least starting with an actual question, rather than with a pre-set point in mind.

So, where do you put yourself? How effective do you feel?

The questions I have about your new record focus on it, lyrically, as describing an internalization of pressures that people feel in their everyday lives, and this potentially wearing them down. People who mean well, but who have a limited amount of power alone, who have some power together, but even that power is starting to feel like it's wearing thin.

Well, again, I actually think that that exact kind of spectrum of struggles that you were just talking about is something that I already got dejected by thinking too much about on the *Hearts of Oak* cycle. And *Shake the Sheets* is much more of a record written in a pretty deep state of despair and depression, and I think that's what most people take it for, partly because a lot of it was me trying to pull my own self out of it with kinda pep-talky songs—

Trying to make sense of things to yourself before you can even try to do so for other people.

Right. But having gone through that writing process, and playing them every single night, and engaging with them 100 per cent, opened me back up to a bit more of a broader look at the full spectrum of stories and ideas of things, which, in some ways—aside from the fact that I was working with Brendan again—kind of makes me feel that this record has more in kind with *The Tyranny of Distance* than with the other records. I certainly have a much more honed vision since then, but I mean just in the kind of broadness of it.

You are working with Brendan Canty again, not Chris Shaw. I'm going to go ahead and say, at the risk of offending you, good choice.

Oh, no, no! Absolutely. That's why we're not working with him again!

The sound is a lot less...bombastic. There was a lot of guitar on the record, but in a different way than there's been a lot of guitar on the things you've done since *Chisel*.

But again, I gotta say, the bombast of *Shake the Sheets* was on purpose. It was the record that I wanted to make.

In the song "Sons of Cain", which leads off the record, you

FULLY FORMED

sing, "I know I'm not to sing of fights I've missed / But, alone, I've got to sing just to exist." You seem to hint at a real risk that progressive elements and people in America run more and more nowadays: of internalizing all of the "murk", as you called it in the song "Shake the Sheets": the endless awful news, the total contempt for human rights, the corruption of our society and our interactions with one another. How this wears on people may lead to them saying, "Everything's too tough, change is too slow to come, and I'm going to opt out. I have to take some time to myself."

I think that's accurate. That song *specifically*—the kind of narrative is dealing with a very personal loss due to "the murk," but, definitely, in lines like that, and in that line specifically, I'm calling in the larger context.

Frustration and anger at what happens around you, or in your name, can lead to a kind of hypersensitivity and despair. That can have a dramatic effect on people, as we've seen recently in the case of Malachi Ritscher [a Chicago-based artist and musician, who died after setting himself on fire in symbolic protest of the war in Iraq on November 3, 2006].

That's absolutely true. But again, there are still some things that I just do not know about. I don't *know* what it's like to be in the Army. And to be sent to go kill someone. So in some sense, I also have to respect, to a certain degree, my limitations in addressing that. But then again, the next line is that I have to sing to exist. Within the context of my life, and my world, it's got to be addressed.

Bear with me here. In "Army Bound", I think you set up dialectic in that song that is the dialectic of the record in general. There's a sense that unnecessary death is permeating life, that there's a corruption of character in all of our day-to-day experiences with one another. And that hope is the only thing that keeps us going, but it's rarely gratified by events.

On a real surface level, that song is simply about recruiting, and the lies, or the "promises" that are made. But it's not just going through that again by saying, "Don't join the Army!" Now, I don't shy away from making statements that could get me in trouble later, or being particularly brash about something. But I feel very strongly that every one of these very specific issues that can be addressed is just a specific aspect of larger issues. So I do want to, almost always, try and draw some of those larger things down into the specific.

For you, it seems that the personal and the political sort of constitute one another, and are inseparable.

Yes. I would agree.

In "Who Do You Love?" you sing about someone getting grief but never losing hope, despite the absence of gratification for his or her best efforts to make social change. So often those efforts seem fruitless. I wonder if you're saying that, in absence of care and compassion, our own sense of self-worth is what keeps us out of decline.

Well, no, actually. The marvel that I have for that character is that they are able to stand tall through it all while seemingly *not* allowing themselves to connect, even with that. So in some ways I think the answer is yes. But the reason I am giving such props in one sense, while also showing that lack of connection, is because this person is isolating themselves because of events. And there's a theme, in a couple of songs that comes directly out of the exhaustion and frustration that *Shake the Sheets* kind of ended up with.

You've been overseas a few times recently, a welcome destination for any sort of hyper-conscious American, as "La Costa Brava" suggests. Do you think there are any lessons that we can learn from our European counterparts?

To be totally honest with you, I am going to answer no. Certainly, there are some more specific governments, or ideas that, with a few centuries more work, once they've gotten more settled—these sorts of socialist ideas that are picking up traction across Europe—we could definitely use. But I gotta say, too, the international capital machine is big and pervasive in so many ways over there, as it is here. You know, the Dutch East India Company existed before America. The British wrote the book on exploiting the world. And I get my friggin' dander up when I go over there and I have to deal with questions about it from people who are just as complicit in it as we are. Especially because I'm a dissenter over here. So don't get in *my* face about it!

"La Costa Brava" which was actually the first song I wrote for the record, is, for me, the emotional centerpiece of the whole record. It's about rejuvenation, accepting the fact that you've gotta allow yourself time to breathe, to stay in a moment. With this person in "Who Do You Love?" it's like, "We don't want to lose you! We don't want you to burn yourself out. Step back, breathe."

But "La Costa Brava" isn't set in Union City, New Jersey, or San Francisco. It's clear: Your character has to get the fuck out of the country and—

Re-contextualize your entire thinking. Sometimes you gotta put on Blondie's "Union City Blue" and say, "But, you know what? Union City's got its own charm, also..." [*laughter*]. It's about making that shift in your head, if not in reality. Going to Barcelona in your brain.

"BOMBrepeatBOMB." You're never terribly obtuse, but to say this song is straightforward is a drastic understatement.

Maybe I should preface this by telling you exactly what "BOMBrepeatBOMB" is about—the CIA-executed coup in Guatemala in the 50s. You don't even need to start spelling out why that remains relevant. I just want to put that into your frame of reference.

The song—and you're singing as a deeply cynical and duplicitous character, a Donald Rumsfeld or John Bolton-type sicko—captures a very American frustration with diplomacy.

And let me say, in the context of that particular conflict of the late 50s, people were even then talking about a sort of puffed-up "bogeyman" that needs to be, you know, "taken down." So that's part of it, too. Still relevant.

Let me ask you this. How do you think the conscientious artist is supposed to make a thoughtful and nuanced statement, when everything he or she cares for and values most is being so blatantly shat on? It's hard to be thoughtful when absolutely no thought seems to be given in return.

Well, that's the daily struggle in every thinking person's life. You know, the path is—for all the various triumphs—a series of mishaps, of missteps. All of the efforts that have led up to this very second, just this very second, can be made something positive, and so it's impossible to see the entire course of history as something primarily negative. And therefore, very simply, that has to bode some sort of hope for the future. **D+T**

“I don't think I'm a politician. I just have a lot of shit that I need to work out, and I feel like other people probably feel the same way.”



* Quote taken from *Punk Planet*