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Ted Leo and the Pharmacists

El Rey Theatre
5515 Wilshire Blvd.
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Can punk be combined with classic rock, Celtic ballads, ska and soul — and not sound like music for a bad beer commercial? The answer is a resounding yes, according to Washington, D.C.'s Ted Leo and the Pharmacists, coming to the El Rey tonight and Friday. As much Dylan and Springsteen as he is Lydon and Strummer, Leo has been melding varied influences into a mélange of story-songs with his band for almost a decade. "Living With the Living," their new album for the Touch and Go label, moves from reggae to roots-rock to blistering hard-core.

"I have always been and remain an actual fan of actual music," Leo says, "and being moved by so much music is definitely going to have its effect on what I write." After spending his early years in the late-'80s New York City punk scene, he moved to the nation's capital, where he eventually formed the Pharmacists in 1999. The effect of living in the center of American politics in a time of war rears its head on the new CD, resulting in songs like the chugging "Bomb. Repeat. Bomb" and the anthemic "Army Bound." But, according to Leo, it's not all politics. "There's a lot about struggling and dealing with loss of different kinds."

Known as much for their fiercely energetic live shows as for Leo's ability to craft a heartfelt melody, the Pharmacists have seen their last few records meet with popular and critical acclaim. So how does he keep the process of writing and touring fresh? "I don't think there's been any one key," Leo says. "First and foremost, you have to truly love playing music." And this exhilaration is unmistakable on "Living With the Living." "No matter how bad things can get, look at what you're doing with your life — you're playing music every night."

— Jonah Flicker