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## Never Mind the Politics, Here's Ted Leo!

*On Living with the Living, the New Jersey-raised punk rocker makes popular, progressive protest music*

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These are people who grew up in a world where Nirvana was the alpha band, where rock stardom is not anathema, but something to strive for," said Ted Leo, the mod-punk provocateur and bandleader known for his politically infused music and explosive live shows. Talking from his home in Rhode Island, Mr. Leo is discussing the rise in a self-obsessed outgrowth of hardcore punk that tops the rock charts via the likes of alt-boppers My Chemical Romance and Fall Out Boy.

After nearly two decades in music, Mr. Leo may be close to having his own star moment, but not because he's been chasing a rock 'n' roll fantasy. At age 36, the singer-guitarist originally from Bloomfield, N.J., is poised for a breakout with *Living with the Living*, his fifth studio album with his band, the Pharmacists. It is perhaps the group's most stylistically assured album, but also it's most critical—politically and socially. Hardly didactic, *Living's* activism is balanced nicely with more personal tunes. Of course, it also just so happens to coincide very nearly with the fourth anniversary of our nation's involvement in Iraq.

Mr. Leo said that his last album, *Shake the Sheets*, was meant to be a "concise statement," both politically and aesthetically, while the latest offered room to expand his palette, delivering brief, punchy message songs as well as meandering narratives, "so you have two-minute punk songs and seven-minute songs that get a little deeper." (A taste? From the song "C.I.A.": "Frankie says that history's race is run, but we all know, it's just erased by those who've won. / C.I.A., only you know what you've done.")

In the next few weeks, before hitting the road for a tour that stretches into July (so far), the band will be featured on NPR and MTV2. At the same time, Mr. Leo has just begun work as a spokesman for PETA2 (the organization's hip activist wing), and even showed up at the studios of WFMU (the longest-running non-commercial freeform radio station in the country, based in Jersey City) a couple weeks back to sing a few covers—Adam & the Ants, Queen, the Pretenders, the Jam—and help fund-raise.

*Living with the Living* debuted at No. 12 on the *CMJ (College Music Journal)* charts, and moved up to No. 7 in its second week. With a touch of incredulity in his voice, Mr. Leo admitted, “The attention the new album has already gotten has been really insane, to the point I’m a little uncomfortable with.”

That sort of modesty may be typical coming from someone who has toiled for more than a decade in relative obscurity. It has also come to seem status quo that politically charged music will remain marginal, even as the U.S. encounters troubled times. The old rule that tough times create great, socially active—and popular—art just doesn’t seem to apply anymore.

*LIVING WITH THE LIVING* OPENS AMID A CACOPHONY OF VOICES in various languages, scattered drums sounding like gunfire and guitar squalling through an echoplex, before locking into a quick, high-stepping beat and finally taking off on a deliciously upward-twirling guitar line. That first section is called “Fourth World War,” melting into the first proper track, “Sons of Cain.” Next up on the disc: “Army Bound.” This isn’t a gimmick.

Mr. Leo’s music feeds off of sounds from first-generation punks like the Jam and the Clash, and he is unabashed in regards to his influences, striving to achieve the same “personal authenticity” he sees in his heroes instead of worrying himself over anyone’s notion of originality (which is well-nigh impossible to achieve in guitar-based rock anyhow). While Mr. Leo’s sound can seem derivative, he is expert at folding one influence into another, matching the earnest lyricism of Billy Bragg with the pop hooks of Paul Weller and the hard-charging energy of Joe Strummer. It is political rock any way you slice it, but also as stylized, fun and energetic as those chart-toppers half his age.

“In a weird way, I credit my parents,” Mr. Leo says about his influences. “They had this amazing record collection. I became obsessed with the Who, and I would hear them trying different things out [like] a James Brown cover, and I could tell that those songs were something different. I am exceptionally *not* religious, but the spirituality of artists like Curtis Mayfield or Al Green has always affected me in a very serious and deep way. I definitely listen to more old music than new music.”

After a childhood across the river, Mr. Leo got neck-deep in the New York hardcore scene as it blossomed in the late ’80s. He played in Citizen’s Arrest and Animal Crackers, both of whom made blistering, brutal music; spent plenty of time at CBGB and ABC No Rio when those places were at the height of their cool; and took a serious interest in social and political issues. That priority among Mr. Leo and his fellow musicians is what he feels has created a gulf between his own experience and the “suburban angst” developing around the same time in the hardcore scene of his home state.

When things downtown began to splinter in the early 90’s, with bands losing the plot, crowds

getting more violent and unity disbanding, Mr. Leo moved to Washington, D.C. (where the post-hardcore wave was just breaking), and formed the influential punk-meets-supercharged-soul-meets-mod band Chisel. The band became popular, but split after just two albums, in 1997. Mr. Leo bounced between a few projects, even releasing a solo album (*very* Billy Bragg) before forming the Pharmacists in 1999.

While he hasn't lived full-time in New York for over a decade, he still pines for the metropolis. Mr. Leo now lives with his wife in Rhode Island, just south of Providence.

"I love the city," he says, "but the cost-of-living part has forced me to never be able to stay for long. But I always hit a tipping point where I have to come back. Where I live now is beautiful: I'm near the beach, but the lack of stimuli after a while is not for me, and I find I need it back."

OVER THE COURSE OF FIVE ALBUMS, Mr. Leo has tightened his grooves, streamlined his messages, and pruned what was a sprawling six-piece band—which he likened to “a full-on Dexy’s setup” (as in the Midnight Runners, complete with violin, if not the overalls)—into a taut three-piece. On *Living*, Mr. Leo is more confident in his guitar solos, and drummer Chris Wilson expands the rhythmic range of the Pharmacists. The sound is still often in the classic mod vein (the Who, the Jam), but it’s tempered by more crystallized ventures into punk thrash as well as blue-eyed soul and even reggae—not exactly the hottest sound in indie or mainstream rock.

Speaking of the hot sound of indie, two weeks ago, critical darlings Arcade Fire scored a No. 2 spot on the *Billboard* charts—an admirable accomplishment, but with just 92,000 copies sold, the event says more about the splintered state of pop music than about the band’s runaway success (also telling was that the No. 1 spot went to a greatest-hits album from a rapper dead 10 years and with only two albums to his credit). Just like *Spin* cover boys the Killers or mega-cult success story the Hold Steady, Arcade Fire has been compared to Bruce Springsteen. Yet while these bands have big sounds and all the touchstones of true Americana, there’s a spirit of action—something more than simple suburban dissatisfaction—missing.

Mr. Leo too has been compared to the Boss, and while his actual tunes rarely intersect with Mr. Springsteen’s brand of rumbling roots-rock—always tending to a leaner, faster, louder sound—he does come closer than any of those others to the spirit of resistance that made Mr. Springsteen so iconic. For his own part, Mr. Leo is confounded by the “completely self-obsessed mainstream.”

But if Mr. Leo’s dedication to his scruples might seem to border on the self-righteous, it isn’t simply a measured pose, nor something he and his band mates don’t struggle with. Not having health insurance sucks for them, too.

“I see myself as a kind of dinosaur in relation to all this,” he admitted. “My standing policy is that I probably won’t allow my music to be used in a commercial. But even I want to leave the door open. People always tell me, ‘Someone’s gonna get paid for that, so it might as well be you,’ but that seems pretty specious to me.”

Yet it seems unlikely he’ll find a decent match anytime soon: “I was looking at the Fall Out Boy MySpace page,” he said, adding quickly: “Don’t get me wrong—I wasn’t submitting a friend request or something ... but the background wallpaper is all Honda logos, and I just thought that was incredible. I mean, how much identity are people willing to give up for that paycheck? What remains of the band?”

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