



Ted Leo

Reviewed by Kyle Ryan
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Ted Leo last played New York's CMJ Music Festival in 2004, just before he released his fourth album with the Pharmacists, *Shake The Sheets*. It was his third for indie label Lookout! Records, and music-industry types were wondering where Leo would go for his next album. After debuting as a solo artist in 1999 (following the breakup of his old band, Chisel), he quickly found popularity in the indie-rock world. After his breakout album, 2001's *The Tyranny Of Distance*, Leo was well on his way to conquering the indie realm. It made sense: He plays thoroughly melodic, ingratiating rock that still respects its punk roots. So at CMJ '04 (in a personally overheard conversation) two label people discussed Leo's next step at CBGB while keeping an eye on their Blackberries. "He's at a stage in his life where he's looking to go to a bigger label that can do more for him," one said. He had it right in one respect: After Lookout! collapsed financially in 2005, Leo needed a label that could do more for him. But that didn't mean going for broke in the big leagues. Last year, Leo moved to legendary Chicago-based indie Touch & Go Records, home to Shellac, !!!, Pinback, TV On The Radio, and too many seminal groups to list. This week, the label releases Leo's fantastic fifth album, *Living With The Living*. Before its release, he talked to *The A.V. Club* about his choices, finding answers, and the tyranny of Baby Boomers.

The A.V. Club: So, answer the CMJ suits: Why not go to a bigger label?

Ted Leo: There's three things I have to say about that. The first one is "Because, fuck them." That's been my whole life—just fuck this whole world. The second thing is that I actually have thought about it, and I think it would be a really bad decision for me. I think someone of my age, and who makes the kind of music that I make—they would have to make their investment in me pay off. Especially with the current state of the major music world, they'd have to completely change my M.O. I would, for better or for worse, wind up alienating, I'm 100 percent sure, a large percentage of the audience I've built for the last 20 years. In some ways, you want to be able to retain your freedom to do whatever you want, so also fuck the naysayers if that ever happened, but at the same time, I know why they'd be upset. Because I grew up a punk kid who felt the same way. I just don't think it would work, on any front.

Then the third reason, to be completely honest with you, is that I haven't been courted by major labels in years. 2004 was the last time I can recall that I had a major-label person really interested in me. It's kind of funny—that's the way that it goes. My ego likes to think that it's because they've read that I've said things like "Fuck them." But it's probably just the case that, whatever those guys were saying, ultimately I'm not the most interesting prospect to a major label.

AVC: So you don't have any good, awkward major-label-courting stories?

TL: As a matter of fact, I guess it was right before *Shake The Sheets* came out or right afterward, I did go as far as to have a meeting with an A&R person at a major label. This guy actually said all the right things. His whole shtick was like, "Listen, we don't want to sign you to squeeze out a couple hits." He's throwing around names like Bruce Springsteen, saying, "You're the kind of guy we want to groom, have as a career artist. You have a home. There are resources for you, blah blah blah." That's *exactly* what someone in my age and position would love to hear, but it just comes back around to the fact that I don't even know if that guy's going to be working there in six and a half years, and where am I? I've alienated a bunch of people, and I'm stuck with that label.

AVC: You recorded *The Tyranny Of Distance* with Fugazi's Brendan Canty, but nothing else until *Living With The Living*. What made you go back?

TL: Probably the same things that brought me to him the first time. He and I have been pretty good friends for many years now, and more than most other people in my life, we share a lot of musical tastes, studio influences, production-value influences. Also, he's just someone I feel really, really comfortable working with. He has great ideas. He's often able to complete the thoughts that I can't, that I'm trying to express. We think and work well together. Even since *The Tyranny Of Distance*, it's not like we ever really had a short list of producers or anything. We didn't actually work with a producer for [2003 album] *Hearts Of Oak*, but he's always on my mind about doing stuff. Finally, he was

actually home and free when we knew we were going to be in the studio.

AVC: A lot of the press about you is similar to what Fugazi got over the years: It focuses on your convictions and the things that you stand for. When you see that, what do you think people *aren't* getting about you?

TL: I gotta tell you, it's rare. Nobody ever gets everything about anything. No matter what kind of compliment you're getting, nobody's ever going to know everything that you're trying to achieve, so you have to dial your expectations down a great deal. Even with the best praise you can possibly get, that's just natural. I go through phases of feeling differently about this, but the older I get, I become more and more appreciative of the fact that that's what I'm recognized for. Because I'm the first one to admit that I write punk songs in a pop vein, however you want to describe the music, but there are a lot of people out there who write much sharper pop songs than I do. There are records that I listen to that I just go, "Brilliant! I'd never do something like that. I'd never think of that!" I'm very proud of the musical side of what I've done. Even setting aside the contents of the lyrics of a particular song, I'm very proud of the wordplay that I achieve sometimes. But lots of people do that, you know? So it's nice to be recognized for that, and at this point, your point is well-taken. At the same time, as far as looking back, I've been playing music, as of 2007, I guess it'll be 20 years for me. It is getting to the point where people want to talk about a legacy or something, and I'd be more than happy to have that be where it starts and ends. There are worse things that one could aspire to.

AVC: You've said that *Hearts Of Oak* was a "questioning" album, but you weren't sure if *Shake The Sheets* had any answers. Where does this one fall on the spectrum?

TL: This one's a little all over the place, I think, largely because I wrote most of *Hearts Of Oak* and *Shake The Sheets* in a really concentrated burst, almost all at one time. But this one was really spread out over the entire two years since *Shake The Sheets* came out. But I can say this: With *Living With The Living*, for lack of a good term, let alone a better term, the emotional centerpiece of the record for me is "La Costa Brava," which was actually the first song that I wrote for this record. That was written well over a year and a half ago. That's the song that should have or could have come, thematically, after *Shake The Sheets*. What I wound up coming to at the end of all the exhaustion and the questioning of the album and the touring—so much of that record was about being exhausted and being completely dejected, as well as ramping yourself up for that one last push, one last fight or whatever. Then "La Costa Brava" is actually about understanding that you *need* to rejuvenate. You *need* some space in your life, sometimes, to gather yourself and not be constantly banging your head against the wall. That quite literally came out of an actual experience in Spain while we were playing over there. I was like, "This is really what I needed," so it's that kind of answer to the *Shake The Sheets* problem. From there, it took me a while to figure out that I had anything else to say at all about anything, and to figure out ways to say it that I hadn't already said. But eventually I did.

AVC: "La Costa Brava" has that line, "Everyone needs a Sunday some days." You can't have "Fight The Power" all day, every day, because you'd lose your mind.

TL: Yeah, absolutely. Thank God "Fight The Power" exists—you need that too sometimes. But sometimes you want to go back to your room and listen to "Always And Forever" or "I Want To Hold Your Hand." That stuff has value, and it has value in the same way that "Fight The Power" has value. It has power in just reminding you. This is the thing: Sometimes you can get so caught up in the black hole of the fight that you forget there's actually something of beauty to fight for. That stuff helps you get through those moments.

AVC: You wrote a response last year to a statement Neil Young made about no contemporary musicians standing up and writing a great protest song. Do you think that's a relevant assertion? The world and music industry aren't the same as they were during Vietnam.

TL: I think that he's probably right, to a certain degree. But also, I can't stomach this leftover, Baby-Boomer lecturing. Honestly, they're the fucking assholes who created the music industry. They're the shitheads who have figured out how to actually turn rebellion into money. I can't allow them to then turn around and call out the monsters that they created for being monsters. It's driving me crazy. They're still in control of everything. George Bush is one of them.

AVC: Your music is replete with social and political commentary. How often do you encounter people at your shows who don't share your opinions?

TL: Not too often. It's happened. It continues to happen pretty sporadically, but even then, it's in a friendly way, like, "Dude, love your music. Don't really agree with the politics, but love your music," and then they move on. But no one ever really confronts me like, "I really wanna know why you feel this way about this or that." I used to feel a little more self-conscious about the fact that you're not really reaching any new ears, you are preaching to the converted, living in a punk-rock ghetto. But I've really come to terms with that in the last few years. First of all, you don't know how many that *haven't* thought about subject X, Y, or Z, actually *do* hear your record and think about subject X, Y, or Z. I certainly have been moved many times throughout to actually look into the actual facts about something, by, say, a Billy Bragg song in 1985. That happens, and you can't gauge how often.

But second of all, when it comes down to it, I wouldn't expect someone who was a dyed-in-the-wool neo-con to enjoy my music. I wouldn't expect them to be at the show, and I wouldn't *want* to converse with them. Not to get too mushy about this, it winds up becoming an affirmation, almost what we were talking about before, the rejuvenation thing. I also think there's a real value in this communal affirmation thing that goes on at my shows. For me, it certainly is affecting, every night, because of the energy that I get from a large portion of the audience, like "We needed this tonight." I need it every night. I feel this go back and forth. I feel like that's a pretty good job to have in the world. It doesn't bother me that it doesn't go beyond that, because how often can you actually say that you've contributed in that way to somebody's life?

AVC: You married a couple years ago. How has that changed your perspective on the world and on playing music?

TL: I've been together with the person I got married to for, at this point, over 10 years. We got married two and a half years ago, so it was pushing a decade when we got married. She had also been a touring musician and probably will be again at some point, so there was a lot that was just understood between us. We have a very similar worldview. In fact, I'm the *not-punk* one in our relationship. In a lot of ways, it's only helped reinforce a lot of my already pretty deeply held feelings about things. In terms of logistics, I am getting to this point within my marriage right now where I am like, "Wow, I've been married for over two years, and we've continued to live our lives in the same way we did before." I'm on tour all the time. I don't feel that it's hard on our marriage at all, actually, but it is getting harder on both of us as individuals. Who knows, it might come to bear on the marriage itself. There are some concerns about it that are specifically from being married, but that are also specifically from getting older and coming to this point where there's a lot that I want to do with my life that I can't do, I can *never* do, I know. I have my life planned out through spring of '08 right now, based around tours for this record that's coming out, and it's cool. It's great. I love touring. I love playing, however much a grind it is. But there are other things that I want to experience that I just can't.

AVC: Like what?

TL: I don't know. Everything from potentially going back to school to having another job. Everything from teaching to fucking going and living in the Peace Corps somewhere else. There's a lot of shit that one could do. This kind of goes back to the previous question of how I can justify preaching to the converted. Just the life of being a musician, being active, touring, making music, sometimes you really have to question: "Is it enough?" I don't know. Ultimately, as a music fan, I wind up coming back around to the notion that it is, because I know how important music is to me. But maybe I'm just going through a phase.

AVC: You wrote on your website, just before the midterm elections, "Cynicism is because I want better, not because I don't care." Do you think about how your music will be interpreted when you're writing?

TL: Yeah. I definitely do, to a certain degree, I guess. But the funny thing is that I think, if I temper myself in any way based on how I think it's going to be perceived, it's going to be in the *other* direction. It's probably because I'm afraid something is going to be too bleeding-heart and mushy.

AVC: They say that cynics are really just optimists who've been hurt. Do you feel that your music is inherently optimistic?

TL: I feel like ultimately it is. In fact, one of the more frustrating things for me, going back to whenever you asked me about that, is that sometimes I feel people don't see how dark a lot of my songs are. A lot of people are like, "Yeah, it's bouncy. It's really positive." To me, it feels pretty desperate and on the verge of breakdown most of the time.