



Ted Leo And The Pharmacists

Living With The Living

(Touch And Go)

Reviewed by **Scott Gordon**

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Nobody will ever be caught just picking a Ted Leo song at an open-mic. Leo's songs can't exist without his unflagging, youthful conviction, and unlike many equally good songwriters, Leo can produce that reliably. In other words, it'd be hard for him to put out an unexciting album right now, so excitement alone wouldn't cut it. After a short sound collage, *Living With The Living* announces itself as another fiercely satisfying Leo record with "The Sons Of Cain," but as on his previous albums, Leo is at his best when he holds off on gratification. *Living* takes up plenty of room for that, running at a full hour—the longest Leo/Pharmacists album yet, and 20 minutes longer than his last, 2004's *Shake The Sheets*.

When Leo wants to moralize, he's admirably direct, but he also chooses the most vulnerable moment possible: "Bomb. Repeat. Bomb," more violent than anything on *Sheets*, comes right after the wistful lull of "A Bottle Of Buckie." Leo's become something of a leader at a time when dissent has become its own form of instant gratification. "Bomb. Repeat. Bomb" turns it back into a challenge—Leo isn't just shunning the bomber pilot who doesn't see or care about his victims, he's trying to level with him, while showing listeners images that they haven't seen either.

Leo and producer Brendan Canty have brightened and polished the scruffy punk that worked so well on *Sheets*, easing shifts like the one between "Bomb" and the more plaintive "La Costa Brava." They also don't hide the ever-increasing tightness Leo, bassist Dave Lerner, and drummer Chris Wilson have forged on *Sheets* and *Hearts Of Oak* and at countless shows. With interruptions like the short "Annunciation Day/Born On Christmas Day" and the reggae bum-out "The Unwanted Things," the album doesn't seem to flow comfortably, probably because Leo isn't interested in comfort. Sure, he still offers sympathy in dark times, but he knows that's nothing without restlessness.