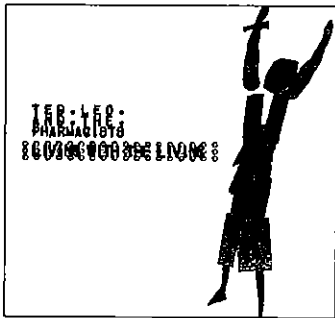


## So Alive

SIGNS OF LIFE IN MUSIC, FILM AND CULTURE  
Paste*With this near-perfect album, Ted Leo is poised to break out in a big way* By David MarcheseTED LEO AND  
THE PHARMACISTS*Living With The Living*

[TOUCH &amp; GO] ★★★★★



Poor Ted Leo. As a man whose music, actions and words all underscore an unwavering commitment to the power of community, *Living With The Living* will cause him some trouble. Not because of any prima-donna antics or self-glorifying lyrics, nor because of any radi-

different influences; each release getting closer to being the kind that can turn heathens into believers. At the risk of downplaying the excellence of his previous work, it's hard not to see *Living With the Living* as that album, the summation of Leo's gifts. The elements are the same—righteous indignation, Celtic soul, British Invasion-approved melodies, thoughtful lyrics, dense guitar blitzkriegs—but they've never been so hot, tight and sharp.

The most amazing thing about the album is that there's nothing especially original about it. Unlike obvious touchstones The Clash, The Specials or Thin Lizzy, Leo isn't an innovator. But the value of originality is one of rock 'n' roll's oldest canards. By just about any measure, Slipknot is a far more unique proposition than Leo has been, or likely ever will be. Leo's strength comes from his willingness

bone than just about anything else out there today.

Leo's songwriting is better than most, too. With its stark lyrics ("when the dying starts, you won't have to know a thing about who's dead") and its tight bursts of scratchy guitar, the frenetic, splenetic "Bomb.Repeat.Bomb" is enough to make anyone squirm under its spotlight. Politics are an integral part of Leo's music, but he never lets them get in the way of the pure, visceral appeal of a good song. "Army Bound" may be about the shadowy deal-making our leaders wish we'd ignore ("In every garden there's a snake now, in every pardon there's a stake now") but the song's strutting melody and choppy riff are what keeps it kicking around inside your head.

As much as listening to Leo's music can leave you feeling as if you've just joined a march, *Living's*

ship, and is given a triumphantly wistful electric Irish-folk arrangement. "The Unwanted Things" works a sultry reggae vamp to great effect, again proving Leo is one of the few punk-bred musicians capable of doing more than just paying lip service to the importance of a groove.

The album's only real flaw is that, at 15 songs (four of which top five minutes), and pitched at such a high level of intensity, listening to the album from start to finish can feel like an endurance test. It's hard to match the passion. Some attractive nooks and crannies might have been bulldozed, but cutting the album down to twelve tracks and 45 minutes would've resulted in something so hot that any country with a nuclear program would've been dying to get their hands on it. Fans of subtlety might also take issue with Leo; his blunt lyrical view can

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cal shift in ideology. The problem is that Leo's searing, gorgeous new album—brimming with magnetic charisma and burning passion—sets him apart from the crowd. On this, his fifth solo album, Leo, like Joe Strummer, Ian MacKaye or Bruce Springsteen before him, proves himself a rock 'n' roll hero.

For almost 20 years—starting in NYC's hardcore scene and then moving on to front mod-punks Chisel in D.C. before striking out on his own—Leo has honed his craft, adjusting his focus and the weight he gives

to dive headfirst into pre-existing musical styles and pump them full of heart and fire until they're ready to explode. The way he makes reggae, punk and '60s rock seem so vital is reminiscent of the young Bruce Springsteen, who also invested older styles with an irresistible in-the-moment fervor. But Leo's templates are altogether tougher, more explicitly political, and less pop than Springsteen's ever were—which is a big part of why *Living With The Living* rocks so much harder, spits more venom and cuts closer to the

smaller, looser and more personal songs are what give the album its heart. "Who Do You Love?" plays like a working-class "Working For the Weekend," only with the AOR sheen and stock lyrics replaced by a bouncy bar-chord riff and the grit of real-life experience. "Colleen" tells the tale of a girl trying hard to keep from giving herself away, and it works within a rhythmic-and-melodic framework that calls to mind prime Kinks or Costello, throwing in a whip-crack guitar solo to boot. "A Bottle of Buckie," is a beautiful tale of friend-

shade toward pedantry. But whether you agree or disagree with his ideas, make no mistake: The music on *Living With the Living* lives up to the album's title. This is music as affirmation. This is music that makes you feel alive. This is Ted Leo's best album.

— DAVID MARCHESE —  
In addition to writing about music for a variety of publications, David Marchese heads up *Salon.com's* Audiofile music blog. He also thinks Thin Lizzy is a woefully underappreciated band.