



TED LEO - PHARMACISTS
 THE TYRANNY OF DISTANCE

TED LEO
 + PHARMACISTS

THE W THINGS

WITH TED LEO/PHARMACISTS' *Living With The Living* out in the marketplace on Touch And Go Records, Ted Leo neophytes won't be forced to pay top dollar for copies of the singer's crucial output for Lookout! Records, *Shake The Sheets*, *Hearts Of Oak* and *The Tyranny Of Distance*. Lookout! currently exists as a catalog label making sure Leo's work (along with other strong-selling titles by Operation Ivy and the Donnas) remains in print (check out lookoutrecords.com or even Leo's webstore at tedleo.com). "[Lookout!]'s priority has been to handle our obligations and keep things lean, mean and efficient until we can invest in new talent," says Molly Neuman, who is co-owner of Lookout!, as well as Leo's manager. "Ted's contractual obligation to Lookout! was up anyway, and he's been incredibly supportive of the label since we've hit some difficult times. We both thought that the best decision would be to find a place that had the resources to invest to help him make the record he had a vision for. Touch And Go was the right place."

To his credit, Leo was also aware of the wrong place to be. When asked if any major labels tried to court him, Neuman responds, "There've been some inquiries over the years, but he's never been interested. He's pretty square on that point." --Con Hongos

Living With the Living understandably reads like the product of these past three years, informed by professional obstacles, shifting lifestyles, distressing headlines and the continued strain of trying to bleed one's self earnestly and uniquely into song. It also comes off as one of Leo's most personal records, with references to relatives, Lookout! staffers and longtime friends. On "C.I.A.," Leo weaves his lyrics in and out of personal asides, eventually confessing something about the source of his seemingly tireless stamina. ("What I stand for/I mostly stand behind/And what I am/I mostly can't hide.") If the Kinks-minded intro to "Army Bound" sounds like a retreat to something calmer, the lyrics keep the pressure on, lamenting the fate of desperate, new recruits. ("In every cradle there's a grave," Leo cries, quickly condemning despair with, "In every captain there's a kid.") Leo/Pharmacists make some of their most overt plays at pop music ("Colleen," "The World Stops Turning"), but the sunshine center only highlights the crusty black lining along the edges. Midway through the largely upbeat album, "Bomb.Repeat.Bomb" interrupts the horrors of war dead-on with the musical muscle of classic D.C. hardcore. Although *Living* is sure to polarize some longtime listeners, it also represents a creative turning point for the band.

"I feel the mix-tape quality that *The Tyranny Of Distance* established is still there," Leo asserts. "I think if there's any pattern across *Shake The Sheets*, [it's that it puts the songs] all solidly in the rock 'n' roll context. With this record, many songs similarly tend toward the folk-punk or pop-punk side of things, but then it also goes into the long, more exploratory songs."

"I can look back along the progression of records I've done, and I know what I was doing and thinking every step of the way, why I made certain decisions," he continues. "I've never had a conscious agenda to tailor an album in terms of an anticipated

audience, but I'll say that with this record, it's the first time I made a conscious decision not to do that."

There's a certain ideology regarding a life in rock which dictates that in order to stay honest to yourself and your fans, you have to stay charged and angry. On the convex, another mode of thought believes that after a certain age, anger should give way to resignation and hope. On *Living*, there are still a few moments of venom positioning Leo/Pharmacists as heir apparent to political street-punk greats like Stiff Little Fingers and Chelsea. But the slate here has, for the most part, been wiped clean—or maybe just painted over with remnants of the previous layer still visible. For Leo, it seems enough that the record is written and available to the public.

He pauses to smirk. "We've got to be going on tour, either way." **alt**

With a career marked by strong records

and countless road miles logged, Ted Leo makes a strong case for the curative power of music. If you want direct testimonials and proof, he'll gladly reference his own personal life for your edification, but the strongest evidence remains in the music. Longtime listeners and a growing base of onlookers just now discovering Leo can attest to the indestructible optimism built into the man's back catalog.

But when news first dropped about a new Leo record coming out this spring, some fans wondered if Leo would finally run out of steam. Keeping pace with the "whole lot of walking to do" messages he confronted in his last record, 2004's *Shake The Sheets*, Leo found his creative muse a tough task to maintain in light of depressing news headlines, his band's Herculean tour schedule and the near dissolution of Lookout Records, the label that released the bulk of his recordings.

The interview takes place on an extremely chilly day in February, the late, East Coast winter casting a shadow all its own. Meteorology is an apt metaphor to convey the physical and emotional demands facing anyone trying to make a living off of his art, let alone off an art that mixes pop and politics.

"At the end of the day, I'd be feeling completely dejected, like there's nothing really more to say at this point," says Leo of the past two years. "So, you just sit there and stare at a blank page, and it all feels relatively pointless. We just have to go through those down periods and eventually, you get so low that the only way to go is up."

Whether he has risen (or simply stepped to the side) will be up for every fan's conjecture, but few will deny that *Living With The Living*, Leo's new disc and Touch And Go debut, takes new directions. It's a solid move away from the frequent comparisons to the politically charged post-punk of the Jam and Billy Bragg. On *Living*, the rock is more classic, invoking the refinement of the Kinks (and their contemporary stylistic offspring, Blur) and the burning blue-collar ambition of Bruce Springsteen. Speaking in very different tones and terms from previous albums, it's one of Leo's most difficult records to dissect by influence.

And like those artists, the struggle to say something new is essential to Leo. With an attenuated career arc spanning from a stint singing for NYHC underdogs Citizen's Arrest, fronting indie-rock contenders Chisel; or performing with drummer Chris Wilson and bassist Dave Lerner—aka the Pharmacists—on *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, Leo has never been

short on material. The trouble isn't so much writer's block, as much as striking out with something singularly "Ted."

"In the few breaks I've had in the year before going into the studio, I had music just coming out of me," says Leo. "I have another album-and-a-half of music written. I'd have all this music, but absolutely nothing to say, nothing to add to the things I'd been saying every night and everyone else was already saying. You have to claw your way back. You find something you can latch on to and a reason to actually waste your time writing a song about, and you just go with it. If I didn't believe the sad, but somewhat optimistic shit I was slinging on the last record, I wouldn't be able to do it every night."

As difficult as it may be in 2007 to write an original punk song about war, it's also hard adjusting to things like the approaching onset of middle age (he turns 37 this year), your record label dropping into bare-bones survival mode (see *slidebar*) and married life (Leo married Secret Stars singer Jodi Buonanno in 2004; they reside in the historic Narragansett Grange Hall outside of Providence, Rhode Island). Leo managed to cram all three experiences into the psychic stretch between releases.

"There's a physical component to living this life," Leo says. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't getting tired of this grueling lifestyle, and that has everything to do with age. I'm probably in better shape than I was 15 years ago. But just in the march of time and amount of energy over the long haul you put into something, you get worn down."

From hardcore hellion to indie journeyman to respected songsmith, TED LEO has been a well-regarded figure in the American underground for more than 15 years. Despite the years and the demands of real life, neither he nor his PHARMACISTS have completely mellowed.

STORY:
MIKE MCKEE

PHOTOS:
LEANN MUELLER

