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**GOOD**

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# New School

**It's easy** to shake your head at the oft-repeated statistics about how many kids don't know what a verb is, or can't find the United States on a map. But in our fear about what will happen if every child doesn't know the quadratic formula by heart, we've created a far more damning problem: We've taken all the fun out of learning. And when learning isn't fun, it's easy for kids to find things to do that are more appealing than sitting in school.

There are countless educators across the country doing hero's work. But if they're going to change the prevailing slide in American education, they need more support. We'd all agree that fear is a lousy guiding principle. Yet we have been so afraid of failure, we've stopped trying to succeed. That isn't working. It's time to go back to school.



**DOODLES** Look throughout the following pages for a number of doodles by the bored inner children of our entire staff.

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New School

# Prescription for Upheaval

**Ted Leo merges his driving rock with political sensibilities.**

The apogee of protest rock might well have come on May 15, 1970. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young recorded "Ohio" in a Los Angeles record studio—a song that Neil Young had penned in feverish reaction to the Kent State killings 11 days earlier. In searing terms, the song called a generation to account for the actions of its government: "Tin soldiers and Nixon coming. / We're finally on our own. / This summer I hear the drumming, / Four dead in Ohio."

In these new tumultuous times, we have plenty to get worked up about (the Florida recount, Katrina, Abu Ghraib, to name a few), but you would be hard-pressed to find such overt social commentary addressed by today's of-the-moment rock bands, at least in any memorable way. Even *Rolling Stone* admitted not long ago that "some of the new political rock is couched in ambiguity"—but isn't a lack of ambiguity required



Leo's 2004 album *Shake the Sheets* featured the hit "Me and Mia" as well as "The One Who Got Us Out," which features overtly political lyrics like "Take it to the floor of Congress / Look into the Core of Rotten / Turn into the one who got us out."

for a clear message of protest?

Maybe we've just been looking for protest in all the wrong places. Maybe the interesting music revolt isn't happening on the FM dial anymore. Case in point: Ted Leo, lead singer and guitarist of Ted Leo and the Pharmacists, and a fixture of the alternative rock scene. His sound is a tightly woven texture of punk and pop, with hard-charging songs of an unambiguously political sort. "I see my songs as vignettes or snapshots about the human condition at a moment of reflection, or crisis, or triumph," says Leo, 37.

As a New Jersey native, his songs can certainly echo the workingman blues of Bruce Springsteen, but they take just as much from Joe Strummer of the Clash and the whole punk ethos. In the late 1980s, Leo fronted the hardcore band Citizens Arrest (before stints with Animal Crackers and Chisel), and while he's no longer screaming into mics and hanging

Leo himself seems unperturbed by this fact. "I don't want to be a rock star, I don't ever want to be playing arenas. My audience is not massive: it's a tight and loyal crowd." He also resists the inevitable comparisons to his protest-rock forebears. His music is its own thing, he says. "To suggest that [the 1960s] were some sort of heyday of musical radicalism," he says, "completely glosses over the fact that when the world got self-satisfied in the 1970s, punk picked up the torch, and [the old radicals] were on the other side of the picket line. You've got people creating amazing art infused with their passion and politics all the time."

So far, Leo's most overt call to action has been *Shake the Sheets*, an album he released just before the 2004 presidential election. He and his band took their fist-pumping pop songs to get-out-the-vote events, shows supporting John Kerry, and organized protests.

*"You've got people creating amazing art infused with their passion and politics all the time."*

from rafters, the antiestablishment rebellion of hardcore punk still rings clearly throughout his newer, more popular work. In songs like "Heart Problems," "Bomb. Repeat. Bomb," and "The One Who Got Us Out," he laments the Iraq war, the abuse of detainees, the erosion of our civil liberties, our failing economy, and our broken health-care system.

In this age of Clear Channel, and the soft banalities of corporate-curated rock radio, it would seem quite a large leap for Leo's songs—angry and unapologetic—to seize a national audience in the way that "Ohio" or Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son" captured college campuses decades ago. But

Despite the outcome of that election, *Shake the Sheets* struck a chord with a larger audience and marked a sharper, more direct approach in Leo's songwriting. This time around, he's at it again, having just performed at the Campus Progress national conference in Washington, D.C., and touring with the band Against Me! this fall. He has also been working on a new crop of songs, which he plans to release in time for the November elections.

—LINDSAY BALLANT