

The Washington Post

4/13/2007

LIVING WITH THE LIVING

Ted Leo and the Pharmacists

"Meaty, Beaty, Big and Bouncy": It's too bad the Who swiped that title for its 1971 best-of set, because that string of modifiers describes the visceral, sprawling, anthemic new album by Ted Leo and the Pharmacists to a T.

Much of the meat is in the social and political issues that Leo bites off, notably those pertaining to injustice, hypocrisy and aggression. Titles such as "C.I.A.," "Fourth World War" and "Bomb, Repeat, Bomb" abound, but happily the pathos with which the leather-lunged belter laces his outrage keeps his dissent from degenerating into strident leftist agitprop. On "The Unwanted Things," in a soulful falsetto over a spongy ska beat, he mourns, "I'm crying for the warring dead / And I'm crying because there's more ahead." His choice of a Third World rhythm here conveys as much as his tears. Just as tonic is the way that Leo leavens the program with songs about romance and friendship, "Colleen" and "A Bottle of Buckie" being particularly affecting.

Rooted in first-generation punk, Leo and the Pharmacists' big, jagged, careening riff-rock owes debts to everyone from the Clash, Elvis Costello and Bill Bragg to the Mekons, the Jam and U2. Nods to British invasion bands like the Kinks and heartland roots-rockers like Bruce Springsteen are evident as well, but all of these allusions are less derivative than inspired. Thoroughly internalized, these touchstones add ballast to the sound of a band expanding upon the urgent vernacular of their forebears to create a language of musical protest for today.

-- Bill Friskies-Warren