

MUSICIAN



TOM MORELLO

A fearless guitarist channels his righteous rage

By Russell Hall

"I'VE TRIED TO TAKE OFF THE BLINDERS IN REGARD TO what could be done with a guitar," says Tom Morello. "I'm like the Old McDonald of the instrument, going through a barnyard of sounds. I might not be able to make the guitar 'moo' or sound like a hay thrasher, but if you're aiming for that instead of Chuck Berry riffs you wind up at a place that's different."

Morello has been putting that philosophy into practice for more than 20 years. As a founding member of Rage Against the Machine, the 47-year-old Illinois native delivered pulverizing funk-metal riffs and dreamed up so many dissonant kamikaze licks that he wound up keeping what he calls a "noise chart" to keep track of them. Following Rage frontman Zack de la Rocha's exit in 2000, Morello and his remaining bandmates teamed with Soundgarden singer Chris Cornell to form the hit hard-rock supergroup Audioslave.

Even before that band's dissolution in 2007 after three albums,

Morello had begun writing acoustic-based protest songs and performing at small venues. Dubbing his folk-singer alter ego the Nightwatchman, he released a full-length acoustic album, 2007's *One Man Revolution*. His third and latest full-length Nightwatchman release, *World Wide Rebel Songs*, runs the gamut from stormy riff-rockers to harmonica-laced ballads that bring to mind vintage Bob Dylan. "I wanted to capture a vibe midway between Johnny Cash and Che Guevara," says Morello. "Between murder ballads and Molotov anthems."

Morello also records with Coup frontman Boots Riley as Street Sweeper Social Club, has performed sporadically with the reunited Rage Against the Machine since 2007, and in October will unveil his debut as a comic-book author, *Orchid* (which he describes as "*The Lord of the Rings* meets *The Battle of Algiers*"). He spoke to us from his home in Los Angeles.



'These albums are true and accurate representations of who I am and of what I want to do.'

What inspired the Nightwatchman?

It was clear to me early on that Audioslave was going to be less of a political outlet than Rage Against the Machine. I wanted to find a way to express my worldview through music, even if that involved doing it humbly, by playing open-mic nights at coffeehouses around Los Angeles. I wrote a handful of songs and began performing them live, and really caught the bug. In fact, when I was on tour with Audioslave playing big arena shows, on nights off I would sign up for open-mic nights at little country-western bars and anarchist-hippie coffeehouses. I did that around the country and developed a wealth of material I believed in as much as anything I've done in my career.

Did it come naturally?

I imagined myself as a singer-songwriter with didactic and strident political views expressed in the songs, but what came out was very different. It was much more

'There's a big difference between being a musician and being an artist.'

personal, and much darker, frankly, than I anticipated. It actually worried my fiancée at the time. But it felt like an honest and true expression. And I loved the artistic challenge of formulating a second act in my musical life—going from shredding electric guitar player to political singer-songwriter.

How do you play differently alone than you would with a band?

It's the difference between chemistry and purity. In a band you get chemistry. When a band is great, you're able to create something that none of the four or five of you could do alone—something that can only result from the interaction of that unique group of people. With the Nightwatchman stuff, you get something that's pure. Every word I sing, every note I play, all comes from me. Of course the listener is then free to take it or leave it.

When did you pick up the guitar?

I didn't start playing until I was 17. At that time a friend gave me the best advice as far

as music goes. He said, "Practice at least one hour a day, every day, no matter what." I took that to heart and my playing improved. I went from two hours to four hours a day until eventually I was practicing eight hours a day. That means if you're on vacation with the family in Ireland, for example, you stop at a bus station and play for 45 minutes to get toward your allotted practice time. I did that in an obsessive-compulsive way that I don't recommend—it precludes a social life. But I fell head over heels for the instrument.

How did you find your style?

Practicing eight hours a day will get you technical ability, but there's a big difference between being a musician and being an artist. I soon became very accomplished technically. I could play some amazing solos, but the real breakthrough came when I started using the toggle switch to emulate a DJ's scratching. This was in the very early days of Rage Against the Machine. At that point I went away from practicing scales for four hours a day to concentrating on the parts of my playing that were unique or accidental, and trying to craft those into music and songs. That's when I found my voice on the instrument.

Do you practice on acoustic?

Yes. In my home right now there's just one guitar, a nylon-string acoustic. That's what I write on. I quickly developed a good ear for knowing when I played riffs on that nylon-string guitar what it was going to sound like in a stadium. Then I would bring those ideas into the practice room and, combined with the ideas of my bandmates, the music would develop. I wrote Audioslave and Rage Against the Machine songs on it. Now I'm writing Nightwatchman songs on it.

Why stick to that guitar?

Initially it was a matter of convenience. I could take the acoustic guitar everywhere, and then if I got an idea in the middle of the night I didn't need to fire up the Marshall stack in my apartment and disturb the neighbors. I could just record ideas into a little condenser mic.

Do you still keep the "noise chart"?

Not so much these days. (*Laughs*) But the noise chart was pretty awesome. I hope I haven't thrown it out. It was really helpful in the early days. Sometimes I would come up with sounds that were otherworldly and then not remember how I made them. I would listen to things on cassette and think, "What was I doing?" That's why I started the noise charts. But I don't keep them

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Tom Morello is unflinchingly loyal to his old gear and guitars, relying mainly for electric sounds on his trademark axe with the provocative slogan "Arm the Homeless" emblazoned on the body. "It's a Frankenstein guitar, custom-made with a Kramer knockoff neck and a Kramer Pacer body," he says. Morello's other go-to electrics include a 1982 Sendero Luminoso Mexican Telecaster for drop-D tunings, and for overdubbing he often uses what he calls his "Taco Bell" Les Paul ("It's the color of their hot sauce," he explains).

His main acoustic guitar for the Nightwatchman material has been a nylon-string Ibanez Galvador. For *Worldwide Rebel Songs*, however, he also used steel-string acoustics for the first time. "The two main guitars are a Gibson and Takamine," he says. "I wanted to employ steel strings for some of the more aggressive acoustic songs. The song 'Black Spartacus Heart Attack Machine' was actually written about the Gibson steel-string."



For amplification, Morello uses a Marshall JCM800 2205 50-watt head and Peavey 4x12 cabinet that date back to his early days in Rage Against the Machine. His effects setup is likewise simple, consisting mainly of a Dunlop Cry Baby Wah Wah, a DigiTech Whammy WH-1 (the original model), a DOD EQ pedal and an Ibanez DFL Flanger. "I was trying to get a sort of Randy Rhoads sound," Morello says of his equipment. "Finally I gave up and thought, 'OK, this is going to be my setup and I'm never going to think about it again.'"

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Steve C. Mitchell/EPA/Landov

At New Orleans' Voodoo Experience, October, 2010

'I loved the artistic challenge of formulating a second act in my musical life.'

any more. I've tried to jettison a lot of the obsessive-compulsive aspects of my playing and just keep my antenna up and rely on pure creativity. That was something I was afraid of before. Doing the Nightwatchman stuff has given me a great deal of confidence to plunge into new areas, artistically.

How so?

I had become very comfortable playing electric guitar in arenas. I could do that night after night. Getting out of that safety zone—singing and writing lyrics, performing songs with an emotional and personal content in front of strangers—was new and very different from hiding behind a Marshall stack in a band with a lot of hits. It made me realize I could take chances—not just by

playing animal noises on the guitar, but real artistic chances.

What's up with Rage?

Someone could write a thick tome consisting of nothing but Rage Against the Machine rumors that have circulated through the years. *(laughs)* When something big happens with Rage, I promise we will let everyone know. It will not be a secret.

What has adopting the Nightwatchman persona given you?

I love being a solo artist, and I love having moved out of that comfort zone of being just a rock guitar player. Both the big picture and every little detail are mine to mess up. I can steer things in any direction I want.

POLITICAL MACHINE

Given his social activism and efforts on behalf of the disenfranchised, it's hardly surprising that Morello is sometimes asked if he might consider running for public office. A two-year tenure inside the Washington, D.C., machinery dissuaded him of that notion. "I was a scheduling secretary for Senator Alan Cranston from 1987 to 1989," he explains. "I got to see the inner workings of a political office. The level of compromise involved was something I couldn't stomach. There was an instance where a woman called the senator's office complaining that Mexicans were moving into her neighborhood. I told her she was a racist and that she could go to hell, thinking I had done a good deed for that day. Instead I got yelled at for two weeks by everybody up and down the hierarchical chain in the senator's office. I thought, 'If I'm in a job where I can't tell a racist to go to hell, I'm in the wrong job.' I chose a career where I never have to compromise, on any level."

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