

AARPSM



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Tom Morello Rages On

Three decades into his career, the guitar legend continues to create innovative, socially conscious music

by Sandra Ebejer, November 5, 2021

Tom Morello, most widely known as the guitarist for rock bands Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave, laughs when he realizes he's been an AARP member for years. "It's crazy," he says. "I'm 57 now. I got my AARP card in the mail seven years ago. And it's such a jarring moment."

Though he jokes that he likes to think he's still 22, it recently dawned on him that it's been nearly 30 years since his talents were introduced to the world through Rage Against the Machine's self-titled debut album in 1991. In fact, referring to Morello as simply "a guitar player" doesn't do his work justice. Over the years, Morello has established himself as a barrier-

breaking, genre-bending rock legend with a remarkable body of work. He is truly a musical pioneer.

The son of a Kenyan diplomat and an Italian American schoolteacher, Morello was raised by his single mother, Mary, in the small town of Libertyville, Illinois. Mary, he says, “remains the most radical member of the Morello family.” At 98 years old, she continues to be an outspoken activist involved with a number of social justice organizations. It is no surprise, then, that she taught her son — the only Black kid in town — to fight for his rights from a young age.

“People will sometimes ask, ‘How were you politicized?,’ assuming it was reading a Noam Chomsky or Howard Zinn text,” he says. “No, it happened at day care when I was 5 years old. There was this older kid who’d just pound me every day and N-word me. My mom told me about a fella by the name of Malcolm X. She said, ‘Whenever you’re confronted with racism, you’re the one that has to resist it and has to fight back.’ I was like, ‘I’m 5.’ She’s like, ‘Yeah, even when you’re 5.’”

At 17, Morello, by then a political science major at Harvard University, picked up his first guitar. “I’ve only ever heard of one guitarist who started that late and made albums,” he says. “And that was Robert Johnson, the famed blues guitar player who had to sell his soul to the devil to get good. Given my Catholic upbringing, that wasn’t really on the table.”

Instead, he practiced daily, sometimes logging up to eight hours a day. “I think it was a way of exerting some control,” Morello says. “I recognized early with the guitar that it was only my will that determined success or failure in that relationship, so I really leaned in.”

Though his years of practice paid off, Morello wasn’t entirely pleased with his sound. “I became a very technically skilled musician,” he says. “But I didn’t really like the songs that I was writing. I could play a shredding guitar solo or make you weep with an emotional one. But I didn’t have my own voice on the instrument.”

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After graduating from Harvard, he moved to Los Angeles and in 1991 formed the trailblazing rap-rock band Rage Against the Machine with vocalist Zack de la Rocha, drummer Brad Wilk and bass player Tim Commerford. It was during this time that Morello really began to manipulate the guitar’s sound and expand the boundaries of what the instrument could do.

“It was really at the beginning of Rage Against the Machine when I began self-identifying as the DJ in the band,” Morello says. “With my own bare hands and my Marshall half-stack [amplifier and speakers] and my electric guitar, I began practicing barnyard animal noises and sounds from the *Star Wars* trilogy and the police helicopter overhead and whatever else. All of a sudden, I started to find my voice on the instrument and started to cobble together a musical language and vernacular that felt like it was my own.”

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With this experimentation, Morello carved a sound that was so unheard of for a single instrument that the band had to include a disclaimer in the liner notes of its first album: “No samples, keyboards or synthesizers used in the making of this recording.”

Rage Against the Machine would go on to release four studio albums and receive two Grammy Awards before disbanding in 2000. In the years since, Morello — a lifelong fan of Kiss, Black Sabbath, AC/DC and Led Zeppelin — has continued to keep one foot in the world of hard rock while creating revolutionary music in a variety of genres. From his work in the supergroups Audioslave (featuring members of Rage Against the Machine with the late Chris Cornell on vocals) and Prophets of Rage (with members of Rage Against the Machine, Public Enemy’s Chuck D and Cypress Hill’s B-Real), to performing as the folk artist The Nightwatchman and joining Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band, Morello has consistently fused his cutting-edge guitar sound with his unwavering pursuit of social justice to produce some of the most innovative, transformative music of the past 30 years.

Now, Morello has a new release, *The Atlas Underground Fire*, which was born of the pandemic. As he explains, “From the time I was 17 until March of 2020, I had been nonstop writing, recording and performing. All that came to a screeching halt with the lockdown. And while I have a nice studio at my house, I don’t know how to work it. Normally, there’s an engineer that does that. So it was the first musical drought of my entire adult life. It was a time of great anxiety, frustration and depression.”

After reading that Kanye West would sometimes record vocals into his phone’s voice memo app, Morello began using his iPhone to record new music. He would then email the riffs to artists around the world. Some of the artists, such as Bruce Springsteen and Eddie Vedder, were friends. Others he hadn’t yet met.

“[I’d] kind of go, ‘Who do I want to send this to? Who might I want to make a song with today?’ Some were ones that were already in my phone and in my Rolodex, and others I would just kinda scroll around on Spotify or call younger, hipper, cooler friends of mine and go, ‘What’s the last song you listened to that was awesome?’ And reach out to them and say, ‘Hey, I’m Tom Morello, would you like to make a song today?’”

The result is an impressive slate of collaborations with artists from around the world. With Morello’s guitar leading the way, the tunes on the album vary from shredding heavy metal and pounding electronic dance music to Southern rock and reggae. He says its creation was not only creatively fulfilling, but beneficial to his mental health during a time when “every day was in some ways exactly the same.”

“This record was not so much a creative endeavor as it was an antidepressant,” Morello says. “It was a life raft. But part of that life raft was forging this global community of collaborators. From Springsteen in New Jersey to Eddie Vedder in the Pacific Northwest, from Damian Marley in Jamaica to Mike Posner, who recorded vocals at 25,000 feet in Nepal on his way to summiting Mount Everest, to Sama’ Abdulhadi, a great young Palestinian DJ who mixed the song during the Israeli bombing of Palestine, to [hardcore punk band] Refused, in Sweden. It was like this rock ’n’ roll pen pal community that I could plug into on a daily basis to be like, ‘I am still a guitar player!’”

When asked to recommend a few of his favorite contemporary artists, Morello says, “Grandson [and] K.Flay are very young, great, thoughtful artists.” He also shares that Sama’ Abdulhadi is “a tremendous EDM [electronic dance music] DJ. Vic Mensa is a great young rapper out of Chicago who I’ve had the honor of working with before. Off the top of my head those are some that people should check out.”

In the coming months, Morello plans to rejoin his former Rage Against the Machine bandmates for a tour that is scheduled to kick off in March 2022. It will be the band’s first time playing together in over a decade. In the meantime, he hosts a weekly podcast, *Tom Morello’s Maximum Firepower*, on SiriusXM Lithium, and is even becoming comfortable with the fact that he’s no longer 22.

“The one that I’ve learned is stop trying to be people you’re not,” he says. “I tried on so many hats before I finally just gave up and went, *You know what? I like Lady Gaga. Yes, I play Dungeons & Dragons. Yes. I’m fifty f---ing seven years old! I can still shred my ass off on guitar. Come at me!*”



Kevin Mazur/Getty Images for The Chris Cornell Estate

Tom Morello's Favorite Songs of Rebellion and Liberation

Although he's always loved heavy metal, Tom Morello says it was bands like Public Enemy and The Clash that taught him it was possible to combine great music with revolutionary politics. In this playlist for AARP, he shares some of his favorite songs of rebellion and liberation.

***Imagine* performed by John Lennon**

“On some of the songs, one of the things they have in common is that they are songs that are couched in such tremendous song craftsmanship and gorgeous melody that their underlying meaning sometimes escapes the listener. John Lennon's ‘Imagine’ would be top of that list. In the pantheon of Bruce Springsteen's ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ and perhaps Rage Against the Machine's ‘Killing in the Name,’ it's a song that people sometimes enjoy with having no idea that is a radical anarchist manifesto.”

***This Land Is Your Land* performed by Woody Guthrie**

“Another song which you likely only learned the censored verses of when you were in the third grade. It's Woody Guthrie's radical manifesto. You know, the lines ‘Nobody living can ever stop me / As I go walking that freedom highway / Nobody living can ever make me turn back’ because this land was made for you and me. It was a song that was written against Irving Berlin's ‘God Bless America.’ Woody Guthrie was deeply offended by that song, and so he wrote a song for the people. And one day, if everything goes as I'd like it to go, that'll replace our national anthem.”

***Biko* performed by Peter Gabriel**

“Biko, kind of the Martin Luther King Jr. of South Africa during the apartheid era, was murdered by apartheid police while in custody. That Peter Gabriel song was one of the songs that really politicized me as a youth and made me realize that this was a global struggle.”

***Get Up, Stand Up* performed by Bob Marley & the Wailers**

“‘Get Up, Stand Up’ is a song that I have heard at rallies in the streets from Tokyo to Peoria, Illinois. [Bob Marley’s] words and his wisdom are absolutely timeless, and people will continue to get up and stand up and fight for their rights to his music for centuries to come, I suspect.”

***Fight the Power* performed by Public Enemy**

“Public Enemy was a news service for African Americans for a decade or more. The timeless lyrics throughout the catalog and particularly in that song — ‘Most of my heroes don’t appear on no stamps’ is all you need to know. It lays bare the real founding principle of this country, which is demand liberty while embracing white supremacy. And Chuck D had the courage to say that into the microphone.”

***Highway to Hell* performed by AC/DC**

“To me it’s a song of heavy metal, headbanging, feral, youthful liberation. It’s middle finger up to the folks. Like, we’re going to rock hard tonight and no one, not even the devil, is gonna stop us.”

***The Ghost of Tom Joad* performed by Bruce Springsteen & The E Street Band with Tom Morello**

“‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’ has three iterations: the plaintive minor key acoustic ballad on the Bruce Springsteen record of the same name, the thundering Rage Against the Machine riffy version, and the hybrid version that Bruce and I have played a number of times. [The song is] drawing from the hero of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and modernizing it to the struggles of migrants and the downtrodden and the homeless, and the ever-enduring spirit of resistance to injustice that exists in the hearts and minds of people in this country.”

***Strange Fruit* performed by Billie Holiday**

“It told the truth about lynching in the United States and in the horrific Jim Crow era and beyond. And it’s an absolute high point of artistic achievement, with that vocal performance and that lyric and that subject matter, [it] is something should be taught in every American history class, both at home and abroad.”

***The Star Spangled Banner* performed by Jimi Hendrix**

“It’s the idea that music does not require lyrics in order to be political, and by deconstructing the staid and sometimes stuffy ‘Star-Spangled Banner,’ and reinterpreting it by creating the sounds of the tumultuous late ’60s, from the bombs of the Vietnam War to the street battles in Chicago, through his Marshall stack, Jimi Hendrix showed the possibility of the guitar as a divining rod of truth in revelation.”

***Bella Ciao* performed by Giovanna Daffini**

“‘Bella Ciao’ is a global anti-fascist anthem, an Italian folk song that the anti-Nazi partisans would sing during World War II. It’s not so much known in the United States, but it’s sung kind of everywhere else in the world, at barricades and on picket lines where people are standing up against the fascists.”

One Man Revolution* performed by Tom Morello: *The Nightwatchman

“‘One Man Revolution’ is a song of mine. It’s the first song on my first solo record. I was the only Black kid in all-white town, the only anarchist at a conservative high school, the only spandex-wearing heavy metal guitarist at Harvard University, and then the only Ivy League, *Star Trek*-loving, Dungeons & Dragons-playing nerd in the world’s biggest political rock-rap band. So that song has served as a kind of personal manifesto since the day I wrote it.”

***Rebel Girl* performed by Bikini Kill**

“That’s just I think one of the greatest anthems of all time, of just like punk feminism, power to the people, destroy the patriarchy with three chords.”

***Born This Way* performed by Lady Gaga**

“I may not be widely known as a Lady Gaga fan, but I am. And that song, ‘Born This Way,’ I just think is a great song of personal liberation and freedom and of embracing who you are. I think it’s one of the greatest anthems of personal liberation ever.”

***Anarchy in the U.K.* performed by the Sex Pistols**

“‘Anarchy in the U.K.’ was the song that convinced me to play electric guitar. Until hearing the Sex Pistols cassette I was sure that you needed an expensive Les Paul and a wall of Marshall stacks and a castle on a Scottish loch in order to play rock ’n’ roll. The Sex Pistols taught me you just need a damp basement, and you need to really, really, really mean it.”

***With God on Our Side* by Bob Dylan**

“My list felt incomplete without with some Bob Dylan on it. You can skip American History 101 in college. Just listen to that song beginning to end. You’ll get the picture. The picture is absolutely HD on that one.”