



# One Man Revolution: An Interview with Tom Morello

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by **Thomas Matlack**

Tom Morello, lead guitarist of Rage Against the Machine and The Nightwatchman, is rockin' a guitar riff as the crowd goes wild. His tongue, proverbially speaking, is sticking out at the Berklee School of music in Boston. This is the next to last stop on his "Justice Tour". All the proceeds from tonight's show go toward the fight for universal health care.

Morello has assembled two rappers, a local boy-wonder folk singer, and a couple of well known rock bands to play for anyone willing to come out on a rainy Sunday night and shell out \$15 for a seat. Morello tells the crowd that he is sick of fans telling him that they can beat him at the video-game Guitar Hero. He promises to blow their minds tonight and the more than mildly suggestive toothsome playing has the crowd in frenzy.

The mood back-stage is jubilant and loose—an extended jam session. I'm sitting on a big black speaker box just out of sight of the audience but about five feet from the drum set, put to good use by a series of small well-muscled men with fast hands and big biceps. They answer to nick names like "Mad Dog". Gary Cherone from Van Halen wanders up from the dressing room to slap me on the back and watch his friends play. I get the feeling these guys don't really care if there are five people in the crowd, or five thousand. They're on fire.

"PEOPLE, are you having a GOOD-MOTHER-FUCKING-TIME?" Morello yells enthusiastically. As he comes off stage, after introducing the next act, he sees me sitting with my notebook open. He walks over to ask, "How are you doing man? Can I get you water or a whiskey?"

Morello's second solo album, *The Fabled City* is out September 30th, along with a documentary movie about the Justice Tour. The timing is not an accident. He is as passionate about politics as he is about music. His background is almost identical to Barack Obama's. Morello's parents met during Kenya's struggle for independence. They traveled back to New York, where Tom was born, when his dad became Kenya's first black delegate to the United Nations. Soon thereafter his dad returned home to Kenya. His white mom took Morello to rural Illinois to grow up as the only black kid in an all-white town.

Morello was the first student from his high school to attend Harvard. His Harvard classmates recall him as the Jimi Hendrix disciple who started the Ivy League's first heavy metal interest group. I was

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introduced to Morello by his Harvard roommate, my partner in our venture capital firm.

I join Morello and the rest of the musicians on the Justice Tour in Boston. He is wearing mirrored sunglasses, his trademark baseball hat, and black boots with bright red laces. Everyone except Morello has on Converse sneakers. At the Four Seasons, we all pile into a van to ride over to sound-check. Some light rock 'n' roll banter about hookers and drugs breaks out in the confined quarters of the beat up vehicle (which I take to be in jest). Wayne Kramer, sitting next to me, pipes up. "Hookers? I was in the fucking gym at nine this morning watchin' *Meet the Press!*"

I don't let on that I already know that The Motor City Five ("MC5") was one of the most influential bands during the 1960s, because my own father was a leader in the Civil Rights and Anti-War movement, risking his life in Mississippi in 1964, sending his draft card back to the selective service and helping Daniel Berrigan, a Catholic priest who was one of the ten most wanted men in the country, escape the FBI. MC5's politics and sound was born out of watching their hometown of Detroit burn to the ground during the summer of love in 1967. Poet John Sinclair formed the White Panther Party (WPP) and named MC5 its official voice. The WPP endorsed the Black Panther's agenda fully through "total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock 'n' roll, dope and fucking in the streets."

In August 1968, lead guitarist Wayne Kramer—dressed in the American flag—and the MC5 took the stage in Grant Park, Chicago against the direct threat of violence by Mayor Daley. The police moved in, tear gas rained down, and the band and protestors were beaten with billy clubs, losing all their equipment and sparking a week of demonstration and violence. I also don't mention the fact that despite getting arrested with my dad when I was eight at Westover Airforce Base, I have spent my adult life as just the kind of capitalist pig Morello sees as the problem.

Back in the van, Morello laughs at Kramer and tells me, "Wayne is the titanium backbone of this tour." The conversation quickly turns to Obama's performance on the Sunday chat shows. "How did our guy do?" Morello asks. I listen closely, since Morello's similarities to Obama have led many to press him to endorse his apparent twin. Privately, Morello confessed to me that he was deeply moved by Obama's speech on race. But publicly he maintains that he will endorse the first candidate who promises to prosecute Bush for crimes against humanity. His whole point is that people change the world, not politicians. We shouldn't wait for the system to magically change by itself. We should, "fuck it up!"

Still, I've noted a lot of Obama's "change" language in Morello's recent concerts and, in the van, its clear these guys are Obama supporters. "He did well," Kramer tells Morello. "He actually thinks about his answers, which could be confused with indecision even though it's not. He has a nuanced view of the world. Everyone else speaks in sound bites that mean nothing. Barack actually tries to answer the question."

During the sound check before the concert, Morello plays cuts from his first Nightwatchman album on his acoustic guitar. Rappers and folks singers arrive to hugs and high-fives. During sound check on House Gone Up in Flames—a song about "Colin Powell's lies" in Iraq—Morello sings the lyric "It was in St. Peter's denial that he'd thrice deny" which leads to an extended Biblical discussion. Morello expounds on the Last Supper and its relevance to our foreign policy. Once the sound is to Morello's liking, it is time to run through the individual artists, figure out who is going to play with whom, and finally figure out a play list. It is less than an hour until the doors open.

Boots Riley, a poet and free-style rapper whose hair looks distinctly like Don King's, tries a bit of his "5 Million Ways to Kill a C.E.O." Next, Mr. Lif, a rapper with long and thick dread-locks down his

back, comes on stage for the last sound check. He needs Morello, Kramer, and the rest of the traveling band to back him up. Lif hands his iPod to the technician running the sound board. Now it's 20 minutes to doors. The music blares over the concert speakers as Morello concentrates on each note to try to learn the song. As time runs out, Morello looks over at me and yells, "It is all going to come together. You can tell by my relaxed demeanor!"

As the crowd files in upstairs, Morello tells me in the dressing room about one of his Kenyan half-brothers, Segeni, who made his way to Georgetown University still completely unaware of Morello's existence. While searching the web about their mutual father, Segeni found a mention of the connection to Morello, who happened to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. Still not believing he had a rock star American brother, he ran down to the news stand to stare at the pictures of Morello. As it turns out, Morello and his dad share a striking resemblance.

Taking the stage as part of the permanent band on the Justice Tour, Wayne Kramer has changed his worn Converse sneakers into brand new white ones. Kramer, who must be 60, asks the crowd, "Where is Lee Harvey Oswald now that we really need him?" as he and Morello dig into MC5's most famous, and controversial, song "Kick out the Jams, Motherfucker!" Jesse Malin, known as a punk rocker with a soft heart whose career has been fostered by Ryan Adams and Bruce Springsteen, takes the stage next with only a female keyboard player dressed in black and sporting four-inch heels. I am reminded of both Neil Young and Green Day as he sings a track off his first album, "The Fine Art of Self-Destruction".

"Writing songs is kind of like masturbating," he tells the crowd. "I need to find that quiet moment when no one is around. The good thing about living in New York is I can walk around while I'm writing and no one bothers me. One day on the Upper West Side, I crossed the street and accidentally bumped into this little lady. I looked down and said to myself, 'Oh, shit that's Yoko.' When I got home I started to play my guitar and write some lyrics. My cat looked at me like 'what the fuck?'"

"The song became my own little Rorschach test. I finally realized that it was about that whole generation that I missed out on. Even my friends who were so punk rock and hard core—who wanted to change the system and fuck things up—had to go on and become part of society and have kids and get jobs. But imagine losing John Lennon—your partner and a Beatle—with whom you were going to start a revolution to change the world with peace. The song started to come to me more and more as I thought about how you might think you are so radical and still want to fuck things up but you still have to go to Toy-R-U's and stare at Jeffrey the Giraffe, or you have to go to some job you fucking hate. But when you look in the mirror you still see that guy who wanted to change everything."

Chetro Urmston and State Radio, who often open for Dave Matthews, take the stage carrying trays of electric guitar pedals. As Chetro plugs in, I hone in on his huge curly blond afro and the box of welded scrap metal with strings which is apparently his guitar. He turns to ask, "Mad dog, you ready?" The drummer, a mild-mannered 20-something with a soft beard and grungy clothes, nods his head yes and without warning dives into a solo more than worthy of his nickname. Chetro belts out their hit song CIA (with the chorus "Don't you ever let us down!") The reggae sound and hard-driving beat transport me for the first time during the concert.

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Chetro follows up with "Camilo", a haunting song about their friend who served in Iraq, came home after his first tour of duty, became a conscientious objector and refused to go back to war. The song recounts how he was tried and found guilty of deserting the Army and served nine months in military prison. "Oh my country won't you call out, doorbells are ringing with boxes of bones, from another land's war torn corners, to a prison cell of my own." I've been trying to keep up my defenses but something about the sound pierces my heart. In the coming days, I begin to play the song every morning on the way to school drop-off, only to find out it has long been my 14-year-old daughter's favorite video on YouTube.

"Light that shit up!" Morello commands the audience as he comes back on stage. "Hold up that Blackberry where I can see it." The crowd is now awash in the glow of blue screen light. He explains that the Justice Tour is about liberating the country and by our very presence, Boston is now a "free zone". But there is more to be done. "Text 'AI5055' right now to send a message that we won't stand for torture. We demand Guantanamo be torn down!"

He's just visited Walter Reed, he explains, and is thinking about what victory in Iraq might look like, since the Iraqi people and the American people have already lost so much. Victory might mean bringing those responsible for crimes against humanity to justice, he says. "So when they tear that mother down they might want to save one cell for George W. and his buddies and make sure to pipe in plenty of Rage Against the Machine!" As Morello rips into the opening bars of *Fortunate Son*, backed by Kramer, he thanks the audience for their kind attention but tells them "it's time to make some fucking noise!"

Backstage, Morello tells me about making the *Rage* video for *Sleep Now in the Fire* with Michael Moore on Wall Street. Morello, who had been arrested scores of times, asked Moore before they started shooting how many times he had been arrested. He was shocked when Moore admitted, "Never." The idea was to film the video on Wall Street during lunch hour, as the traders and brokers flooded into the streets. They had a permit to play on the steps of the Federal building across from the New York Stock Exchange, but not in the city streets. Soon Morello was enveloped in a sea of traders as he went crazy on the guitar. Moore told the band to move down into the street and keep playing no matter what happened.

The City Police Sergeant made it very clear the band had to move back onto the steps and physically attempted to restrain them. The Sergeant grew angry as Morello and the rest of the band continued down into the street. Finally, he reached over and unplugged Morello's guitar. To the Sergeant's great amazement the music didn't stop, since it was being piped in for the shoot. "The look on his face was like the first time cavemen saw fire," Morello recalls. "It was like *Rage* had some magical power over the police." The Sergeant looked at Morello with disgust and then at bass player Timmy C, who's built like a superhero, and walked straight between them to throw handcuffs on Moore, arresting him and dragging him off.

Morello, the band, and the crowd of fans attempted to storm the stock exchange in hopes of demonstrating on the floor. Morello got into a physical altercation with the guards, ultimately causing the NYSE to go into full lock-down at 2:52pm to prevent the mob from getting inside. As Morello tells me this story, I don't have the heart to tell him that in my previous life I was on the inside around that time, taking *The Providence Journal Company* public, watching our stock open on the floor and then ringing the bell on the New York Stock Exchange triumphantly as the blond-haired-boy-wonder Chief Financial Officer of the oldest media company in the country. We seem to have been traveling in parallel universes.

Morello didn't start playing guitar until he was 17. "I didn't choose the instrument, it chose me like a viral infection," he explains. "I couldn't get rid of it. So I came to see my responsibility as weaving my convictions into my vocation." After Harvard, Morello packed his Chevy Astro van and drove to Los Angeles with a thousand bucks in his pocket. He arrived knowing no one and suffered through a series of "soul-crushing" jobs in retail before working for Senator Alan Cranston in a number of roles, eventually becoming his scheduling secretary for two years. Even though he respected the Senator's politics, Morello was shocked to learn that on a daily basis, Cranston spent his time calling up rich guys to ask for money. For the first time he saw "the duck-tape that holds our democracy together."

Morello's first record deal was with a band called Lock-Up. They produced an ill-fated record entitled, "Something Bitchin' This Way Comes." The band and record went nowhere. At 26, Morello thought his musical aspirations were over. Rage Against the Machine formed in August of 1991. Where Lock-Up had tried to play by the rules, Rage most certainly did not. "We had no expectation of even being able to play a show," Morello recalls. "We were perfectly content to make a cassette and sell it for \$5 to anyone who would buy it." The band spoke to the American psyche.

In retrospect, Morello sees their success as the juxtaposition of real world events like Rodney King and massive feigned rebellion in the music world. Rage's rebellion was for real. They were an ethnically mixed group who played Neo-Marxist rants. "In our first single we shouted 'fuck-you I won't do what you tell me' sixteen times in a row," he recalls. At first American censors outlawed the group. They became huge in Europe before dominating the American music scene with Morello's monster riffs.

In recent years, Morello's moved away from his monumental electric sound and struck out on a solo acoustic career. An unlikely convert to folk music, he says "sometimes three cords and the truth can be just as powerful as a wall of sound," quoting his friend Bono's version of the famous Hendrix line. Besides, it frees him from the chaotic personalities of a rock band and all the equipment that goes with it. "If I want to raise money for a buddy in jail on protest I just throw my guitar in the back of the car and go."

The next day, as we get back into the van for a rally on Boston Common, I still have the words to Camilo in my head, feeling Mad Dog on the drums so close I could reach out and touch him, the vibrations running through my body. I can see Camilo himself in his prison cell. Morello orchestrates the controlled chaos with passion that is infectious. He likes to say he has hit on a winning formula, bringing great musicians together to change the world through music.

Morello tells me in the van that his brother Segeni finally tracked him down. After they got together, he invited Morello to Kenya. "My father was a Kenyan diplomat and shortly after my birth he was not involved in my or my mom's life. In 2006, after I had already grown close with many members of the Kenyan side of my family, he apologized to me and my mom and welcomed me into the family." Morello's lost Kenyan family, the source of his racial heritage, was found. Morello recorded a song with the Kenyan artist Eric Wainaina and some additional material that, when released, will raise money for Kenyan Red Cross to aid the victims of recent violence. It will be titled *Facing Mount Kenya*.

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It's pouring rain as we pull off the main road in the van and are waved into the Boston Common by policemen in neon rain coats. The organizer of the rally is in the front seat. She explains that the weather has put a damper on turn-out. Riding along with musical superstars as they approach an outdoor concert and rally, images of Woodstock come to mind until the van turns the last corner and I see the sound man setting up with literally less than a dozen fans milling about awaiting our arrival.

"The show must go on," Morello says with a laugh. We all pile out of the car and run for the cover of the bandstand. Morello yells to the fans to come in out of the rain. As he plugs in his guitar, one of the Boston policemen approaches. "Tom, I am a huge fan," he admits. "Thanks for coming out on such a terrible day!"

Twenty minutes later a handful of health care lobbyists arrive from the State House where there was a viewing of Michael More's *SICKO*. They're carrying signs protesting the lack of health care. Morello sings "One Man Revolution". State Radio, Wayne Kramer, and Boots Riley groove to Morello's guitar and his sometimes incomprehensible rhythmic shouts, their heads bobbing to the beat. Everyone seems to be having a great time, despite literally playing for themselves.

I notice one old lady with a cane who is at least 80-years-old. As Morello gears up for his finale, Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land", he notices her. He asks her to come to the stage to sing along with him. She makes her way up and he gives her a hug. Morello always closes with Guthrie's national anthem; breaking in the middle of the song to ask the crowd to sing along to Guthrie's lost verse and "jump-the-fuck-up" to show the world that the revolution is on. The night before there had been 30 musicians on stage, and several thousand fans, jumping and screaming the verse in a blur of exuberant energy. I watched and laughed, but stayed out of sight.

In the pouring rain the musicians, the little old lady with her cane waving, and even the cop all start singing and jumping. I hesitate. But then I see the unbridled joy of Morello, singing Guthrie's words in 2008, with all there is to be depressed about, a rock star in a downpour playing just for fun. I jump too, joining my first protest in 35 years.

"This is about making people feel less alone in their convictions," Morello says as he packs up to head for home. "Never give up and never give in."

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