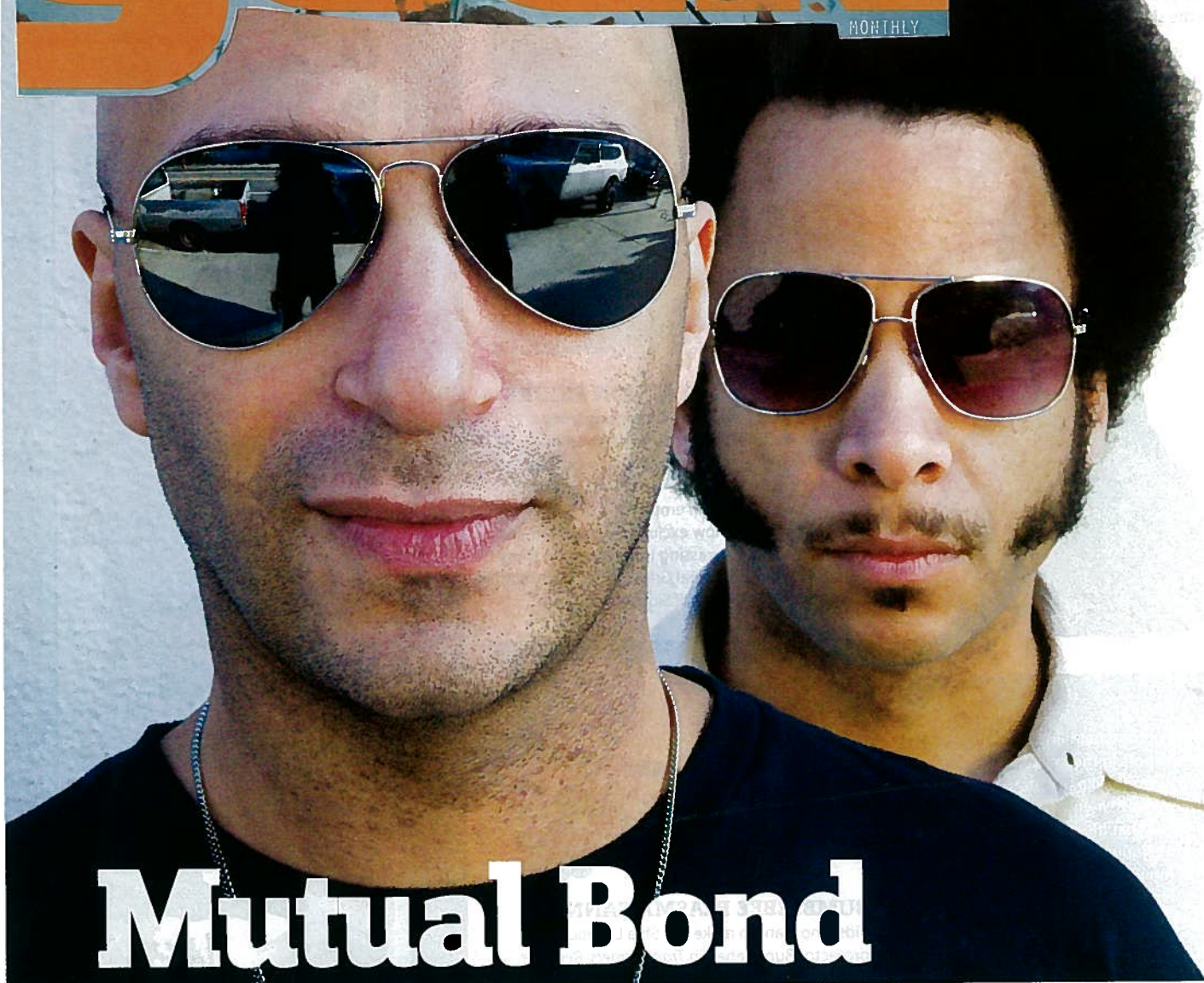


geek

MONTHLY



Mutual Bond

Tom Morello and Boots Riley have similar ideals. Now they share a band.

// WORDS: JEREMIAH GRIFFEY

“I’m going to continue to fight for the world I’d like to see no matter who’s in the Oval Office.”

In paper, the pairing makes a whole lot of sense. First, there’s Tom Morello, the Harvard-educated musician who artfully managed to replicate DJ-scratching with his guitar while with political icons Rage Against the Machine. Then there’s Boots Riley, the communist Bay Area rapper from the aptly-titled *The Coup*. Both champion the rights of the poor and the downtrodden. Neither possesses any patience for the inherent greed that accompanies seats of power.

But, great pairings on paper don’t always work out—just ask any director who has cast Al Pacino and Robert De Niro to share scenes together. Fortunately, it only takes about 10

seconds to realize Morello and Riley need to keep making music together and that *Street Sweeper Social Club* is much more than a “supergroup.” Their self-titled debut instantly reminds all those angry leftists out there what the world’s been missing the minute Morello’s guitar opens track one, “Fight! Smash! Win!” That’s before Boots takes over with command he rarely employs in his more playful and biting satirical rap group. As Morello says, the two bludgeon listeners into submission whether they’re ready or not.

Geek spoke with both men on separate stops off their recent tour opening for Nine Inch Nails and Jane’s Addiction.



Tom Morello and Boots Riley. One is a communist, the other a Cubs fan. You must determine which is which.

and whenever there was a protest or a benefit show, Boots was always the first one to raise his hand and say he'd be happy to play. Cut to the demise of Audioslave. In the aftermath of that, the first call I made was to Boots. We had dinner, sat down and I didn't really give him any choice in the matter. I just said, "We're in a band called Street Sweeper Social Club. It'll be revolutionary party jams." I handed him a cassette tape of music I had written and said, "Start writing to this."

He was kind of stunned, and he still hasn't said "Yes." Boots Riley: It's kind of hard for me to place when I heard it first. I think, probably, when I first heard it, I was not in a place to receive it. I didn't know what they were about, Rage Against the Machine. I wasn't involved in any crowd whatsoever that was groups of folks who would listen to Rage. I had no idea what they were about. I had heard some of the

lyrics, but couldn't really make them out. I had no idea what their politics were until I saw the cover of one of those guitar player magazines where Tom had a hat on that said, "Commie." I read the interview and then bought the albums. I got a chance to listen to it at home and feel the riffs. The Coup had always been accused of rocking too hard for a lot of hip-hop fans. It wasn't like I was a stranger to rock; I was just a stranger to what was going on in the '90s.

When you started songwriting together, when did you realize this was definitely going to work?

Morello: The main challenge was we couldn't find a cassette player. We had to go to every Target, Wal-mart, even asking philistines down the street if they've stolen a cassette player out of a car. Boots asked me "How do you want me to write this?" I just told him to be himself. "Do exactly what you do and everything is going to work out fine."

The music, on a majority of the tracks, brings out a more serious side of Boots.

Can you talk about the juxtaposition of his voice and the music?

Morello: I knew it would work well because we've been performing shows together since 2003. One of the challenges for me as a producer was to really introduce Boots Riley to a bigger audience. I think he's great. I think his vision is one that is really important. The way that he's able to meld the personal pain and the humor that's rolled into that through really intricate word play—the verses are somewhere between Gramsci and Walt Whitman. But in the choruses, they're big, revolutionary nursery rhymes. They're ready for soccer stadiums.

Riley: I write my lyrics to music. I don't write them

a cappella. My delivery in The Coup changes drastically depending on the song. The riffs, I think that's one of the things I had to deal with. A lot of my music deals with exploitation and trying to change the system and I deal with more personal things. Individual contact with the system. With these riffs I had to find how to do things in a way I was used to, while at the same time matching with the feel of those riffs.

On I Heard It Today, Mr. Lif opens the album with the sentence, "Oh I see—we all supposed to start trusting the government again, just because we got a friendlier face in charge?" Can you talk about your impressions of the Obama administration?

Morello: On one hand it's a great relief to have a president who can read above the third grade level. The bar was set pretty low. On the other hand, I think the problems we face are systemic and have very little to do with the individuals in office, and more to do with the tectonic plates that move beneath the seats of power. As we're seeing, there have certainly been some more humane initiatives over the course of the last few months. On the other hand there are 65,000 people every night who are homeless on the streets of Los Angeles. We're still immersed in illegal and immoral wars in Iraq and Afghanistan which don't seem to be abating. The treatment of a lot of our veterans who come home is often disgraceful. I believe both Democratic and Republican administrations have been guilty of economic crimes at home and war crimes abroad. And I'm in favor of bailing out people, not banks. I'm going to continue to fight for the world I'd like to see no matter who's in the Oval Office. Riley: I'll say this. More people are unemployed. More people are homeless. More people who are not considered homeless are sleeping on their cousin's couch, working 40 hours a week. Our military is still in the same places it was before. We're sending more troops to one of the places. The people who have been marauding through our financial system are getting kickbacks. Although this administration has decried the torture the last administration allowed to happen, they won't release the pictures from it. I say, it's the new manager at McDonald's. Everybody had complaints about how the food tasted, how they treated their workers. The last manager was an asshole. They fired him. Bring in the new manager.

Boots, you're commonly referred to as a Marxist in articles.

Riley: I'm a communist. A lot of times people call themselves a Marxist or a Maoist. What they don't realize is that all of those people were just coming up with new observations—some based on theory and some based on fact. The (primary) thing is a dedication to people having power over their lives. The question is how does that happen? We're constantly revamping. We're constantly relooking at how that happens.

Tom, can you give yourself a political title as well?

Morello: I have a very specific and narrow political title that I feel describes my lifelong support of the underdog. I describe myself as a Chicago Cubs fan.

Can each of you tell me what you first thought when you heard the other's music?

Tom Morello: I discovered The Coup maybe almost 10 years ago. I read an interview with Boots and he seemed like a very intriguing character who had a similar political ideology to myself. I really liked his lyrics. Later I saw The Coup play, and was a big fan of his lyrics, then put it aside. It wasn't until 2003 when Boots and I toured on the Tell Us the Truth Tour with Billy Bragg, Steve Earle and others—which was an anti-media consolidation tour, I know, it sounds very sexy—that I got to hear Boots every night in an acoustic context. I was basically his backup band. I really got to get into his lyrics and see how brilliant they were; what depth and humor, venom and satire was wound up in his storytelling. We became good friends. He opened up for several Nightwatchman tours