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RIFFS

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Morello (left) and Boots Riley.

TOM MORELLO ON FEAR

IT'S A LITTLE BIT OF A STRETCH TO SAY that Tom Morello has reinvented himself. After all, he's playing "the same crappy old 50-watt Marshall and 4x12 Peavey cab and those same five pedals" that he's always played. And his new band, *Street Sweeper Social Club*, is a return to the huge rock riffs/rap vocals formula that made

him famous. Despite all that, somehow the only thing that is predictable about Morello is his ability to remain exciting and vital. —Matt Blackett



What goes through your head when you launch a new musical endeavor, whether it's *Rage*, *Audioslave*, the *Nightwatchman*, or *Street Sweeper Social Club*?

In each of those instances, the principle impulse has been fearlessness. When *Rage* formed, it was out of the ashes of my previous band *Lock Up*, which had been summarily dumped from Geffen records and I was pretty sure that my "career" was over. At that point,

I just vowed to play music that I loved, without any care or concern for record deals or radio or anything like that. That is a muse that I followed for the next two decades. When *Rage* went away, a lot of people counted Tim, Brad, and me out. At one point, the record company suggested that we become Macy Gray's backup band. We said, "No we've got another idea," and we got together with Chris Cornell and made *Audioslave*. Out of the ashes of *Audioslave*, I made the audacious decision to become a folk musician, this political singer-songwriter. I adopted this *Nightwatchman* persona, which felt perfectly natural to me. Over the past few years, I've felt comfortable whether I've been playing more *Rage* shows, doing *Nightwatchman* shows, or forming *Street Sweeper Social Club*. I've tried to approach this with the same fearlessness as I have my other projects.

At this point in your career, what are the pressures from both a business and a musical standpoint?

That initial experience with *Lock Up* was so jarring and disturbing that I've felt pretty impervious to outside business pressures. The pressures I feel are the ones I put on myself to try to play some good guitar, to make great records, and to make sure the songs kick my ass before they kick your ass. All the pressure I feel is internal, not external.

It's tough for a lot of guitarists to not act out of fear.

For me the two crossroads were when I discovered the toggle-switch thing and I decided to stop practicing eight hours a day on scales and start trying to find my own voice on the instrument for eight hours a day. The second thing was the shedding of the commercial ambitions. Looking back now, I can see that it was really sort of a burning away of the artifice of "trying to be a rock star" and really finding the artist within. It took me abandoning my *Hit Parader* dreams in order to end up on the cover of *Hit Parader*.