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RECORD RACK

They're ready to provoke

Street Sweeper Social Club
"Street Sweeper Social Club"
(Independent Label Group/
Warner Music)
★ ★ ★ 1/2

Just last month, some critics questioned the continued relevancy of the fairly mild political discontent expressed on Green Day's latest album, "21st Century Breakdown." Well, Billie Joe Armstrong can breathe easy now. There's a new explosives unit in town, and this one is radical enough to really reap the scorn of those who think there's no more room for protest in rock.

Guitarist Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine and rapper Boots Riley of the Oakland crew the Coup are long-time comrades in pop's committed left wing. Now, along with Stanton Moore, the scrappy drummer from jazz-funk outfit Galactic, they've excavated the sunken ship of rap-rock as a vehicle for revolutionary jams. For Morello, who helped create this bomb-dropping approach, the sound of Street Sweeper Social Club is well-loved home ground. For Riley, it's a step toward a different audience, beyond the loyal cult that's long appreciated the Coup's highly explicit polemics.

Marrying firebrand lyrics with massive guitar riffs, SSSC (it sounds like a union acronym) revels in the kinds of big, earnest gestures that emblemized 1990s alternative rock. It's hardly a new approach to rabble-rousing. But hidden within the band's empire-toppling football chants, Riley wields a sharp little knife.

That weapon is the sense of lived politics that's permeated Riley's work for nearly 20 years. On this album, he's as prone to sloganeering as is Armstrong (or, for that matter, Rage's more oracular Zack de la Rocha). But he never crafts a rally cry without countering it with a sly joke and a poignant detail.



ROMY SUBRIN

NEW SOCIAL CLUB: Tom Morello, left, of Rage Against the Machine and Boots Riley of the Coup are teaming up.

The downtrodden workers Riley evokes in songs such as "Somewhere in the World It's Midnight" and "The Oath" aren't abstractions. They sweat through the night shift and dream of an uprising partly because if that happens, they might get a day off.

With Riley in front, cracking jokes and getting sweaty, Morello relaxes. His playing is what-the-heck spontaneous, complementing Moore's loose-elbowed drumming. (Morello also played bass on the album; Hollywood mainstay Carl Restivo does so on tour.)

SSSC can get very explicit about overthrowing the state. The disdain expressed toward police, corporate shills and even wealthy rock-rap fans (in the highly amusing "100 Little Curses") often has a violent edge. "Clap for the Killers" suggests that hip-hop's gangstas are nothing compared with murdering bankers and heads of state, while "Shock You Again" portrays a soldier as an unrepentant torturer.

Such stubbornly oppositional sentiments, bolstered by the music's none-too-subtle metallic attack, will put off those more interested in sleeker pop — or more conciliatory forms of activism. But as Leon Trotsky once wrote, "Insurrection is an art, and like all arts has its own laws." Riley and Morello aren't done with it yet.

— ANN POWERS