

I WVO to rage

Tom Morello's new project is a blend of rap and rock, flavored with angry politics



Sunday Star-Ledger

BY JAY LUSTIG
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Street Sweeper Social Club, opening for Nine Inch Nails and Jane's Addiction

Where and when: 7:30 p.m. Friday at Susquehanna Bank Center, Camden; 7:30 p.m. Saturday at PNC Bank Arts Center, Holmdel

How much: \$25-\$99 for Camden, \$19-\$59 for Holmdel. Call (877) 598-8694 or visit livenation.com.

Tom Morello first opened for Jane's Addiction more than two decades ago, at a 1988 New Year's Eve concert at the Embassy Hotel Theater in Los Angeles.

"They asked my local Hollywood band at the time, Lock Up, to impersonate them," says the virtuoso rock guitarist, who has played in the bands Rage Against the Machine and Audioslave and recently formed a new group, Street Sweeper Social Club, with rapper Boots Riley. "When Jane's Addiction came onstage, it was actually Lock



BRANIMIR KVARTUC/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Morello, far right, with his Rage Against the Machine bandmates, Zack de la Rocha, left, and Tim Commerford.

Up, dressed as Jane's Addiction, playing a Jane's Addiction song, 'Pigs In Zen.' Then the lights went out, and Jane's Addiction came out and finished the song."

Their paths are crossing again this summer, under very different circumstances. Touring with its original lineup for the first time in 17 years, Jane's Addiction is co-headlining (with Nine Inch Nails) one of this summer's biggest rock tours. It comes to the Susquehanna Bank Center in Camden on Friday and the PNC Bank Arts Center in Holmdel on Saturday. Street Sweeper Social Club will be the opening act.

The band's music is a politically charged rap-rock hybrid, distinguished by Morello's endlessly inventive riffs and Riley's lyrics, which display a rare combination of anger and wit. On the lead single, "100 Little Curses," for instance, Riley lashes out against the rich with withering contempt, but also some good one-liners: "May your champagne not bubble, may your pinot be sour/May that white stuff you snort be 96 percent flour/May the famous rapper you bring to your daugh-

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ter's Sweet Sixteen/Get some pride and walk out, as if born with a spleen."

This project isn't a huge stretch for either artist. Sociopolitical commentary played a big role in both Rage Against the Machine and Morello's acoustic side project, the Nightwatchman, as well as in Riley's group, the Coup, whose music combines elements of hip-hop and funk.

"There's a very thin line between rock and funk," says Riley. "Funk is like a dirtier blues, and so is rock. They're close cousins."

The Coup, he says, has sometimes been criticized by hip-hop purists for rocking too hard. "It's somewhat less of a problem for Street Sweeper Social Club," Morello adds dryly.

Morello and Riley first met in 2003. Morello was a fan of the Coup, and invited Riley to perform on the Tell Us the Truth Tour, organized by singer-songwriter Billy Bragg to protest globalization and media consolidation. Morello was performing on the tour, solo, as the Nightwatchman.

Morello's day job, at the time, was playing with the Chris Cornell-fronted Audioslave. But Riley was more familiar with his Rage Against the Machine music.

"I wasn't in the rock world but I had seen their name all over the place," Riley says. "I think the first time I really started paying attention was, I saw (Morello) on the cover of some guitar magazine with a hat that said 'Commie.' And I said, 'Oh, maybe they're not just some rock group.' So I read the interview, and became interested in what was going on."

After the Tell Us the Truth Tour, Morello and Riley found themselves playing together often. They first talked about putting together their own band in 2006.

"Tom said, 'We're going to make a band. It's going to be called Street Sweeper. It's going to be anthems for the revolution,'" says Riley. "He handed me a cassette tape and said to write some lyrics, and he didn't ask me whether I wanted to or not. He just said it was going to be."

"I told him very simply, 'Just do what

you do, and we're going to be me,'" says Morello. "That was a real good division of labor."

A street sweeper is a type of machine gun. "The idea is that our music is the weapon," says Morello.

Originally, the band name was going to be just Street Sweeper. But the rights to that name had been taken, so Social Club was added, because when the two musicians had performed together — even at a benefit concert with a serious cause — it felt like a couple of friends getting together to have a good time.

On the album, due out June 16, Morello plays bass as well as guitar, and Stanton Moore of the band Galactic handles drums. On tour, the group will be a quintet, with Eric Gardner (who has played with Gnarls Barkley) on drums, Carl Restivo (whose credits include Wyclef Jean and Perry Farrell's Satellite Party) on second guitar and Dave Gibbs of the Gigolo Aunts on bass.

"They're all really good friends," says Morello. "The thing that they all have in common is that they've played countless concerts with Boots and myself in the past, often around charity issues."

Onstage, the musicians wear matching black-and-red jackets, adorned with SSSC logos.

"It symbolizes our unity onstage," says Riley.

"Whether it was the Clash or Kiss, I've always liked bands that cared about the big picture and the visual presentation," says Morello.

Nine Inch Nails' Trent Reznor invited Morello and Riley to open the Nine Inch Nails/Jane's Addiction tour before they had presented any shows together as Street Sweeper Social Club or finished their album. Before the tour started, on May 8, they had played only a handful of gigs, including one at the maximum-security Sing Sing prison in Ossining, N.Y. One of the highlights of the show, according to Morello, was their cover of Thin Lizzy's "Jailbreak" (also featuring Jerry Cantrell of Alice in Chains).

The day after the Sing Sing show, Morello performed at a Pete Seeger tribute concert — also celebrating Seeger's 90th birthday — at Madison Square Garden. He played a duet with Bruce Springsteen on "The Ghost of Tom Joad" and performed with many other artists as well.

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BRYAN BEDDER/GETTY IMAGES

Top, Pete Seeger's 90th birthday celebration was a highlight for Morello, shown here performing with Bruce Springsteen, left and Dave Matthews, right. "It was kind of like it was my birthday," Morello said. Below, Boots Riley, left, and Morello of the new band Street Sweeper Social Club in a New York studio.

"I told them when they first contacted me, 'I'd be happy just to shake a tambourine in the background,'" he says. "For people who combine activism with their music, Pete Seeger sits in seat 1A. But to be able to play with Tom Paxton and Taj Mahal and Ben Harper, and then to play 'The Ghost of Tom Joad' with Bruce Springsteen, it was kind of like it was my birthday."

While supporting musicians are involved in Street Sweeper Social Club, it's basically a duo. This way, says Morello, he gets to be in a bandlike situation without being subject to the "often-complicated dynamics" of a band.

"I really enjoyed the independence of the Nightwatchman — touring and recording and writing whenever I wanted," he says. "One of the things that was clear to me from the beginning of this was that Street Sweeper Social Club

was going to be a hellaciously rocking band live, and would have some of the elements of band chemistry, but that it would also have the pure elements of just two artists working together."

The Coup is still an active group. And while Audioslave is defunct, Rage Against the Machine continues to perform together occasionally.

Morello and Riley have no long-term master plan for Street Sweeper Social Club, but see no reason why the partnership shouldn't continue.

"It's super fun, so I wouldn't see any reason why we wouldn't make more records or do more touring," says Morello. "But the record hasn't come out yet, so ... we might want to hold off on planning the boxed set."

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