

TOM MORELLO

'If you aren't angry, you aren't paying attention'

BY JASON GREENOUGH
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In the 1980s, Tom Morello – years before becoming Rage Against the Machine's resident Guitar God – was just a young man in Spandex who loved heavy metal and practiced guitar in the stairwell of a Harvard dorm.

Prophets of Rage musician Tom Morello has never been afraid to be politically provocative

"I started playing guitar relatively late, when I was 17," Morello said. "So, it was actually in my freshman year at Harvard where I had the revelatory calling that it wasn't going to be just a hobby, that it was going to be much more than that, and I didn't have any choice in the matter, but here I was stuck as a political science major.

"And of course, fulfilling an honors degree at any Ivy League school didn't leave too much time to practice arpeggios, so I may have made some sacrifices on my social calendar to get the necessary practice. I would finish my studies, then go practice in the stairwell for four hours and drive everybody absolutely insane," he said with a laugh.

'Amalgamation of radical musicians'

The legendary guitarist, who now makes up one-sixth of the political supergroup Prophets of Rage – alongside members of Rage Against the Machine, Public Enemy and Cypress Hill – has made it his life's work to use his voice for the oppressed. Oddly enough, the biggest thing he can attribute to this newest chapter in his career was the insanity of the 2016 election and the mounting tension and frustration it brought to so many – himself included.

"The band came together as a necessity, in these tumultuous times, because we felt that we couldn't just sit back and tweet about the disconcerting world affairs," Morello said about the birth of Prophets of Rage. "So we put together a pretty potent amalgamation of radical musicians to both rock the crowd and also to effect social justice change. So, within a year and a few months since the band was founded, we've played to over 2 1/2 million

people on three continents, so the message, as well as the rock 'n' roll, seems to be resonating."

Prophets of Rage kicked off their short run of U.S. club dates in September in Boston, leading up to the Sept. 15 release of their self-titled album. Part of the proceeds of the show were donated to local food banks and homeless shelters.

"Of course, the message will be in the mosh pit, but we also want to leave a Robin Hood-like footprint in each of the cities we play," Morello said.

Just as Robin Hood and his Merry Men belong to English folklore, each member of Prophets of Rage belongs to an elite class of rock and hip-hop legends.

But even with three-quarters of the original Rage Against the Machine lineup lending their hands to the mission of Prophets of Rage – including Chuck D and DJ Lord of Public Enemy and B-Real of Cypress Hill – Morello stressed that when they came together, they didn't want to re-create RATM or any of the groups involved and they wanted to respect the legacy of each group.

"Any band, in order for it to be great or stand on its own two feet, needs to discover its own chemistry," Morello said.

On homelessness and hypocrisy

While Morello's politics have deep roots and can be traced back decades, he's not afraid to be provocative for the sake of it. For example, many have tried to figure out the meaning behind the famous "Arm the Homeless" expression written on his guitar. The truth is, it was a spur-of-the-moment decision prior to sound check before playing a now legendary show at the Whiskey a Go-Go with RATM.

"That was my sort of homemade guitar, which I had drawn these cute, white hippopotamuses on, and I decided to take a Magic Marker and thought of the phrase, kind of echoing the provocateur artistry of the Paris commune in the back of my mind," Morello said. "In the city of Los Angeles, where you have Bentleys and Rolls-Royces driving by these homeless tent cities, it just felt like a fine, provocative artistic statement."

The way Morello sees it, homelessness is a

matter of immoral priorities and it's the people at the top who are arranging said priorities.

"The homeless don't have a lobbyist in Congress. Poverty and homelessness is a crime, and that means there are criminals who are responsible for it, and the grotesque economic injustice that plagues not just our country but the world is terrible," Morello said. "We are an incredibly wealthy country, but there are people living on the street with no roof over their heads who are looked at as sort of a subset of humanity that is even beneath the dignity of even making eye contact (with them)."

Morello also called out what he sees as hypocrisy among those claiming to be religious. As he notes, many religious founders spent time with "the downtrodden, the outcasts, the homeless and the prostitutes" as people who were worthy of help and attention. Modern America, however, lacks this same compassion, he said.

"In our country, they're shunted to the side as refuse. It's infuriating and needs to be addressed," he said.

Morello has come a long way from those days on the staircases at Harvard, and he now plays at stadiums and festivals all over the world. He's made it his life's mission to be a champion for the underdog and a voice for the silenced, and he's also one of the most well-respected musicians in the world. Being such a vanguard has allowed him to see many injustices in many forms, and when it comes to the current state of America, Morello's message is loud and clear: "If you aren't angry, you aren't paying attention."

"That being said, anger needs to find focus in order to effect change," said Morello. "There's no brand new way that the world has changed. Change happens when people stand up in their place in time and demand that their voices be heard. Every radical, revolutionary change has come from below, not from above," he continued. "In today's age, you may be tempted to sit back and watch the clown show on CNN, or hashtag change on Instagram, but in all reality, you're only a click or a scroll away from getting engaged."



Tom Morello, of Rage Against the Machine and now Prophets of Rage, uses his voice for the oppressed. In an interview with street papers, Morello explains the origin of "Arm the Homeless," the legendary saying written on his guitar.

Online

Prophets of Rage are putting economic disparity and homelessness center stage. Read the band's 2016 interview with street papers at news.streetroots.org/prophetsofrage

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