

SXSW Review: Tom Morello

By John Davis | Saturday, March 17, 2012, 08:42 AM

Tom Morello The Swan Dive 1 a.m. Friday night/Saturday morning

The dichotomy of Tom Morello's personal and professional lives was on display in the first song, "One-Man Revolution," of his late-night acoustic/electric set Friday: "On the streets of Havana/I was hugged and kissed/At the Playboy Mansion I was on the list."

As Tom Morello, trailblazing guitarist of Rage Against the Machine and sought-after session man, he enjoys many of the perks of rock stardom, including standing elbow-to-elbow with Bruce Springsteen on the shiny stage of the plush ACL Live. As Morello's alter-ego, the Nightwatchman, the monkey-wrenching rabble-rouser and fiery political advocate, he played the grungy, aptly-named Swan Dive, and his set was broadcast via a makeshift screen to a makeshift cast of protestors, celebrants and activists who spilled out into blocked-off lanes of Red River outside the club.



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"Hello, badge holders," Morello said to those of us inside. "And hello to you all out there on the People's Stage," he addressed those on the street. A cheer wafted in through the door.

The evening was billed as "Occupy South By Southwest," which was catnip for Morello. His leftist politics are, let us say, unalloyed, and his fierce, pithy, passionate songs address race, class warfare, homelessness and income inequality on a global scale. Songs like "Save the Hammer For the Man," "Black Spartacus Heart Attack Machine," "It Begins Tonight," and "Union Town" are not only calls to arms, they are finely crafted pieces of music that mixed elements of folk,

rock, hip-hop, metal and pop with seamless affect. Without that musical craftsmanship, such material can too easily come off as screeds and rants.

And Morello is a superb showman, smart, funny and very much self-aware of his entertainer's role, even as he embodies the professional provocateur. He was eminently capable of dropping a delicately crafted acoustic guitar solo into the midst of the gear-grinding "Save the Hammer For the Man" or making "Union Town" the kind of irresistible singalong you'd have expected Phil Spector to create.

All respects to MC5 frontman Wayne Kramer, who joined Morello onstage for a scorching version of "Kick Out the Jams" (the "Barbara Allen," if you will, of metal/punk/agro protest music), but the most musically charged moment of the evening might have been the ominous, heavyweight version of Springsteen's "The Ghost of Tom Joad," a song he had sung with Springsteen the night previously.

Dedicating the song to Springsteen, Morello said with a smile, "Some of my anarchist friends describe him as the only Boss worth listening to."



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At the end of the night, as befitted the prevailing sentiment, it was time to take the fight to the streets. Morello, serving as a self-appointed Pied Piper, led the clubgoers outside to join the sidewalk audience, where he climbed on a makeshift stage and led a rousing version of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" to round out the night. Somewhere, Woody and Big Bill Haywood and Emma Goldman and Joe Hill were smiling. Me, too.