

**Rage Against the Machine: Brad Wilk, Zack de la Rocha, Tom Morello, and Tim Commerford (from left), 1999**



PERFORMERS

# RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

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THIS POWERFUL BAND MERGED  
MUSICAL GENRES AND SPEWED POLITICAL MESSAGES  
WITH INCENDIARY SONICS AND LYRICS.

BY ROB BOWMAN

**U**pon its release in late 1992, Rage Against the Machine's debut album changed the very rules by which rock & roll could be made. Here was a band capable of fusing funk, punk, metal, and hip-hop with an intensity, intelligence, and inventiveness that rock music had previously neither seen nor heard. Perhaps more importantly, other than Public Enemy's, no band's lyrics or videos had so consistently and fiercely addressed the myr-

riad forms of oppression that characterize the activities of both governments and multinational corporations.

Rage were equal parts shocking, revelatory, and galvanizing. Tom Morello single-handedly reinvented the possibilities of the electric guitar. He created unique ways of mimicking DJ scratching on his instrument while also generating an astonishing array of extra-terrestrial noises and crafting titanic guitar riffs that rivaled those of Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi and Led



Zeppelin's Jimmy Page. Singer Zack de la Rocha combined the charisma of Bob Marley with the punch and single-minded conviction of Chuck D, while writing lyrics that excoriated the wrongs in western society. Bassist Tim Commerford and drummer Brad Wilk delivered a groove that both swung and hit as hard as any rhythm section in rock history.

They formed in Los Angeles during the summer of 1991, taking the name Rage Against the Machine – previously used by de la Rocha as the title of a song he wrote as a member of the hardcore band Inside Out. It would be hard to imagine a more appropriate moniker. Within a month, the group wrote over a dozen songs. Figuring no label would sign a multiethnic band (Morello is Black and de la Rocha is Chicano) that played hard-edged fringe music with incendiary lyrics openly attacking corporate America as well as the government, Rage recorded an independent cassette to sell for five dollars apiece. The insert on the cassette case declared, “No samples, keyboards, or synthesizers used in the making of this recording.” That proclamation would apply to every recording the group ever made.

Playing their first gig in October 1991, Rage's impact was immediate. By November, they were being courted by several labels. They insisted they would only sign a record deal if they had complete creative control over all aspects of their music, lyrics, cover art, and advertising. Amazingly, Sony's Epic Records had no issues with their demands. By January 1992, they had a deal. The eponymously named first album, produced by Garth Richardson, was released in November. For the cover art, Rage chose an iconic photograph by Malcolm Browne of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in protest of the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem.







**Raging high at Lollapalooza, Vancouver, British Columbia, 1993. OPPOSITE PAGE: In London, 1992.**

It's a troubling and shocking photograph that perfectly aligned with Rage's politics, music, and lyrics.

Remarkably, Epic chose to release the expletive-laced "Killing in the Name" as the group's first single. The record features an additive intro, a multisectioned arrangement with no less than five monumental-size riffs; shifting meters; numerous innovative otherworldly guitar sounds; extreme use of dynamics; sustained repetition of in-your-face lyrics; and a feral, scorched-earth vocal that moves from a whisper to a raging scream. "Killing in the Name" climaxes with de la Rocha declaiming sixteen times, "*Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me,*"

followed by a scream of "*motherfucker!*," heavy riffing on the bass and guitar, a bar of blistering sixteenth notes from Brad Wilk, and a lurching 6/4 close. It's a stunning track that would, in many ways, provide a template for much of what would follow.

Three more singles were released between 1993 and the summer of 1994: "Bullet in the Head" (addressing the misinformation spread by the government and the media), "Bombtrack" (with Che Guevara appearing on the single's cover art), and "Freedom" (whose video uses quotes from Sitting Bull and declares the innocence of Leonard Peltier, an imprisoned leader of the American Indian Movement).



Early days in L.A. at Club Lingerie, 1991. OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Protesting U.S. use of rock songs in the mistreatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, 2008; de la Rocha with Michael Stipe and Patti Smith, Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony, 2007; live at the Grand Olympic Auditorium, Los Angeles, 2000; de la Rocha and Morello at an anti-Iraq War protest at the Democratic National Convention, Denver, 2008.



*Rage Against the Machine* slowly climbed its way to Number 45 on the *Billboard* chart, eventually going triple platinum. The band's gritty second album released in 1996, *Evil Empire*, is even darker and edgier. Its title came from a Ronald Reagan speech in which he referred to the Soviet Union as an evil empire. Rage flipped Reagan's statement on its head, suggesting the moniker could just as easily apply to the United States. Its liner notes include a reading list of writings by left-wing and progressive thinkers ranging from Noam Chomsky and Che Guevara to Miles Davis and James Baldwin.

The lead track, "People of the Sun," as well as a number of other songs, were written in support of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, while the first single, "Bulls on Parade," addresses the American military-industrial complex. The solo on the latter features Morello deploying his signature DJ scratching technique: holding down his wah-wah pedal to create white noise while using his right hand to quickly flick the toggle switch up and down between two pickups – one set to ten, the other set to zero – and rubbing his left hand across the strings to create friction. The effect is incredible.

The band moved from opening for Public Enemy, Porno for Pyros, and House of Pain in the first half of the 1990s to headlining festivals and arenas in the second half. Like *Evil Empire*, Rage's 1999 followup, *The Battle of Los Angeles*, shot straight to Number One on the *Billboard* chart. *The Battle of Los Angeles* had three singles: "Guerrilla Radio" (attacking George Bush), "Sleep Now in the Fire" (whose lyrics portray the arrival of Christopher Columbus as an invasion), and "Testify" (articulating America's deteriorating relationship with Iraq).

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**Rage Against the Machine**  
(1992) Epic



**Evil Empire**  
(1996) Epic



**The Battle of Los Angeles**  
(1999) Epic



**Renegades**  
(2000) Epic

Putting their money and labor where their mouths were, Rage also routinely played benefit shows for such causes as Peltier, Mumia Abu-Jamal, the United Farm Workers, the Milarepa Fund for Tibetan Freedom, and Para Los Niños. They donated the proceeds from numerous other shows to organizations such as UNITE (an anti-racism think tank at the National Institutes of Health), Women Alive, and the Zapatista Front for Liberation.

Never afraid of confrontation, Rage performed nude at the 1993 Philadelphia stop of Lollapalooza with the letters PMRC taped across their chests to protest the



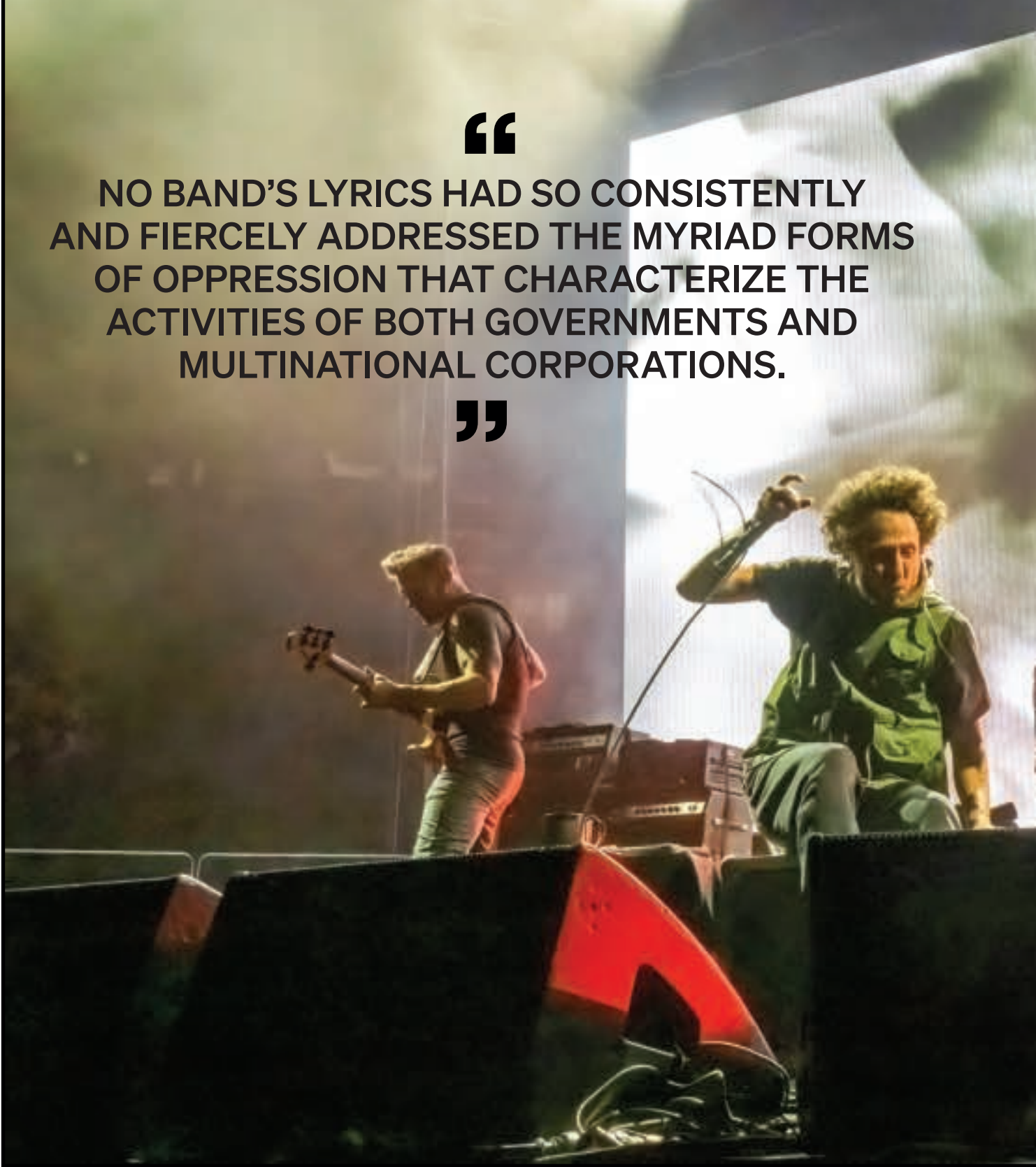




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ensorship efforts of the Parents Music Resource Center. In 2008, they played a riotous show outside the Democratic National Convention. Less than two weeks later they attempted to play a similar show at the Republican National Convention and were stopped by police – at which point de la Rocha and Morello marched into the crowd singing “Bulls on Parade” and “Killing in the Name” through a megaphone. While shooting the Michael Moore–directed video for “Sleep Now in the Fire” on Wall Street, Rage managed to create such a disturbance that the riot doors of the Stock Exchange had to be closed.

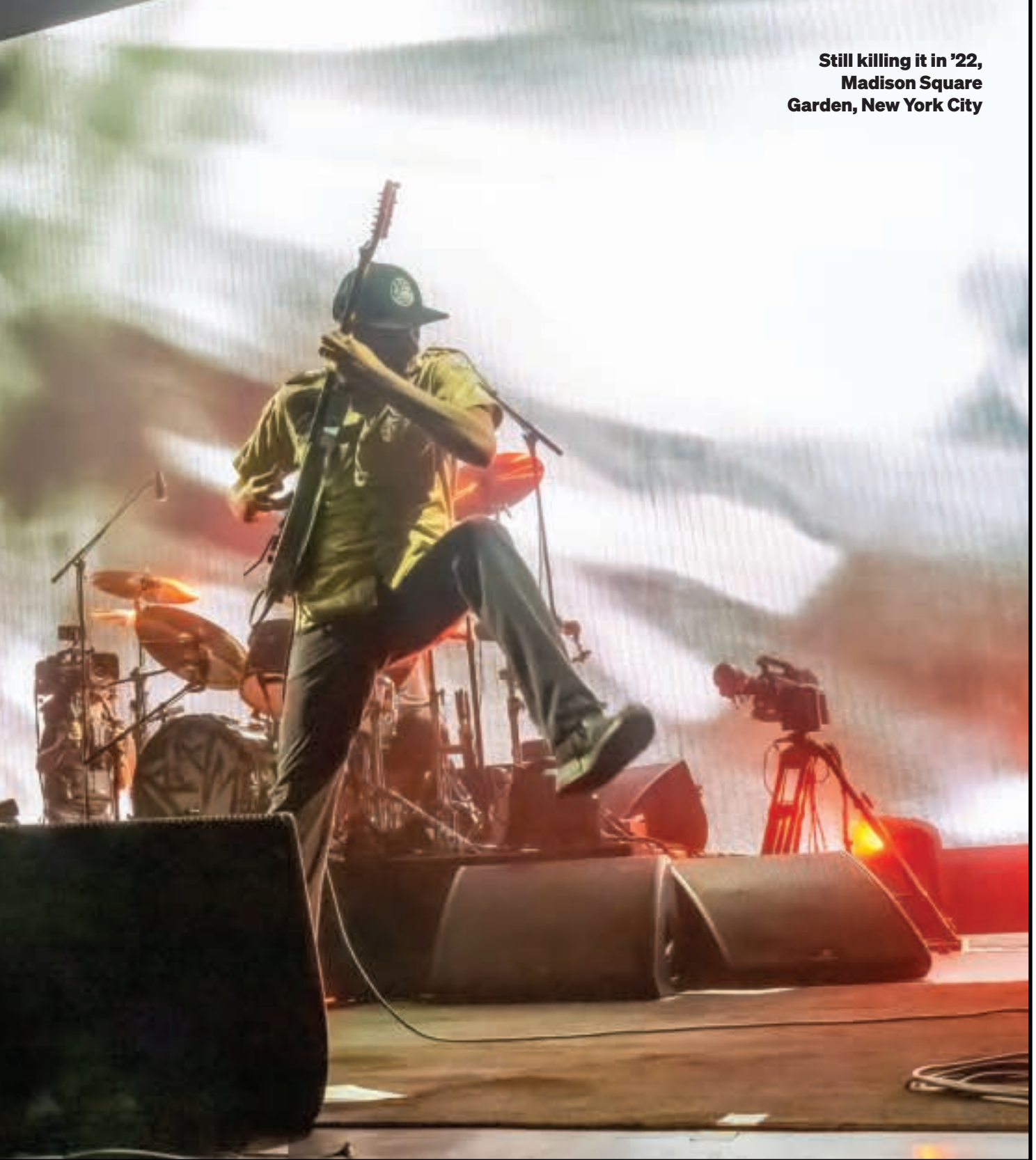
The band’s final album, *Renegades*, was issued in December 2000 shortly after de la Rocha announced his departure from the group. *Renegades* consists of “covers” of songs by such disparate artists as the MC5, Cypress

Hill, Devo, and Bruce Springsteen. Unique among such recordings, Rage wrote completely new music to accompany the lyrics, making it as much an album of Rage originals as any of their other records.

When the band went on hiatus in October 2000, Morello, Commerford, and Wilk elected to stay together, hooking up with Chris Cornell of Soundgarden to form Audioslave. In 2016, the Rage instrumentalists would come together once again, forming Prophets of Rage with turntablist DJ Lord and rappers Chuck D of Public Enemy and B-Real of Cypress Hill.

In the early 2000s, de la Rocha recorded two albums, one solo and one with Trent Reznor, neither of which were ultimately released. He also recorded a one-off single, “March of Death,” with DJ Shadow in 2003, and

**Still killing it in '22,  
Madison Square  
Garden, New York City**



wrote new material and played jarana with the Son Jarocho band Son de Madera in 2005. In 2008, he formed One Day as a Lion with Mars Volta drummer Jon Theodore. The group released an EP in 2008 with de la Rocha playing keyboards as well as taking care of lead vocals.

Rage Against the Machine regrouped in 2007, playing several gigs over the next four years. In 2020, they announced their first shows in nine years, but due to the pandemic most of the concerts were rescheduled for 2022 and 2023. Unfortunately, de la Rocha tore his Achilles tendon during the second show of the 2022 tour, performing the rest of the scheduled North American dates seated. Despite de la Rocha's physical limitation, the band's shows were as explosive as ever. Unfortunately, the European leg of the tour, as well as the 2023

North American shows, were subsequently canceled.

Over the course of their career, Rage have sold over fifteen million records and won Grammys for "Tire Me" and "Guerrilla Radio." More to the point, through their lyrics and actions, they have educated thousands of their fans about numerous social issues and, theoretically, caused many in their audience to rethink how to live their lives. As I see it, that is what rock & roll was always meant to do.

In 2003, Morello inducted the Clash into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Four years later, de la Rocha performed the same honor for Patti Smith. Tonight, Rage Against the Machine take their rightful place alongside many of their heroes, including Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Public Enemy, Rush, Bob Marley, and the Clash, as members of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.