

# the Rake

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Take Back Labor Day concert round-up

By Max Ross

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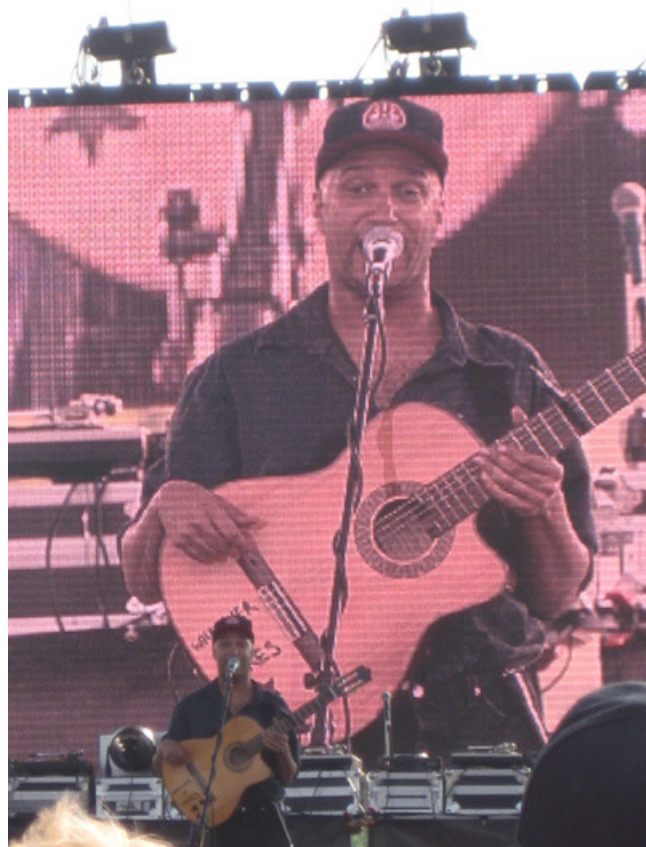
Wednesday, September 3, 2008

Musicians promote workers' rights...or maybe just play music

"[Rage Against the Machine](#) [1] is going to play," said Mim Epstein. "That's my prediction. I'm calling it out."

She and her roommate, Molly Anderson, sat on a grassy patch, decked out in oversized sunglasses. Their spot was in view of the Mississippi River, the various food-and-beer vendors' tents, and the main stage set up for [SEIU](#) [2]'s First Annual [Take Back Labor Day](#) [3] festival on Harriet Island.

"Why would [Tom Morello](#) [4] (Rage's guitarist) be scheduled after Atmosphere if all of Rage wasn't going to play?" said Dan Bohnhorst. Earlier, he'd swiped a press pass he found lying on a picnic table. Now he sipped an Aquafina he'd pilfered from backstage.



Thronges of people had traversed roadblocks and detours and closed-down bridges in Downtown St. Paul for...for what? For the music? To campaign for workers' rights? To be seen? Cheese curds?

"[Billy Bragg](#) [5]s on stage talking about how this election is about faith, how it will affect people all over the world" said [Todd Smith](#) [6], another guy who'd somehow scored a press pass. "And I'm caught over by the beer tent, and these two guys are talking about fantasy football. One was complaining about how he missed drafting Chester Taylor by one pick. I shit you not."

[Continued](#) [7] advertisement [8]

After about fifteen minutes in the heat, it probably didn't matter why you'd shown up, as the brain became too sun-baked to retain things like Purpose or Motivation. Fourteen-year-olds that had probably never had a job whooped wildly at calls for unionization. An event staffer, employed by the SEIU, complained about how overworked he was (then quickly tempered his statement - "It's not that bad, though. I mean, I don't mind it. Really.")

I started the show on the periphery, but was sucked closer and closer to the stage with each progressive act (Pun! - this is what happens when a lit-blogger is sent to cover music...) The sets, meanwhile drifted farther and farther from the day's intended dogma. Nobody noticed, though, and I'm not sure it mattered.

The Run-down:

**Billy Bragg** is dapper as hell. Which means, of course, that he's not American. Nevertheless, of all the performers, he was arguably the most outspoken on the issue of (American) worker's rights. At the press conference before the show, he said he's "been working with unions since the miners' strike in Britain in 1984," and then went on to explain that Brits in general are shocked by the fact that not everyone in a country as wealthy as ours has health insurance (applause). "The only insurance I buy is traveling insurance, because health care in my country is free," he said. (Applause...Feel free to clap out loud right now, at your computer, if you're so persuaded. It'll be like you were there.)

Bragg took the stage wearing unassuming slacks and a short-sleeved, button-down shirt. He played a typically political set, intermixing minor rants and mildly inspiring anecdotes with his songs. Maybe it was the accent, but everyone paid attention and seemed at least a little moved by his rhetoric.

What's nice is he's not condescending, and seems genuinely to care about the well-being of our nation's overworked and underpaid. I guess I'm just a little disturbed that there aren't many activists as convincing as Bragg within our country. In a rally for American workers' rights, we had to send out for extra talent.

[Steve Earle](#) [9] and [Allison Moorer](#) [10] played next. All I'm going to say is that Earle played "Way Down in the Hole" from "[The Wire](#) [11]" - a TV show he acted in - and it was pandering-ly awesome. Otherwise, [this is what I was doing during their set](#) [12].

Next up was **Tom Morello**. Apparently the schedule had been misprinted, or he'd switched slots with Atmosphere last-minute. Actually, though, Morello came out as a modern incarnation of [Bob Dylan](#) [13] (if Bob Dylan doesn't appear often as a modern incarnation of Bob Dylan...), holding an acoustic guitar with the words "Whatever it takes" printed on its body in permanent marker, and a harmonica cage set around his head.

"I find it insulting that the republicans would start their convention on Labor Day," he said. "With their long history of union-busting and generally working against the workers."

The audience cheered.

Then, some concertgoers around me compared tattoos. ("You have a tattoo of Minnesota? I have a tattoo of Minnesota!") Others waited for the beach balls that were hovering over the crowd to come toward them, so they could hit them back in the air, in impressive displays of masculinity. Some just shouted out "Bring out [Zach de la Rocha](#) [14]!" after every song.

Still, it was an impressive set. Thought Morello preached revolution, the mood was more celebratory than angry...unlike the protest that would soon erupt across the river. Completely ripping off Todd Smith's line, Morello lets the malatovs come out from his guitar.

As he picked his way through a couple Rage songs, it became apparent that his bandmates weren't going to appear with him. Nevertheless, Morello had [a different, more meaningful surprise up his sleeve](#) [15]. (Same link as the Steve Earle one.)

Then it was time for [Atmosphere](#) [16]. At this point I was maybe forty feet from the stage, and the crowd behind me kept pushing me incrementally forward. Each step I took, I smashed another plastic beer bottle under my feet. Yeah, sure, everyone is pro-environmentalism, but apparently it's okay to litter in an enclosed space...or something.



Slug came onstage in an Obama '08 shirt, to predictably impressive cheers. I think at this stage of his career, Slug could suffer a stroke, develop a debilitating speech impediment, and still rock the microphone in Minnesota. Probably he'd make his stutters rhyme.

Unpredictably, Ant - Rhymesayers' longtime producer - was also on stage, a cigarette perpetually dangling out of his mouth. This is rare, I'm pretty sure - though Ant's been making Atmosphere's beats for over a decade, he seldom appears at shows. He drank from a can of Budweiser, which he must have brought from home, because all the beer being sold - at least to we civilians - was Miller brand.

Their set was on the mellower side, as Atmosphere cycled through some of their slower songs - "Godlovesugly," "Shrapnel," "Always Coming Back Home to You" - but the energy remained high. There was crowd-surfing, and there were reprimands of crowd-surfing by Slug. "You might think it's awesome, but the people that have to carry you are pissed. Just put your feet on the ground, man." (Applause.)

Especially with their most recent album, *When Life Gives You Lemons, You Paint That Shit Gold*, Atmosphere's songs have become a bit more politically motivated, with anthems like "Gaurantees" and "Puppets." So, while they may not be activists in the same sphere as Bragg and Morello, they certainly had something to offer to the show besides pure energy.

If you were watching the giant screen behind stage, a jumbo-tron that provided close-ups of the performers as they played, you may have believed that the next set was put on by a **Pair of Blue Nikes**. Really it was [Mos Def](#) [17].

Until this point, the camerawork had focused on faces, and maybe hands that spun records or zoomed across guitars and keyboards. During this show, though, there were at least a half-dozen shots of Mos Def's shoes. And they were nice shoes, I suppose, but not musical shoes, as far as I could tell. A minor qualm, to be sure.

This was a sort of experimental set. He was on for maybe half an hour or forty minutes, and played I think five songs, though they all began and ended amorphously. The beat changed at least four times under the lyrics of "Hip Hop," going from the original production, to samples from the Sugar Hill Gang, to some jazz xylophone-type-thing, to a capella, and back. Ditto the rest of his stuff, but that's okay, because he's Mos Def.



"He's dreamy," a girl next to me said, ironically-but-not.

It was six o'clock, and in a show of mercy, the sun was finally setting. Already a couple people in the crowd had passed out from heat exhaustion.

"I thought Minnesota was supposed to be cold," Mos Def said. "But it's hot as a motherfucker."

A certain set of smells had established itself as dominant: B.O. and weed smoke. So while the crowd submitted to Mos Def's demands to raise arms and pump fists, it maybe wasn't such a good idea. But, I suppose things like energy and adrenaline are extra-sensory, and trump such petty disturbances as olfactory discomfort.

When he played "Definition," rumors started flying again. "Is [Talib Kweli](#) [18]gonna come out?" "Talib has to come out." "I saw Talib hanging out backstage." "I saw Talib peeing in the bathroom, and he told me he was performing." But then Mos Def rapped over Talib's verse, and that was that.

He rapped on to a rapt audience, made a quiet exit, and it was time for the final performance.

Which was amazing. It's an uncommon occurrence that a reunited rap group can manufacture as much enthusiasm upon reconvening as they could during their original performances two decades ago. But [The Pharcyde](#) [19] generated as much energy as any of the previous acts. (Even if the energy wasn't necessarily harnessed to promote the SEIU's goals.)

It was an undeniably [post-modern](#) [20] set (that's right, the lit-blogger strikes again): While the MCs danced and rapped on stage, their music videos were broadcast on the giant screen behind them, so there was this convergence of Pharcyde 2008 with Pharcyde circa 1992. One was tempted just to watch the TV, as their videos are some of the best made (many of them directed by Spike Jonze). Particularly, when they played "[Drop!](#)" - [a video shot in reverse](#) [21] - it was impossible to keep one's eyes from the screen.



But honestly, the live group was even better. Imani did some sort of slow-motion solo-grind dance throughout the set, thrusting his hips at like 12 RPM. During a cover of Bobby Brown's "My Prerogative," (rapped by Fat Lip to put down all the haters), they all step-danced in unison.

What it came down to was, they were having fun. And while it wasn't a particularly inventive set - all the songs were expected, a sort of best-of-The-Pharcyde performance - the crowd was sated.

Perhaps one can consider the first half of the show - the activist/rockers Bragg and Earle and Morello - to have been the work, and the latter half - the rappers - to have been the play. Play, of course, being the ultimate worker's right.

*(Photos courtesy of Nick's Little Brother aka Jake Ryan, whom I owe two [2] beers)*

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#### Links:

- [1] <http://www.ratm.com/>
- [2] <http://www.seiu.org/>
- [3] <http://www.takebacklaborday.com/>
- [4] <http://www.nightwatchmanmusic.com/>
- [5] <http://billybragg.com/>
- [6] <http://www.rakemag.com/blogs/spazz-dad/2008/09/rake-against-machine>
- [7] <http://www.rakemag.com/blogs/hear-hear/2008/09/take-back-labor-day-concert-roundup#adjump>
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- [12] <http://www.rakemag.com/blogs/hear-hear/2008/09/protest-music-new-millennium>
- [13] <http://www.thepickinparlor.com/v/vspfiles/photos/AM932140-2T.jpg>
- [14] <http://www.zdlr.net/>
- [15] <http://www.rakemag.com/blogs/hear-hear/2008/09/protest-music-new-millennium>
- [16] <http://www.myspace.com/atmosphere>
- [17] <http://www.myspace.com/mosdef>
- [18] <http://www.myspace.com/talibkweli>
- [19] <http://www.google.com/musica?aid=Bvmz8IUQdyJ&sa=X&oi=music&ct=result>
- [20] <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/postmodernism>
- [21] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=co3qMdkucM0>