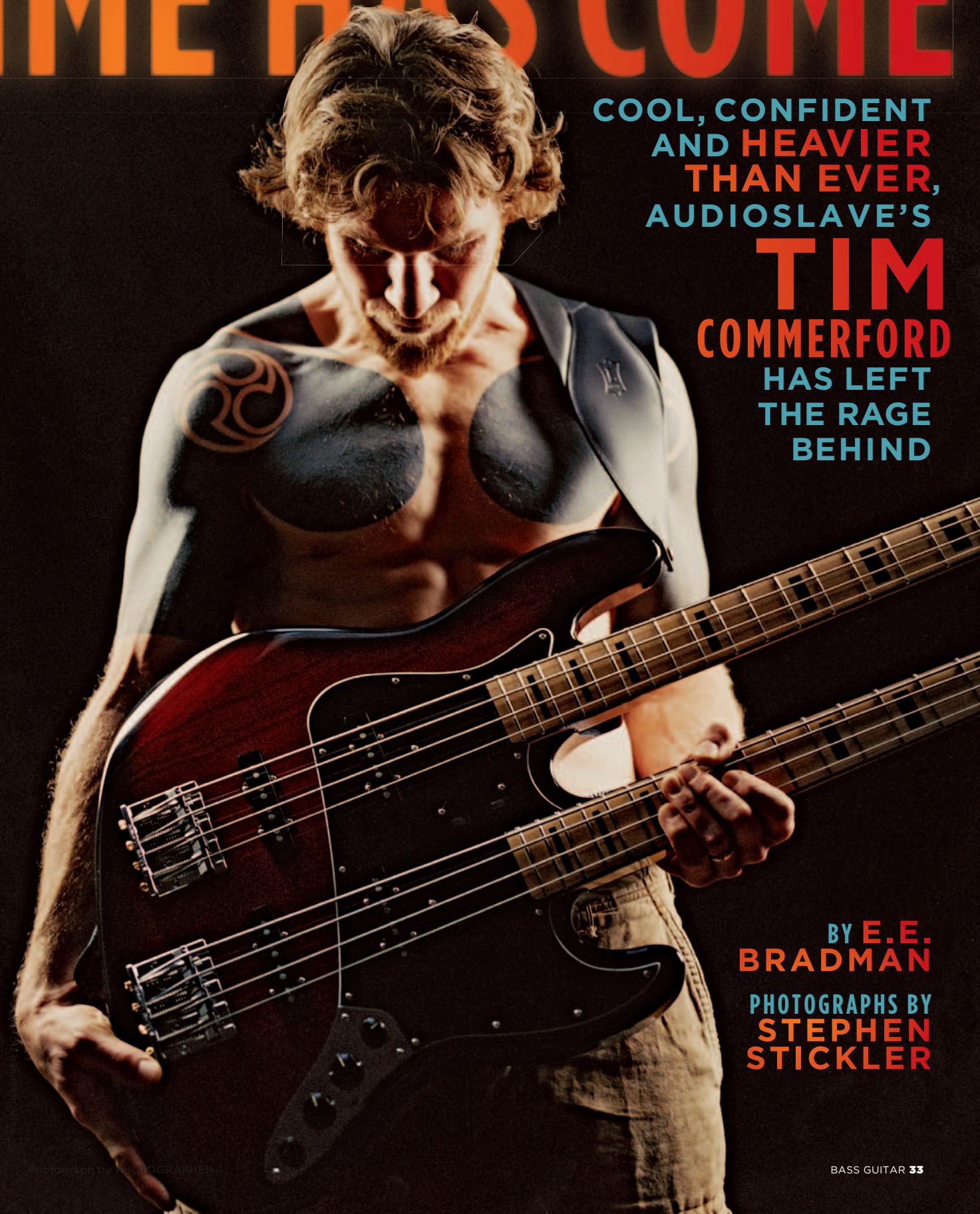




HIS TIME HAS COME

COOL, CONFIDENT
AND HEAVIER
THAN EVER,
AUDIOSLAVE'S

TIM
COMMERFORD
HAS LEFT
THE RAGE
BEHIND



BY E.E.
BRADMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
STEPHEN
STICKLER

Photograph by STEPHEN STICKLER

“OUT OF EXILE IS THE BEST RECORD OF MY CAREER, FROM EVERY STANDPOINT. NO DOUBT ABOUT IT.”



IT'S A GREY, DAMP DAY IN CHICAGO, but the rain and wind whipping in from Lake Michigan don't seem to bother anybody waiting in line outside the Aragon Ballroom to see Audioslave. Everyone's excited, smoking, restless, and smiling into cell phones because they've scored tickets to one of the hottest shows of the year.

Tim Commerford, the band's relaxed but focused bass man, greets me outside the dressing room where the band's production team is buzzing with last-minute details. As I sink into a couch, he tells me that guitarist Tom Morello, who's been known to exchange views with Bruce Springsteen and U2's the Edge on the art of pacing a live show, is the band's "setlist guru." "Setlist *jedi*," Morello corrects from across the room, his voice booming like a newscaster's. We

laugh; Tim smiles and nods as Tom bounces over to run it down for me, confident like a coach with a knockout strategy he knows will win the game.

Sure enough, it is a helluva setlist—a sly sequence of tunes from Audioslave's new album, *Out of Exile*, and their self-titled debut; hits by front-man Chris Cornell's old band Soundgarden; and

several gems from Tim, Tom and drummer Brad Wilk's thrash/hip-hop powerhouse, Rage Against the Machine. Soundgarden was no slouch—the grunge pioneers put out five full-length albums and sold three million copies of *Badmotorfinger* before calling it quits in 1997—but it's the hell-raising legacy of Rage that gets people excited. Over the span of eight years and three albums of original music (*Rage Against The Machine*, *Evil Empire* and *The Battle of Los Angeles*), the band, spearheaded by Zack de la Rocha, became the foremost purveyors of radical, politically-charged music of their generation. No other band has filled the vacuum left by their breakup in 2000.

Onstage, opening act Jonny Polonsky con-



TIM'S TONE QUEST

WHEN TIM Commerford tells me he's ditching all his bass necks in favor of "left-handed" necks for a longer B string, I have to laugh. Countless rock bassists consider Tim's distinctively warm, overdriven bass tone pretty close to perfect—but he's still trying to nail the sound he hears in his head. "I've modified everything—my basses, my speakers... I'm not afraid. Man," he says, "I've fucked with my amps in ways I don't even remember, much less try to repeat."

Like his hero, Geddy Lee, Tim's a J-Bass man. He trashed his main axe, a Seventies Jazz, during a Rage show years ago, but the pickups live on in his main bass, a '74 J; his other basses carry

Fender Custom Shop copies of those Seventies single-coils. His current arsenal includes three natural Jazz Basses and a black Jazz, all of which have Precision necks for wider spacing and Gotoh bridges; they're strung B-E-A-D with standard-gauge Ernie Balls and a .120 B string. He uses custom, wide Levy's straps specially sewn to protect a mountain bike injury to his left clavicle.

Tim's double-neck [see photos on pages 32 and 33] was built by the Fender Custom Shop. The top neck is tuned and strung E-A-D-G, and the lower neck, which has a reversed headstock and a B-E-A-D setup,

inspired Commerford to begin retrofitting his basses with "left-handed necks" whose tuning pegs point downwards. (See both *Tele-style headstocks* on page 9.)

Tim's relentless quest for the perfect tone is nowhere more apparent than in the care he's taken with his amp setup and overdrive. His signal chain starts with three Ampeg Pro series heads. "One head," he says, "goes into an 8x10, and the other two heads go into 4x10s. The main head—the clean bass sound, through the 8x10—is always happening, and that's my main sound."

"I have a switcher box that has two buttons and two

lights—and when there's no lights on, then it's just the 8x10 with my Ampeg head. If I click one button, one light comes on, along with another head—I can step on just one or both at the same time. I like to play with just a little tiny bit of extra gain: I'll have the 8x10 going, it'll be nice and clean, and then with one light on, I'll give it a little edge. Each light makes it a little louder and more crunchy."

"In Rage," Tim recalls, "I had just two heads and two cabinets, and I would click one on for distortion and then click it off. But at the end of Rage and in Audioslave,

it's been all about more volume and more gain. "I have different levels: clean sound; clean sound and the second amp; clean sound with the second amp, compressor and homemade distortion; and clean sound with the third amp and the distortion box."

Tim's two Dunlop Crybaby bass wahs are also crucial to his sound. "Each one goes to one of my overdriven heads. I put a plate over both so I can hit them at the same time. One covers the midrange, and one covers the highs." He also uses a Boss DD-

2 Digital Delay and a homemade compressor/boost.

Tim hates DIs for all the string noise they pick up. Instead, he mikes his cabinets and keeps a DI line for backup in case his amps go down.

"The average person that comes to a show doesn't realize that I'm running a little science experiment using distortion, volume and gain," says Tim, seriously. "I want to hear the incremental changes—that's what hypes it up, man! You can feel and see what it does. I swear to God—every show, the pit always leans towards Timmy C.'s side."

“I SWEAR—THERE COULDN’T BE ANY-ONE WHO’S MORE OF A RUSH GEEK THAN ME, MAN. I WAS SO INTO IT.”

cludes his last set of earnestly delivered pop tunes to a smattering of applause. The crowd, by now so large that it squeezes the walls and hallways, bursts every few minutes into cheers of anticipation. After what seems like forever, Tom’s white-haired mom is escorted onstage, right to the mike. “My name is Mary Morello—” we’re primed and ready “—and it’s a pleasure to introduce the best fuckin’ band in the universe. Let’s *do this!*”

The crowd goes wild.

CONSIDERING THE CONTROVERSIAL politics of the band that made him famous, it makes perfect sense that Tim—born to a NASA engineer and a mathematician in Southern California’s conservative Orange County—name-checks Sid Vicious as his first musical influence. From the the time he was a child, he saw music was a way to rebel against what he calls “the Orange Curtain.” Early on, he discovered fellow rebel Zack de la Rocha.

“I was definitely a rebellious little punker



kid who wanted to go against what was established,” says Tim. “I met Zack when he was in fifth grade. He already had a guitar, he knew how to play songs, and he was the first person to tell me to play bass. We loved *Never Mind the Bollocks*, and we’d sing and play along to the Sex Pistols with tennis rackets in my room. We were into that song ‘Bodies’: ‘Fuck this and fuck that/Fuck it all and fuck the fucking brat/She don’t wanna baby that looks like that/I don’t wanna baby that looks like that.’ And me and Zack went on to make millions with ‘Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me,” he laughs.

It wasn’t long before Commerford, not yet 11 years old, had his first four-string. “I had learned Sex Pistols songs on acoustic guitar, but my dad finally got me a bass, a Gibson G-3. It was pretty cool. It had three pickups and that weird triangular headstock. I was kinda interested in Kiss because the bass player, who I thought was crazy lookin’, had the same bass as me. So I mentioned it to my sister’s husband, Ray Ollie, and when Christmas came he bought me *The Originals*, a three-record set that had *Kiss*, *Dressed to Kill* and *Hotter than Hell*... it was sick!”

Tim was also listening to punk bands like T.S.O.L., the Clash, G.B.H. and Bad Brains. The second bassline he ever learned—after a 12-bar blues—was Public Image Ltd.’s “Public Image.” When PiL, lead by ex-Sex Pistols singer Johnny Rotten and featuring Jah Wobble on bass, played the Hollywood Palladium, Tim was in awe. “They played Sex Pistols songs; it was incredible,” he says.

Then he heard Rush.

“John Dohlgren, this shredding drummer kid, turned me on to them,” says Commerford. ‘YYZ’ was like, the apex of bass playing. I learned every song on *Moving Pictures*,



Rage Against the Machine: (l-r) Tom Morello, Zack de la Rocha, Brad Wilk, Tim Commerford

Signals, *Permanent Waves*, *Hemispheres* and *Fly By Night*. I spent a good four years in my room trying to forget about my mom's cancer by learning how to play and sing Rush songs. I swear—there couldn't be anyone who's more of a Rush geek than me, man. I was so into it."

After Commerford graduated from high school in 1986, he worked in a cabinet shop and played bass. He was kicked out of "a really bad strip-metal band that was kinda Poisony" for "not conforming." He went through a funk and disco slapping phase, learning Louis Johnson licks. And fusion icon Jaco Pastorius changed the way he thought about tone.

"I had read about Jaco, but I didn't appreciate what he was doing until I started playing in a band, and then I was like, Why is my tone not cutting through?," says Commerford. "Then I checked out the Jaco instructional video [*Jaco Pastorius: Modern Electric Bass*, DCI] and realized that I was playing too low, that my strings were vibrating into the pickups and that it wasn't sounding good. So I jacked my bass up higher and got the right attack going, and I was able to get some speed and play faster."

He occasionally jammed with his buddy Zack. At the end of the Eighties, John Knox—another friend and "the best drummer in Irvine"—was playing with Tom Morello in a band called Lock Up; when they broke up, John encouraged Tim and Zack to

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jam with Morello. Brad Wilk, who had unsuccessfully auditioned for Lock Up, played drums. Tim says he learned years later that Morello had to be reassured that Tim's slapping didn't make the band sound too much like the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

From the moment they hit the ground running with a 12-song cassette in 1992, Rage endured criticism for their in-your-face politics, but they walked the walk and talked the talk, winning the loyalty of listeners who were ready for funky beats, jagged melodies and social change. Thanks to Morello's distinctive guitar approach, their combination of thrash, punk and hip-hop was undeniably powerful; Tim, rumbling in the pocket one moment and playing thick, distorted lines the next, bridged all three genres while barely slapping or playing with a pick. Wilks kept it steady while Zack ranted, and it seemed like nothing—and no one—could stop them.

But things moved fast after de la Rocha announced plans for a solo project in early 2000. He quit in October. Two months later *Renegades*, Rage's covers-only final album appeared. By early 2001, the remaining members of Rage had jammed with Cornell. The singer backed out in March but returned in 2002. The new group settled on the name Audioslave, and their eponymous debut was on sale by the end of the year.

Tim says they were all surprised when Zack quit the band. "I've gone full circle about it. It made me mad, it made me sad, it made me scared. It's like having your quarterback jump ship and go to another team. But now I wish the guy the best—he really is a great musician. I'm just glad we were were lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time when Chris Cornell showed up."

"YOU KNOW THAT METALLICA movie *Some Kind of Monster*, with that guy Phil Towle?" The dorky psychotherapist with the sweater. "He was with Rage before Metallica—they hooked up with him through me, Tom and Brad," Tim tells me. "We're all big football fans, and Tom Morello met Towle because he used to be the L.A. Rams' performance-enhancement coach. We tried to do it with Zack at the end of Rage but, obviously, it didn't work out." But it did work, for a time, anyway, with Audioslave.

They fired Towle months before Metallica did, but the band can point to one positive result of therapy. "The way we wrote music in Rage was really bad. People would bring in stuff and there was always someone who didn't like it," says Tim. "We were all hatin' on everything. When someone brings in an idea in Audioslave now, we've learned to let other people make adjustments; and if I don't really get someone else's riff, I can suggest that maybe it would sound better like this or like that, and that's OK. "When me, Brad and Tom get in a room

to jam, we bring in an idea and piece it together, then we record it and try to make an arrangement out of it, until we're ready to bring in [producer] Rick Rubin. We keep getting better and better."

For *Out of Exile*, in fact, Rubin, who played a major role on the first Audioslave album, contributed "a lotta little arrangement ideas, nothing major." One thing he always does, however, is help Tim stay lean and mean.

"I do have a lot of space in my playing, but I can also play 'YYZ'—there's a dichotomy," Tim says, laughing. "When we first learned the new song 'The Curse,' for example, I was playing all kinds of arpeggios, a lotta notes, and it didn't sound good. It sounded kinda light, and Rick said something had to change. I just started sliding into notes, playing less, and it really opened it up."

Perhaps as an extension of his early love for Rush's prog-rock, Commerford also went through a full-on jazz phase in the mid-Nineties, playing upright and studying jazz. The most tangible evidence of his affair with bebop, besides the jazzy touches on songs like "Hadda Be Playing in the Jukebox," is the fact that a couple of his basslines were directly inspired by John Coltrane songs.

"I fell in love with jazz when I heard his 'My Favorite Things.' I thought the melody would make a sick bassline—I put it in 4/4, we wrote something around it, and it became 'Bulls on Parade,' Tim says. "The song we have on the radio right now, 'Be Yourself,' that's from Coltrane's 'Naima.'"

Playing upright bass also influenced his ideas about practicing. "Sometimes Tom and I would get on a chord and roll through the modes of that chord in all different positions. On upright, I was training my arm to find positions, and I realized I needed to do that on electric so that I didn't have to watch what I was doing so closely onstage. I'd look at basslines I had recorded on one string and go back and play them in one position, even if it didn't sound as good. I think of it as patterns—major, minor, minor, major, dominant, etc. I'll play the first and third shapes, the second and fourth, and on and on."

Commerford wasn't the only member of Audioslave who took his game up a notch. By the time the band recorded *Out of Exile*, drummer Brad Wilk was letting loose in a whole new way. "In Rage, Brad had to hold it down; otherwise it wouldn't have been hip-hop," says Tim. "But on this record, he laid down drum tracks without using a metronome, doing fills like Keith Moon. That pushed me—the drums are so great that the least I can do is come up with some memorable basslines."

Tim is emphatic about being done with the rock-rap sub-genre Rage Against the Machine helped define; he feels freer now, and he credits Cornell with opening up the band's sound.

"I'm proud of what we did in Rage, but what I'm doing now is so much more driven

by the music. The melodies Cornell brings in and the depth of his chord knowledge are just unbelievable. Instead of just me and Tom, he adds a third note to the chord. The lyrics were in the driver's seat there for about 10 years, and even though they're still important, now the songs are running the show."

On *Out of Exile*, Tim may finally have found an identity that's more than the sum of his parts. "All my influences are coming back around on this record," he says, and it's easy to see: Years of singing and playing Rush songs, the jazzy origins of "Be Yourself," Seventies pop melodies, even Soundgarden, whom Tim says was a big influence on the first Rage record—it's all there.

Tim's feelings about the success of Audioslave are in keeping with a newfound maturity and a general sense of well-being. "In a lotta ways, things are finally making sense to me. I'm in the best shape of my life. I've had children and that has been a sigh of relief for me. This is the first time I've been able to listen back to any of our records—Rage or Audioslave—without hearing something I want to change. This is the best record of my career, from every standpoint. No doubt about it."

S HOWTIME AT THE ARAGON. The band comes out ready to kill. Tim is like a boxer—alert, bouncing on the balls of his feet, all business, as his tech hands him his first Jazz Bass of the night. The intense look in his eye reminds you that this is the tattooed, hardcore mountain biker who climbed a 15-foot stage prop to protest Limp Bizkit's MTV Video Music Award speech in 2000.

"Set It Off" and "Exploder" are perfect songs to, um, set things off, the first two of four Audioslave tracks the band plays before Soundgarden's "Spoonman." They rip through four more of their own before launching into a block of Rage. The question of the night, it seems, is whether Cornell will rap over Rage songs; "Bulls on Parade" is still powerful without vocals, and the singer wisely holds the mike out to the audience, which knows every word, for "Sleep Now In the Fire." When he returns for Soundgarden's "Outshined," Cornell wrings every drop of emotion from the moody verses. Tim plays like his life depends on it, singing more confidently than ever and strategically rockin' his warm, detailed overdrive.

Cornell returns for a solo encore, strapping on an acoustic for "Black Hole Sun" and "I Am the Highway." The band joins him on the second chorus, and by the time they tear into "Show Me How to Live," everyone's primed for one of the twentieth century's best fist-pumping singalongs: "Killing in the Name," with its incendiary chorus of "Fuck you, I won't do what you tell me!" But "Co-chise," Audioslave's first single ever, is the last song of the night—a definite statement that these loud and proud warriors are in for the long haul as a new brotherhood. ■