



HOME

COVER STORY

Voices Carry

Serj Tankian steps beyond System of a Down to 'Elect the Dead'

'Divine' Reinvention

Former Fear Factory guitarist's new band hits brutal heights

Art Brut Gets All Cuddly
Meet Eddie Argos, L.A.'s new best friend

FRONTLINES

L.A. Sniper: Mr. Green In More Ways Than One
DWP's union boss will eat David Nahai's lunch

AMERICAN BABYLON

All Smoke, Little Truth
Extinguishing some of the myths of fire week

3RD DEGREE

Voices Carry

Serj Tankian steps beyond System of a Down to 'Elect the Dead'

~ By STEVE APPLEFORD ~



Photo by Steve Appleford

~ Singer-elect: Tankian is about to scream ~

The howl catches me by surprise. It is a raw and terrifying sound, a windy Darth Vader wheeze of horror, suggesting intense rage or madness or worse, and it's erupting right now from the smiling face of Serj Tankian. He is sitting inches away from me, in a dark little room upstairs at the House of Blues, and behind him stands a carving of the elephant deity Ganesha, the Hindu patron of arts and sciences, of intellect and wisdom. It is peaceful here. And our conversation has been typically pleasant. Until I ask about his metallic howl, and he quickly demonstrates, with no warning at all. And I'm actually startled by it.

It's a common vocal affectation in the metal world, very often overused, obliterating any subtler shades of emotion and meaning as a more direct route to some imagined inferno at hell's seventh circle. For Tankian, it's

LAST ISSUE

Pick up a paper

[Click to view 2007 Real Best L.A.](#)

Johnny Rotten

The Sex Pistol on doing TV, going to Iraq, and listening to Paris Hilton

EDITORIAL**Tale of Two Bureaucrats****LETTERS****LEFT COAST**

Cartoon By Ted Rall

TAKE MY PICTURE

Photographs by Gary Leonard

CLASSICAL**Twists and Turns**

Morris's 'Mozart Dances' brings music to the fore; L.A. Phil dances it up for a new season

7 DAYS**Music as Medicine****L.A.&E****Wandering Along Highway 61**

Filmmakers and musicians find more ways to reinterpret Dylan

MICK'S MEDIA**Down with the Ship**

As the administration sinks lower, the right-wing media rats have started to scamper

LIVE**Rock Like a Zombie**

On stage and on the page, Roky Erickson's post-psychedelia comeback soars in L.A.

FILM**The Fall's Big Fest**

AFI is here again, and the pickings are ample

~ LATEST REVIEWS ~

~ SHOWTIMES ~

just "a trick," he says, a small piece of a broader repertoire that has made him perhaps the finest hard-rock singer of his generation, and certainly one of the most powerful and compelling voices in pop music. As the main voice for System of a Down, he could be as wild and unpredictable as the music, shifting from melodic croon to nattering diatribe, at times playful, passionate, or intensely political.

Much of that range (sans the howl) can be heard on his new solo album, *Elect the Dead*, the first project to emerge from System's current, open-ended hiatus. The sound is a familiar one from Tankian: loud, melodic, epic, an anxious mix of Gypsy swing with brooding electronics and big guitars, mostly played by Tankian himself. It begins with "Empty Walls," as Tankian rails, "Don't you see the bodies burning?" He sings of "poets gone wild" amid swirling piano and orchestral waves of guitar on the charged "Honking Antelope," which imagines a world upside down, beginning with hunters strapped to the hoods of pickups driven by big game.

A few of the songs date back a few years, but most were written specifically for *Elect the Dead*, usually beginning as quieter tunes on piano or acoustic guitar. Recording began by October 2006. "When I started putting in more instruments, I said 'Whoa! This sounds like this is going to be a rock record. How weird!'"

You will find the album classified as "metal" on your iTunes chart, a likely holdover from his SOAD identity, but it is a bit misleading. Extremes can be difficult to classify. Most recently, Tankian has found great inspiration in the work of the great female jazz singers – Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, and others – for "singing that's completely relaxed, completely effortless." He hopes his next album will better reflect his interests in jazz and classical composition, with horns, strings, and the entire world beyond loud guitars. But his late discovery of metal, sometime in his early 20s, was a key part of the fuel that sent Tankian deep into a life of music, walking away from a successful business career and plans to become a lawyer.

"I was always into revolutionary music," Tankian says now. "I was always into music that talked about freedom and expression and fighting hypocrisy. Metal and rock tended to have those aspects accentuated with a lot of oomph. Not all metal and rock, but they had that character to them even if the lyrics weren't about those things. It is a great form of expression."

Back in July, Tankian was still at work on *Elect the Dead* at his home studio deep in the foothills just north of Los Angeles. The room was cozy but crowded. Guitars and keyboards were stacked everywhere, the floor scattered with cables and effects pedals, and a vintage Ronald Reagan puppet slumped nearby with a detached head. As he played back a few of the songs in progress, he said, "The excitement that I've had making this was like the first System record. I woke up every day and I couldn't fucking wait to get in here. Every day."

His partners in SOAD are also busy: guitarist Daron Malakian and drummer John Dolmayan are at work on their first album as Scars on Broadway; and bassist Shavo Odadjian is busy directing videos and recording an album with Wu Tang's RZA. Ask Tankian about the status and future of System of a Down, and he's upbeat and vaguely noncommittal. "We're doing our own things right now," Tankian explains with a smile. "The door's open, we're all friends. There's no reason to think that it won't happen. There's no reason to think that it will happen. It's all our choice."

As he has been with that band, and on his own, Tankian remains politically engaged and on alert. His own activism began while a business student at Cal State Northridge, where he was involved in the campus Armenian students group, pushing for official recognition of the Armenian

~ SPECIAL
SCREENINGS ~

~ NOW PLAYING ~

DVD EYE

**A Tasty Apple,
Compromised by a Nasty
Worm**

New 'Help!' DVD looks great, but the packaging sours things

PRINT

**'Revolution in the Head'
and 'Magic Circles'**

STAGE

Lifting the Screen

'dark play' and 'Anon' consider the consequences of synthetic sex

LISTINGS

~ ROCK, POP,
ACOUSTIC ~

~ JAZZ, BLUES, LATIN

~

~ DANCEBEAT ~

~ CLASSICAL/DANCE ~

~ CABARET ~

~ CONCERTS ~

~ THEATER ~

~ COMEDY CLUBS ~

~ ART OPENINGS ~

~ MUSEUMS ~

~ READINGS, ETC. ~

~ GIVE IT UP! ~

EAT

Yogurt Daze

A taste test reveals ripe competition on WeHo's 'Yogurt Row'

genocide, when 1.5 million were killed by Turkish forces between 1915 and 1923. More recently, he and Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine founded Axis of Justice, a political activism resource focused on current affairs and the usual crimes against humanity: war, poverty, injustice, etc.

"Everything in my life is inspiring, from the personal to the macro," Tankian says of the ideas behind his new music. "I read about what's going on in the world on a daily basis almost like a hobby. Anything that happens, I get bullet reports from all over the world. But it's not just that. It's also a personal thing. I think the world is sometimes reflective of our personal melancholy, of our personal grievances, or our personal state of being lost or unconsciousness. I do believe that everything is connected. I have no choice but to believe that the micro is the macro is the micro is the macro. I'm influenced by the small things on a daily life basis, and I'm influenced by the grander things, whether it's the war, the unjust occupation, ecological disasters happening around the world, the whole vibe of the times, the religious fervor, where are we going, the Mayan calendar, apocalyptic visions, you fucking name it."

Back at the House of Blues on Halloween weekend, Tankian arrives onstage with a band he's calling the FCC (for "Flying Cunts of Chaos," no doubt a taunting jab at the other FCC). He is a smiling ringmaster in a white coat and top hat, presiding over an audience of costumed characters: ghouls and escaped cons, kittens and sexy devils, an Egyptian pharaoh and a guy in a red backwards baseball cap, Fred Durst-style. (Is that a costume?) One fan up front seems to be dressed up like Tankian himself, with a dark Zappa-esque mustache and elegant threads.

The first song is "The Unthinking Majority," which explodes with slabs of anxious guitar and playful piano melodies, as Tankian stands wailing and crooning, eyes closed or bulging. He sometimes picks up a guitar or sits at the upright piano tonight, but he's mostly focused on being a frontman, connecting with his audience.

When he arrives at a cover of the Dead Kennedys' punk classic "Holiday in Cambodia," Tankian adopts the original's Jello Biafra warble, and the mosh pit rips open. Durst guy and a rainbow-haired clown are tumbling inside of it, pushing, shoving, going nuts.

The night is nearly done. But before Tankian and the band make their exit, they sign off with the Beatles' "Girl," a beloved mid-'60s pop tune of bitter romance and regret. It's sped-up but recognizable, until the very end. Tankian closes the tune by suddenly howling the final chorus of "Girl! Girl!" like a mad messenger for Beelzebub, twisting the pop nugget into a horror show Lennon & McCartney never predicted. It is a musical moment horrible and hilarious, over the top and strangely on target. Fans are stunned. So much the better. ★

11-01-07