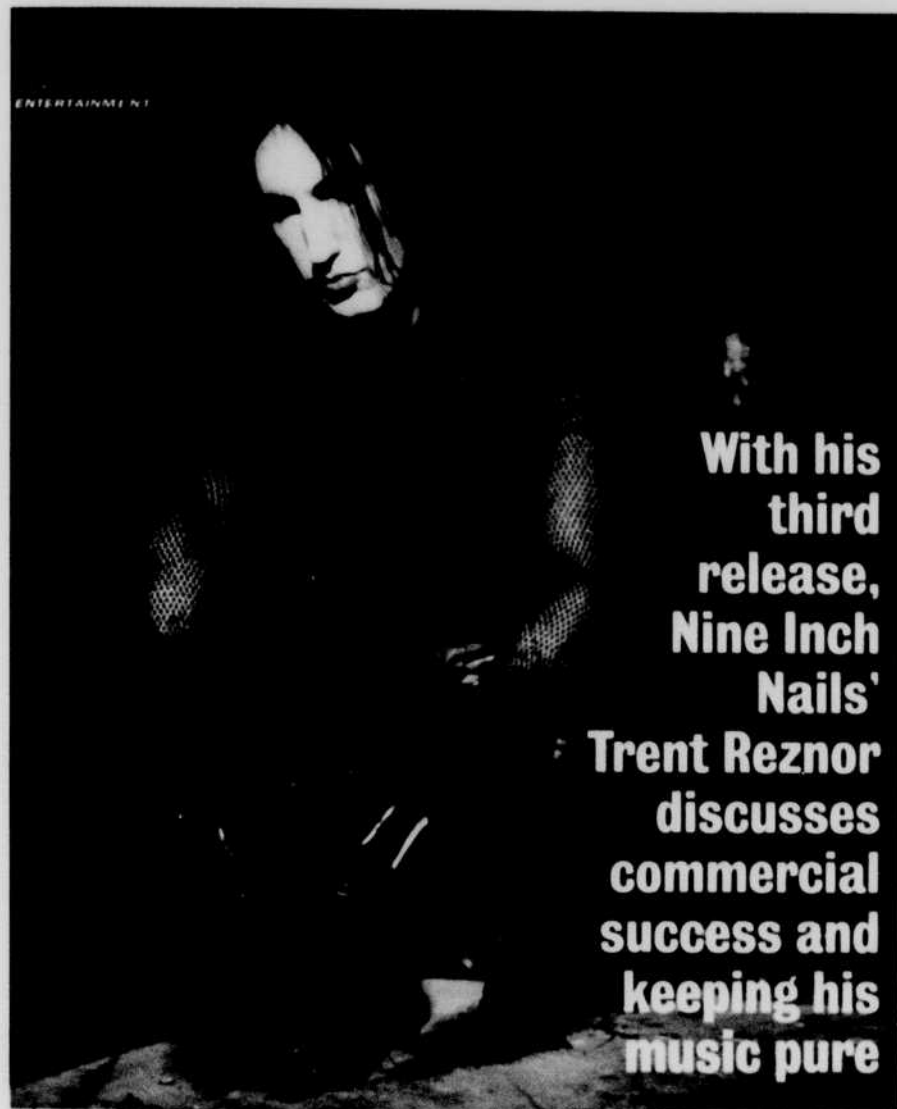




With his third release, Nine Inch Nails' Trent Reznor discusses commercial success and keeping his music pure

Trent Reznor sits in the corner of a hotel bar and slowly sips an iced tea. He seems at ease for someone who is homeless at the moment.

"I think I've moved every six months for the last 10 years," he says. His last residence in Beverly Hills, the infamous site of the Sharon Tate slayings, was recently demolished by its owner.

"I have a certain degree of newfound maturity," he continues, "and it makes me desire some kind of permanence like having a home. But now I'm faced with getting on a tour bus for at least a year. And as great as that can be, it's ultimately a rather shallow existence."

Shallow is not a term many people would associate with Reznor or his music, a project he calls Nine Inch Nails (NIN). More of a solo venture than a group effort, NIN enables Reznor to vocalize the sense of displacement he feels in his own life. The result is as disturbing as it is provocative.

"I've never written an outright happy song," the 28-year-old admits. "If I did, then I doubt it would fit into the context of a NIN record. And I don't really feel inspired to write about happy s**t anyway. When I'm happy, the last thing I feel like doing is torturing myself with my notebook in hand."

Reznor's anger and tortured-artist image attracted a cult following after he signed with TVT Records in 1988.

When his debut album, *Pretty Hate Machine*, was released the following year, the popularity of NIN began to rise so rapidly that Reznor says he found it disconcerting.

"It was cool to see that record do well on its own merit because MTV and commercial radio didn't embrace it until later," he says. "But at the same time, it was really weird going from being a fanzine level band to outselling Jane's Addiction in merchandise sales at Lollapalooza."

"The bigger the stakes, the more uncomfortable and out of control it starts to feel. It's cool to be the underdog, but when you start rising to the top, there's more people ready to drag you down any way they can."

Reznor is speaking of his relationship with TVT Records and its owner, Steve Gottlieb, who paid little attention to NIN until sales from *Pretty Hate Machine* began to skyrocket. A battle ensued over rights to NIN's next album, with Interscope Records finally stepping in to release the 1992 EP *Broken*.

"It came down to a simple thing," Reznor says of the struggle that almost ended his career. "What I'm most concerned about is that the record you get in the store and the way you perceive NIN is the way I want it to be perceived. I don't want it to be diluted by some marketing plan that's completely

Reluctant Icon

By Rob Hooper, *University Times*, California State U., Los Angeles

inappropriate and would make the music impure."

His frustration with the music industry provides the prevailing theme on *Broken*. The six-song collection, which was recorded without TVT's knowledge, also showcases Reznor's newfound interest in making his music as abrasive as possible. Less dance-based than *Pretty Hate Machine*, the EP sounds more like a guitar-oriented wall of sound.

Ironically, Reznor received a Grammy award last year for the track "Wish," an honor he's quick to dismiss as meaningless.

"The best thing about it," he quips, "was that it's the only song to ever win a Grammy that says 'fist f**k' in the lyrics."

Sarcasm aside, Reznor says he's come to terms with his hatred of the music industry. Most of his energy for the past two years has gone into making the recently released 14-track opus *The Downward Spiral* (Nothing/TVT/Interscope). It's a project that he says turned him into a workaholic.

"This album literally sucked the life out of me," he says. "I found it a difficult process... because when I went into the studio, I knew that I didn't want to make *Broken* again. I saw that as a trap I could easily fall into. When I write music, not everything comes out really hard and mean like those songs."

"On the same token, I didn't want to go about making *Pretty Hate Machine* over again. So I tried to experiment with different forms of intensity rather than just use loud guitars and drums. Ten hard, fast songs don't have nearly the intensity of spacing the different emotions out along the entire album."

While *The Downward Spiral* does contain some obvious musical mood swings, it also gives Reznor a chance to express some of his political concerns. "Big Man With a Gun" addresses misogynist attitudes in gangsta rap, whereas "Heresy" blends themes of sex and religion.

"I was trying to explore some of the paranoia I have as a sexually active person in the age of AIDS," he says of "Heresy."

"I guess I feel cheated for not growing up in a more liberated era. At the same time, what gets me mad is the way the right wing has used the 'convenience' of this epidemic in helping to promote their own agenda."

Reznor admits the issues brought up on the album may not exactly be Top 40 radio material. "The first people who heard it outside my immediate camp thought the album was commercial suicide," he says. "I'm not doing music to make millions of dollars, though. Every record I've put out I thought was risky at the time."

"My main goal was to broaden the scope of NIN a little bit. I'm tired of trying to second-guess what other people are going to like. It may not be the most obvious career move for me, but if you give the album a chance, it may produce something for you that you didn't expect."

The most unexpected element of *The Downward Spiral* is on the final track, "Hurt." Although Reznor usually revels in his nihilism, the song's ending conveys a surprising amount of optimism.

"I questioned whether or not to put that on there," he says.

When reminded that the music overpowers the vocals so that his lyrics are almost indecipherable, Reznor smiles.

"I do that sometimes," he says. "When I'm scared, I just turn the vocals down." □

IN REVIEW

★★★★ through 14 tracks that assault the listener with their sonic extremities. While his focus has taken on a harder edge, the new material has some accessible moments. "Closer" is sure to be a dance hit with its quirky electronic beats and blasphemous chorus. "Hurt" offers layers of circuitry that brilliantly compete with Reznor's wavering vocals. *Spiral* is not easy to digest. Reznor's hook is that his intensity lives up to his ambition.

Who says misery loves company? Nine Inch Nails roots on the idea that frustration is born of isolation. It's a formula that serves Trent Reznor well, especially on *The Downward Spiral*—the full-length follow-up to 1989's *Pretty Hate Machine*. "Mr. Self Destruction," a song that progresses much like the title suggests, sets the tone for most of the album. Reznor plays the fiendish tour guide