

# Rolling Stone

COLLEGE '99

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Secrets  
Cheating  
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THE FRAGILE WORLD OF  
**TRENT REZTOR**

ANTHONY

BOZZA

1994 was the year Trent Reznor released *The Downward Spiral*, an unsettling opus that details one man's descent to near self-destruction. It was also the year Toad the Wet Sprocket had a Top Ten hit, O.J. Simpson was chased on TV and Kurt Cobain committed suicide. It was only five years ago, but pop music has the life span of a Sea Monkey — maybe even shorter. Consider who shared the bill with Nine Inch Nails at Woodstock '94: Deee-Lite, the Spin Doctors, Porno for Pyros, Arrested Development and Jackyl. "At the Woodstock I did," Reznor recalls, "all you heard about was the Pepsi logo on the fucking bird thing and how it was all about money. Bands were getting shit-canned for doing it for money. Did anybody mention money this year?" **IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS,** rock music, according to Trent Reznor, "has taken a big shit." It is a period he's glad to have missed. All the while he's been lying in wait, hidden away like a Brazilian wood tick on the underside of a branch. Sure, he put his hand to a few things: producing the soundtracks to David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and Oliver Stone's *Natural*

HOLED UP

IN AN OLD

*Funeral Home*

THE MAN BEHIND

**NINE INCH NAILS**

HAS SPENT THE LAST  
FOUR YEARS

*dealing with loss*

CONSTRUCTING A  
DELICATE

&  
BRUTAL

MASTERPIECE

CALLIGRAPHY BY ANTHONY BOZZA



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MANN SELLER

Born Killers, co-producing Marilyn Manson's *Antichrist Superstar* and compiling *Closure*, a Nine Inch Nails video collection and tour diary. While these projects only made his fans rabid for a Nine Inch Nails album, he remained the Invisible Man. "All I really want to know," lamented a fan recently on a NIN Web site, "is, When will they tour? I've never seen Trent in real life."

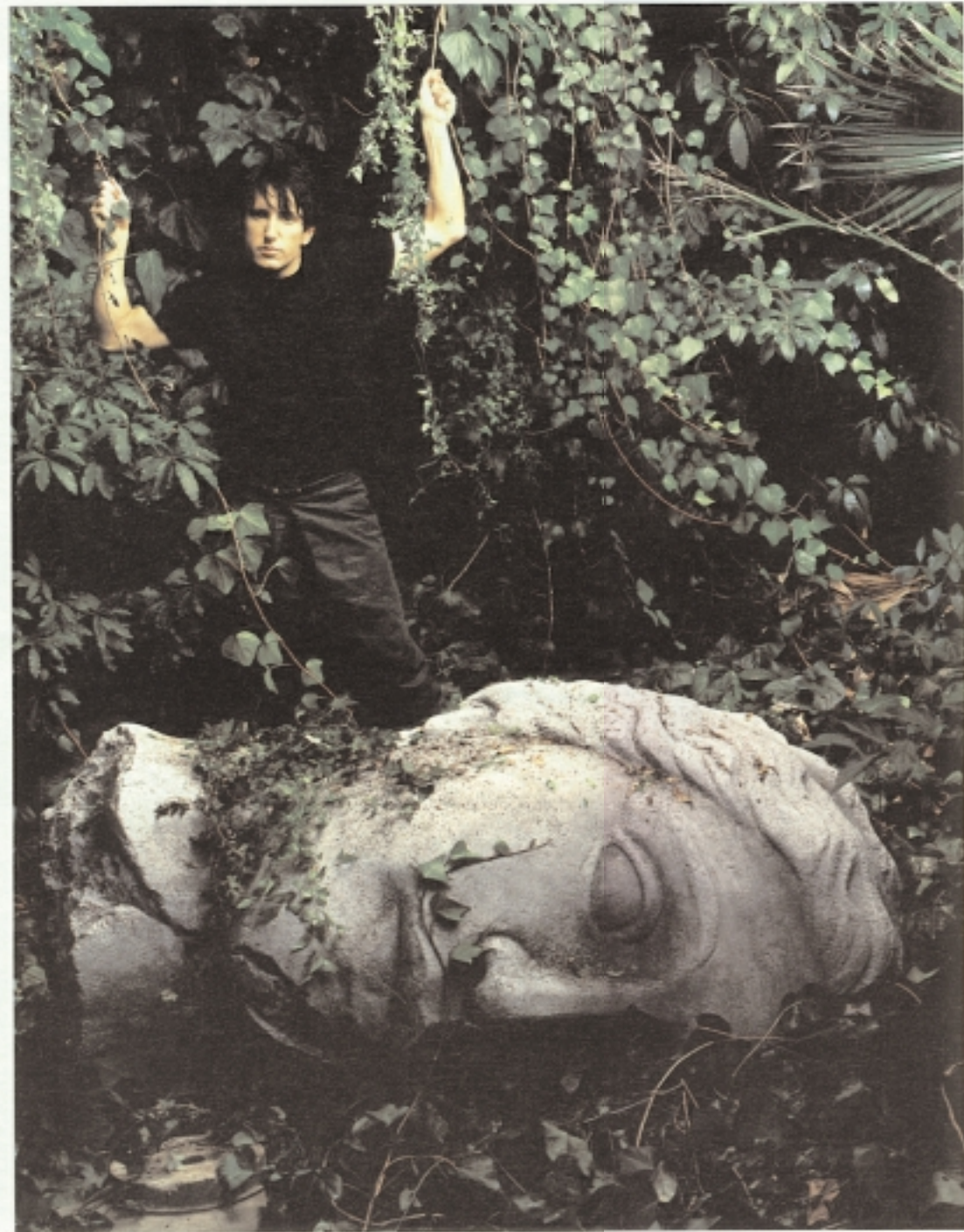
Don't worry, Reznor is ready now. It just took some time. First he needed to disappear. And then he found that reappearing wasn't so easy. Reznor, adept at most things he puts his mind to, had disappeared very, very well.

If you have a few hours, Trent Reznor can tell you what he's done in the second half of the Nineties - a period he jokingly calls his "summer vacation." He has brooded on the cliffs of California, suffering his writer's block at a grand piano. He has lost his grandmother, the woman who raised him after his parents separated, when he was five. He has lost a close friend in Marilyn Manson, one of the two or three people he had allowed into his life. He has spent two years of sixteen-hour days making a double album called *The Fragile* that far outshines anything he has ever done. He has traded drugs and alcohol for protein shakes and jet-skiing on the Louisiana bayou. He has wondered whether he is capable of sustaining a relationship and raising a family. And he has learned that he wants one.

Many of these changes and revelations have unfolded at Nothing Studios, in New Orleans, the former funeral parlor that Reznor bought in 1995, in the midst of the *Downward Spiral* tour. It is easy to tell when you are approaching Reznor's recording compound: Goth girls start cropping up like speed bumps. Even on a ninety-four-degree day, two vinyl-clad specimens are positioned at the gamy bar across the street, eagle-eyed for signs of life. Nothing Studios has a sand-colored stone facade and darkly tinted windows. It exudes a guarded stillness, like a bank vault. The front door is not original. It is the door that

Random Notes correspondent ANTHONY BOZZA wrote the cover story on Eminem in RS 81.

Charles Manson's minions passed through at Sharon Tate's house the night they killed her and four others in 1969. Reznor rented the infamous Hollywood Hills house at 10050 Cielo Drive to record *The Downward Spiral* in 1993; he took the door with him before the owners razed the place. There are security cameras at every entrance to Nothing. Now that Reznor has fin-



"I WOUND UP AT A PRETTY DESOLATE PLACE. IT'S ONE THING TO FLIRT WITH SUICIDE WHEN YOU'RE WRITING. IT'S ANOTHER WHEN YOU ARRIVE THERE."

ished *The Fragile*, he may need more of them.

One of Reznor's engineers, a stocky Colombian fellow, answers the door. A wide staircase leads up to a large second-floor room where, presumably, bodies once lay for wakes. Today it is filled with vintage arcade games: Robotron, Tempest, Space Invaders. The first-floor living room boasts a worn-in black leather couch, a large TV, a larger video collection (*Twilight Zone* episodes, John Waters' entire oeuvre) and the six-

foot canvases by artist Russell Miller that were photographed for *The Downward Spiral*'s artwork. Original animation cells from the movie of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* line the halls. In the bathroom, a print of the film's famous screaming face is Number 666 of a limited-edition run. A homey kitchen is at the back of the building. Above the stove hangs what could be a picture from Woodstock '99: a frat-looking guy projectile-vomiting while his pleasantly surprised buds look on. No one is sure who took that picture. It just showed up at the studio one day.

Next to the kitchen is a large metal door with a sizable lock. This is the door to the control room, the room in which Reznor recorded ninety percent of *The Fragile*. Inside, tons of gear - sound processors, guitars, effects pedals, keyboards, computers - is meticulously arranged. Despite the massive seventy-two-track mixing board and the security monitor above it, the room is warm: rust-colored walls with a wooden floor, candles burning on every surface and beige drapes hiding imaginary windows.

Reznor sits alone in a front office. The carpet and walls are deep blue. He is busy at a buzzing blue Mac. So busy, in fact, that he doesn't notice the odd little lady who has stopped outside his window. She's using its dark reflective surface to comb down her hair.

Reznor's hair is short now; gone are the long black locks he once favored. It is one of many things he has changed. "I was putting off doing this record for a number of reasons," he says, "some conscious, some subconscious. It's not like I've had this big, long career where I could become tired of this, but I was disillusioned." Reznor is dressed in black jeans and old black combat boots held together with electrical tape. He wears, as always, one of an endless succession of black T-shirts that advertise his fondness for Atari Teenage Riot, the Jim Rose Circus Sideshow or Nothing Records.

Reznor speaks deliberately and softly, in clear tones. He waits before answering, seemingly composing entire sentences before letting them out into the air. "When we started the *Downward Spiral* tour," he says, sitting back on a nearby couch, "we were still

kind of a small band. At the end of two and a half years of touring, we got off the bus and everything was different. I had money, and I had everyone kissing my ass, and I had friends I didn't know I had - or I thought I did. I saw myself change on tour, because I could. It was like, 'You mean, I can treat you like shit and get everything I'm supposed to? Great!'"

Reznor had everything he'd wanted for so long: the means to build an ideal studio, the respect of his peers and free rein from his record label. "What I didn't have," he says, "was spiritual satisfaction." As Reznor does when something bothers or "chews at him," as he calls it, he dived into another project, namely, producing the album that gave Marilyn Manson a career, *Antichrist Superstar*.

"That was just like staying on tour, without going anywhere," Reznor says. "The Manson camp party every night; there's something going on all the time. At the time I was in that mind-set already, so that was appealing."

When the circus split town, the inevitable fallout occurred. "The party left except for me," he says with a laugh, "and then I was supposed to do my real work." But Reznor had lost his musical passion. Depressed, he briefly saw a psychiatrist. "Then I decided I didn't want to go anymore," he says. "I turned a corner and I didn't need someone chewing at me to do things I didn't feel were right for me, like medication. I don't want to fuck with that. But that whole procedure made me realize I didn't like myself anymore and that I had to come to terms with certain things."

Reznor headed to a house in Big Sur, California, for a change of scene. He brought a few musical ideas - and a lot more emotional baggage. "It just took me time to sit down and change my head and my life around. I had to slap myself in the face: 'If you want to kill yourself, do it, save everybody the fucking hassle. Or get your shit together.'"

"I thought Big Sur would be a nice break," he says and smiles. "It was sheer terror. Isolation on the side of a mountain, an hour from the nearest grocery store. I really didn't want to be by myself. I wasn't prepared for it."

Reznor's loneliness was deepened by the loss of his grandmother and his split with Marilyn Manson. The two went from trusted friends to bitter rivals; reportedly, the final straw came when Reznor heard that Manson wanted David Bowie to produce the *Antichrist* follow-up, *Mechanical Animals*. "I don't want to get into a 'he said, he said,'" Reznor says about Manson, "but to sum that scene up, I think fame and power distort people's personalities. He and I are two strong personalities that could co-exist for a while, but things changed. I'm not pointing fingers at him 100 percent, but some lines were crossed that really hurt me when I was down - real down. He was a best friend, and it was a shitty way to lose him."

Reznor gets up and looks at the door. "It's hard. It makes you rethink a lot of things you thought were special: Were you blind to them the whole time? How stupid was I? Listen, I don't really want to talk about this - that's all I want to say. I've got to take a piss." And off he goes. It won't be the last time. When our talks turn too personal, Reznor is quick to end them by politely and firmly leaving the room.

TRENT REZNOR is a network of balanced contradictions - and all the richer for it. His music can be as abrasive as chain saws or as melodious as birds - often in the same four minutes. Until *The Fragile*, he worked almost exclusively with machines but expertly wrung earthy warmth from their chips and bits. As much as his music screams "Fuck you," it whispers "Love me." It can sound simple, but it is meticulously crafted and complexly programmed. Reznor uncorks chaos but has the intelligence to harness it. As industrial, distorted and thrashing as Nine Inch Nails are, there is an inherent groove to the music that can't be learned - like Prince, like Sly Stone.



MEET NINE INCH NAILS: FINCK, LOHNER, CLOUSER, REZNOR AND DILLON (FROM LEFT).

Reznor's lyrics, he says, come from his gut. They are culled from journal entries and are intensely personal yet tell us little of him. He engages in microscopic self-editing and self-analysis, but he will be the first to tell you he runs from his problems. Above all, Reznor is driven, a man possessed of a vision only he can fully see. He is the type who is most inspired when his back is against the wall.

"I came to realize," says Alan Moulder, producer of Smashing Pumpkins' *Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness*, engineer for My Bloody Valentine and engineer/co-producer of *The Fragile*, "that the best thing to tell Trent is that you don't think a song is working. If he thinks something's beating him, he won't stop until he's beaten it." Moulder should know. He spent two years with Reznor on this album, watching it grow from unfocused instrumental snippets

into a two-hour sonic journey - serving as a collaborator as much as a producer.

The two began with the bits Reznor had compiled, some ideas from Big Sur, most from afterward. "I wanted to let what felt right come out without allowing myself to think about where it was going," Reznor says. "That's also what made the record difficult." The experiments were unlimited: No clock was running. Reznor, who is classically trained on piano and well-versed in synth, found himself drawn to guitars. "It's typical of him," Moulder says. "You know people saying 'Rock is dead.' Everybody else is hanging guitars up, and he decides to do a guitar record with solos and everything. He's as good as anybody I've worked with at conveying emotion with his playing. He's always looking for an angle you'd never think of taking."

"I'm pretty studied in keyboard instruments," Reznor says, "but I don't understand the guitar very well. There's an imperfection to it that helped me get a more emotional connection to the music: You strum it with your hand or bang it; it can go out of tune; certain notes buzz. Not to get super literal, but it gives the album a more fragile feel."

As the volume of material grew, the pair devised a grid of influences to keep track of things. There were category headings like Tom Waits, *Bone Machine*; Organic Funk; and Atari Teenage Riot. It was a way to set sonic goals. "Nothing was ever suggested and not done," Moulder says. "The unwritten rule was, 'We'll try everything.' We'd spend a day getting a load of cardboard boxes and a metal barrel. We'd mike them up and he'd play on them. The marching sound on 'Pilgrimage' is actually bits of stuff in a box being shaken."

At the end of a year's time, Reznor had nothing but "an abstract blob" of a record. He hadn't started this album with a story line, as he had *The Downward Spiral*. Now he needed someone to find one. Reznor and Moulder sent for Bob Ezrin, producer of *The Wall*, a constant Reznor touchstone. Ezrin, who has worked with everyone from Alice Cooper to Berlin, flew to New Orleans for one week and powered through three or four different sequences until he nailed it. "The most important thing about a continuous listening experience," Ezrin says, living up to his Seventies rock legacy, "is defining the four corners of the album first - the beginnings and endings of the first and second acts - while staying true to the journey. It was important to fail two or three times. The last failure opened so many doors that it fell into place in a matter of hours."

There is a journey at the center of *The Fragile*, one laden with dreamlike (and nightmarish) imagery and unexpected twists. It begins ominously and ends uncertainly, with a sense that space has been traveled but no destination reached. The ocean is a recurring theme - sinking beneath it, rising from it, looking to it for something or someone. Overall, it is an album to keep a psychiatrist (or an armchair one) pretty busy: Is this a quest for self-discovery? A map of the subconscious? A diary of a co-dependent relationship? It could be all of them, and it could be none of them.

After he completes an album, long before it is on sale, Trent Reznor gives a copy to each of his parents. Considering the subject matter - suicide, sex, bon-



BEACH? WHAT BEACH?! REZNOR (LEFT) AND LOHNER REHEARSE IN A BAHAMAS STUDIO.

age - it must be squirmy. "It's always a little awkward," he says. "You know, like, 'I'm OK, I'm OK. Don't worry about it.'" This album is different. "It's more about a sense of purity or morality and a preservation of that. It's about the search. And you don't arrive at a nice tidy conclusion."

**T**HE WIND is pinning Trent Reznor's hair down and lifting his black T-shirt almost over his head. He is sitting in the front of a forty-foot powerboat, skipping over the waves off Nassau, in the Bahamas. After five days of nonstop rehearsals here, he and his band are heading for a day off on a private island where the boat's captain will cook up grouper stew and spiced rice for the band, crew and road managers. Reznor is gnarled into the same posture he assumes onstage: shoulders rolled forward, arm gripping a bar in front of him. But he is smiling, laughing and gleefully looking around as the boat repeatedly jumps out of the water. Behind him, keyboard player-programmer Charlie Clouser and guitarist Robin Finck clown around, letting the wind catch their lips and distort their faces.

They aren't the same crazed crypt keepers who left a trail of smashed keyboards across the country four years ago. They will be quick to tell you they've changed - and that they needed to. It wasn't just Reznor who tried to live up to the tour's name: The Self-Destruct Tour. Finck also had to find his way back to earth. After spending a lost year in New Orleans, he joined Cirque de Soleil for a year as its guitarist. "It was exactly what I needed - a 180-degree, polar-opposite change," he says. Finck then spent time working with Guns n' Roses, a project he may return to after the upcoming Nine Inch Nails tour. "I was with Axl for a little over two years," he says, "and we recorded dozens of songs together. I'm really proud of what we did as a band. I'm anxious to see how it's completed." Well, will it be? "Oh, yes," Finck says, grinning. "You may depend on it."

Nine Inch Nails are in the Bahamas for three reasons: to prepare for the MTV Video Music Awards - their first public appearance in almost four years - to make *The Fragile* road-ready for a tour that will take up much of next year and to vacation while doing it. Before settling down to work, they frolicked for a few

days: swimming with Bahamian Reef sharks, jet-skiing and snorkeling. "The music sounds better than it did at the height of when we had our shit together before," Reznor says. "Our drummer, Jerome Dillon, is really changing the sound." Dillon was one of many who tried to land former drummer Chris Vrenna's spot. Vrenna - who left on bad terms two years ago - was the only person aside from Reznor's manager who had been around since Day One. "When Chris left the band," Reznor says, "part of me was relieved. I miss him as a friend a lot. But it was freeing on the musical level."

Nine Inch Nails have taken over Compass Point Studios, the facility that Chris Blackwell built in the late Seventies to record Bob Marley, for whom he couldn't get an American work visa. In the woody main room where Marley recorded *Survival*, *Exodus* and *Kaya*, the band has set up its gear. A second control room serves as Trent's office, while the attached studio has been converted into a gym. Reznor's Nautilus and stationary bike have been shipped from New Orleans. Nearby is a table full of vitamins, protein powders and - aha, Reznor's real secret: a bottle of Mega Creative Fuel.

When the band members settle in for rehearsal the night before our boat trip, their chemistry is tangible. In conversation, Reznor is shy and thoughtful. Put him in front of a mike and all of that changes. His body tenses, his arms flex as he holds the mike above and in front of him, rocking it back and forth. The band fiercely attacks older songs like "Suck," "Terrible Lie," "March of the Pigs" and "Down in It" like it's been at it for months. When it falls in on "Reptile," hot air streams rhythmically from the stacks of speakers in the small room. There are only three of us in this audience, but the band members are kinetic, playing with closed eyes, bouncing up and down, as lost in it as they would be for 3,000. ("Rocking in bare feet is not cool," Reznor says afterward. "Toe-stubbing is a problem.")

The MTV Video Music Awards will mark Reznor's second television performance - his first was *Dance Party U.S.A.* Yes, back in the early days, before his debut album, *Pretty Hate Machine*, was even released (attention, VH1 producers), Trent Reznor lip-synched on the raised platform of that low-rent *Solid Gold* show. "I told this publicist we wanted to do it, completely out of my ass," he says. "Next thing I know, we're booked. It was like mall people doing these crazy *Hairspray* dances. Terrible. And, at the time, we had

this keyboard player who was a fucking idiot. When we were talking about what to wear on the show, he said, 'I'm thinking about a sword.' I'm thinking, 'Is that some sort of cummerbund?' He meant a real sword. He's probably dead by now. There's no way someone hasn't taken him out."

Reznor guards the NIN mystique zealously. He has never played *Saturday Night Live*, never sat in on *Politically Incorrect*. It hasn't been for lack of offers. "I've worked hard at keeping Nine Inch Nails precious," Reznor says. "Everything I do is secondary to the music. It's pretty easy, once you let your guard down, for someone to say, 'Hey, want this Prada jacket?' Next thing you know, you're some jive dude; Carmen Electra is on your lap and you're a rock guy that's full of shit." That said, Reznor is looking forward to joining us, live and worldwide, on MTV. "I like the challenges of flirting with the mainstream with Nine Inch Nails. I think we can do it honestly," he says. "You know, let Fred Durst surf a piece of plywood right up my ass."

Reznor is frank about today's clownish rock climate. "If you turn on MTV right now," he says, grimacing as if a foul smell has found him, "I bet Kid Rock is on there, judging something, giving something away with sumo wrestlers and his pants on backward. But that doesn't seem inappropriate for what he's trying to do." Reznor was recording during Woodstock '99 but had it tuned in on TV. "It struck me as some of the worst shit I'd ever seen," he says. "It was a dismal synopsis of everything that's bad in music right now. The incredible lack of importance seemed to jump off the screen at me. But it did make certain bands really stand out. I thought Rage Against the Machine looked like the Second Coming of Christ."

After the night's rehearsal, Dillon, Finck and Lohner have a beer while lounging around the hotel pool. They recall the injuries sustained during the last Nine Inch Nails tour (broken fingers, bruised ribs, a severely lacerated head). Reznor returns from the studio. "Is this the all-male pool party?" he asks, his chocolate-milk Weimaraner, Daisy, in tow. He says good night and is gone.

The next day, on the private island, Reznor is the first off the boat, and he's soon exploring every inch of what is basically a large sandbar with palm trees, bordered by sharp rocks. It has been colonized by hermit crabs that caravan over the sand and up the trees. "This one's in charge," he says, pointing out a fist-size shell. "Pick it up; they don't bite," he goads one of his sound engineers. He does and it does. "Did that hurt?" Reznor asks with a sly grin.

Reznor moves to a stone stairway that descends into the water. Below it the ocean is deep blue and tranquil. It is very different from Big Sur. "You'd walk down this rickety ladder to this not-very-pretty beach scene: crashing waves, moss-covered rocks, weird ocean life. It was scary," he recalls. "It summed up a lot of things. Like, 'I should be enjoying this, but I'm not.' It's a very spiritual, very cleansing place. But all that my antennae were picking up were the bad parts." As hard as that time was, it served Reznor well. "Day- [Cont. on 140]

"I LIKE THE CHALLENGES OF *Hizling* WITH THE MAINSTREAM. I THINK WE CAN DO IT HONESTLY. LET FRED DURST surf A PIECE OF PLYWOOD UP MY ASS."

## TRENT REZNOR

[Cont. from 62] dreaming, just sitting out there became a catalyst," he says. "It's a force that crops up in some of the album's lyrics." And it's a force that seems to have washed away some of *The Downward Spiral*'s suicidal tendencies. "I had a little flirtation with the bottom," he says, "and I don't want to be there. After *Downward Spiral* ran its course, I wound up at a pretty desolate place. It's one thing to flirt with suicide when you're writing, it's another when you arrive there. It's not as funny or romantic a notion."

The same goes for nihilism. "I'm still anti-organized religion," he says. "I still think that's a crock of shit. But in my head, that spilled over into an utter-chaos outlook: 'I don't need anything, I don't need anyone, and I don't need to believe there's any reason to anything.' It was a pretty self-centered approach. I was lonely and had a bleak outlook on everything. I think people have an inherent need for belonging, to feel they are a part of something."

Reznor talks about working with other people in the studio and being closer to people outside his career. "There's a shitload of things I've given up to do this," he says. "I look at friends from other eras of my life who are now married, paying off condos. They have that rock of stability and normality that maybe they wish they didn't have. It's like, 'Fuck, you've got a lot in that life.'"

He often wants that life, too, but thinks he'll need to end this one first. "When I do something, it's total immersion. I don't allow anything to get in the way," he says. "I know what my life now can bring, and it's great things - but there's a shallowness to it. I've been saying for a long time that I wanted to raise a kid." He tosses a rock absent-mindedly into the waves. "I'd want to wait until I wanted to dedicate a lot of time to a family. It's not right this second."

Trent Reznor has other plans. He wants to start a new band, one that he's not in. "I want to do everything I do for Nine Inch Nails and produce it, but not sing," he says. "What I liked about producing Manson was that I could help make the music better and not have any pressure on me." Calling all divas: He has people collecting tapes and is looking for a female singer. "It has to be the right thing - genreless and raceless, but soulful. Not Nine Inch Nails with a girl singing." He also plans to tackle more scoring. "It sounds kind of jive, but I like the idea of getting deeper into music, minus the constraints of pop music and being an icon." Hopefully, this will leave Reznor more time to make friends, of which he has few. "I don't really have many friends," he says. "When Christmas comes every year, I get a little bummed out because if I'm not in a re-

lationship, I don't have anywhere to go."

Where he usually goes is home: Mercer, Pennsylvania, a small rural town far out in Amish country. He plays music and talks computers with his dad, visits with his younger sister, her husband and two kids, and returns to the house where he was raised to see his granddad. Everyone is within twenty miles of one another. Though Reznor's parents have been separated since he was five, they get along well. "I used to just think it was a little shitbag town I couldn't wait to get away from," he says. "That motivated me a lot to succeed and drew me to things like sci-fi and horror movies and Kiss. Anything that wasn't at all like Mercer, Pennsylvania." Reznor has begun to accept and even embrace his roots. "Now I realize there is a quaintness to Mercer that's kinda cool," he says, then smiles and throws a sidelong glance. "Still, I don't think I'm moving back there." Reznor has joined Eydie Gorme and Tony Butula, of Sixties pop group the Lettermen, in the ranks of famous Mercerians. For the sake of the town square, let's hope they don't commemorate him with a statue. "I'd be the first one to spray-paint it," Reznor says. "I'd put tits on it."

Midway through his thirties, Reznor finds that the majority of his friends are younger, and he doesn't feel different - for the most part. "Thirty-four," he marvels. "Suddenly the balls lower a little bit. I only feel weird when I look at someone else my age and think, 'Fuck, they're old.'" Reznor will not be rocking when he's fifty. "I've thought about artists like Tom Petty," he says, "who seem to have been around forever and still make passionate music. I never get the sense he's putting on an act for a generation he doesn't belong to." The dark void of the generation gap is already something Reznor has gazed into. "We did a show in New York," he recalls, "and we brought Adam Ant onstage. We're like, 'Fuck, yeah, Adam Ant,' and the audience is looking up at us like, 'Who the fuck is that guy?' They're all fifteen. I'm thinking, 'Oh, I forgot. I'm older than you.'"

Reznor pokes a Paleolithic-looking creature clinging to a rock. It doesn't budge. "Do you mind if we take a break for a while?" he asks, eagerly looking at the people goofing around on the beach. "I want to go hang out with everybody for a bit." He walks back toward the group. Wait - where is he going? He walks past them, to the water. He stares out at the setting sun for a few minutes, letting the ocean lap his feet. Then he turns around and faces everyone. He doesn't look happy, he doesn't look sad. And he doesn't move to join them.

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## PUFF DADDY

[Cont. from 51] to HMV to sign albums for fans. Three thousand people were waiting for him, and the blocks around the store overflowed with teenagers and their nervous energy. A riot seemed possible. When Puff's silver Navigator got within a block of the store, a bodyguard jumped out and walked alongside the truck as it moved slowly down the street, like Secret Service men do. Finally, Puff leapt out and was immediately surrounded by a coterie of bodyguards and assistants who kept the beehive of fans from tearing him apart. It was like a rugby scrum, with Puff as the ball.

As fans stepped up to the table for their four-second meeting with Puff, most were overwhelmed. Girls sobbed, boys' legs buckled and nearly everyone lost their tongues. A bodyguard standing next to Puff grabbed the microphone and began giving instructions meant to keep things moving. "Please have the item you want signed out and ready as you step up to the table. ... Please be fair, only one signature per person. ... But time went on, he began teasing the fans clowning them over the loudspeaker keeping the moment light. "Breathe!" urged girls who stepped up crying. When people began rhyming for Puff, he said, "Rhyme while you're stepping down the aisle." When a young boy's camera wasn't ready, he said, "Fix your camera outside the store. Thanks for coming." Puff's assistants laughed. Puff remained professional, hugging the who cried. After four hours, everyone who lined up had gotten an autograph. The crew moved through the back corners of HMV and into the silver Navigator. An assistant phoned Mister Chow, the trendy upscale Chinese restaurant on Fifty-seventh Street, to tell them Puff was on the way. Signed every autograph, Puff was proud of himself. He would say it twice more times. "Is your hand tired?" someone asked. Surely it was cramped. "Not at all," he said animatedly, snatched up his Motorola and, with writing hand, began dialing. He seemed not the least bit tired, as though he'd fed off the crowd's energy and left HMV with his batteries charged instead drained. "I'd like to get a shot of him laxing," a photographer whispered Steve Lucas. "You'll be waiting a long time," Lucas said.

Puff's crew strolled into Mister Chow and settled at a rectangular fifteen-person table. Mister Chow is the official cafeteria of the hip-hop glitterati, a place where you'll see a tanned business in a pastel green suit sitting beside a fat in a football jersey that says MURK UNIT on the back. MCs Pras and Nas, longtime Def Jam executive Clipse and DJ Spark Ronson were