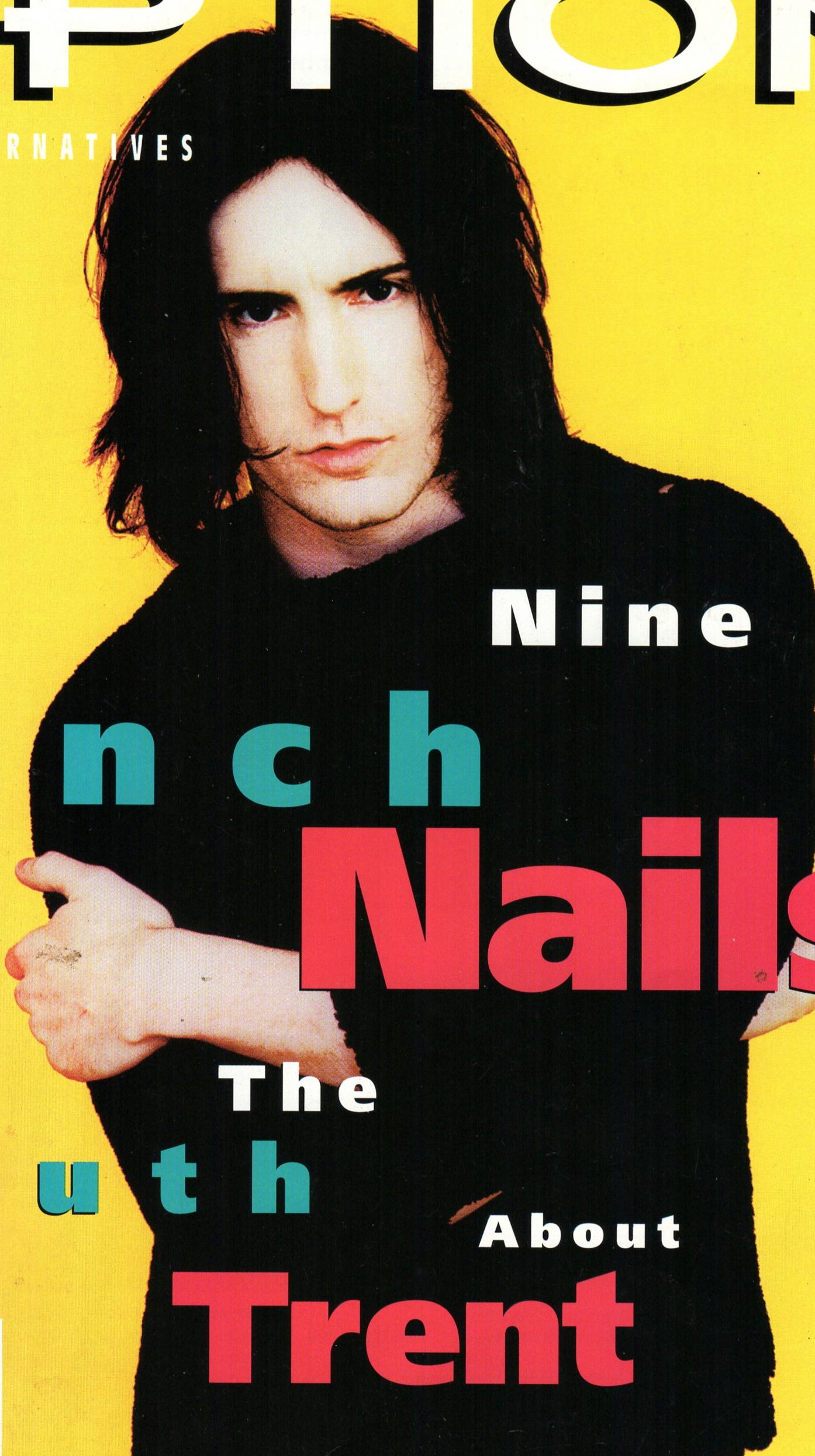


DEPRESSION, DRUGS & DEATH: HOW MUSICIANS COPE

OPTION

MUSIC ALTERNATIVES

A black and white portrait of Trent Reznor, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. He has long, dark hair and is wearing a dark, long-sleeved shirt. His right hand is visible, resting on his chest.

Nine
Inch
Nails
The
Truth
About
Trent





the triumph about trent

Ten minutes into the first of two sold-out shows at the Warfield Theatre in San Francisco, Trent Reznor is stomping and writhing across the stage like a spoiled child. Wearing cut-off fatigues, leather boots and long black gloves, the volatile, anguished leader of Nine Inch Nails slams into his keyboard, kicks over a mike stand, then picks it up and hurls it over the drum riser. Drummer Chris Vrenna doesn't see the 25-pound hunk of metal coming. Nor does he see the blood oozing down his face until he wipes his forehead with a towel someone passes from backstage. That's when Vrenna remembers starting to feel woozy. And that's when the sound cuts out, the stage lights go dark and the band shuffles off stage, apparently leaving the largely teenage crowd more dazzled by the spectacle than angered by the sudden interruption.

It's a sweaty, uncomfortable half hour in the slam pit before Nine Inch Nails returns. Vrenna has a crude bandage wrapped around the hole in his head. Reznor has an apology to make. "That was my fault," he says, momentarily humbled. "I'm sorry... I'm just a fucking asshole."

By Jason Fine

Photos by Michael Lavine

Nine Inch Nails
& Dance Man
Song

Trent Reznor, it seems, can do no wrong. Since he exploded onto the scene in 1989 with his seductive, industrial-pop *Pretty Hate Machine*, under the moniker Nine Inch Nails, the 28-year-old small-town Pennsylvania native has become one of rock's most celebrated antiheroes.

During a three-year hiatus from touring, Reznor released the vitriolic, Grammy-winning EP *Broken* ("Wish" took honors for best heavy metal song) and moved his base of operations from Cleveland to L.A. — keeping his name in the press by taking up residence at the spooky Benedict Canyon estate where Charles Manson's cohorts murdered Sharon Tate. He recently assem-

bled a new band to tour in support of his second full-length album, *The Downward Spiral*. Written, performed and produced mostly by Reznor alone, in a studio built into the living room where Tate's friend Voytek Fykowski was stabbed 51 times, the album is a dense and richly nuanced collage, blending elements of industrial, techno and guitar rock to create a music of startling and sophisticated power.

So far Reznor has not been able to translate the power and dynamics of *The Downward Spiral* to the stage. Using a mix of live instrumentation — two keyboards, guitar, bass and drums — with samples and tape loops, he replaces musical subtlety with a well-designed stage show and lots of

choreographed, in-your-face aggression. For all his talk about alienation, Reznor seems more interested in elevating himself above the crowd than reaching out to make any direct contact. During NIN's San Francisco stint, he behaved at times like an actor in a grand drama: screaming, clutching his head in his hands, crouching in the corner of the stage behind blinding stage lights and a bank of fog. He repeated the same maneuvers — with the exception of hurling his mike stand — at the same moments of the same songs during essentially the same set two nights in a row. Reznor is powerful, no doubt. But there is also something cynical and calculated in his raging on about alienation and his innermost fears before 2,000

"Trent's in a bad mood. He thinks he's gonna suck tonight."



screaming fans, while never straying from practiced gestures or revealing some naked, unrehearsed soul.

The Downward Spiral shot to number two on the *Billboard* charts the week it was released; as of June 1 it was nearly gold. Yet Reznor claims he thought the album was doomed for "commercial failure." And despite the fact that Nine Inch Nails is just a few dates into a sold-out U.S. tour, the moody superstar is, predictably, in a somber mood. Aside from the unfortunate incident with his drummer, Reznor almost canceled NIN's second San Francisco date because he had a sore throat that even a backstage visit from an accupuncturist couldn't fix. Performing in Los Angeles a few nights later, he railed at the *L.A. Times* for a mildly critical review of his previous night's performance. And though he rehearsed with his band for four months, created a sophisticated stage and lighting set that he says is "costing us a shitload of money," and is employing a touring crew the size of a small army, the tour's array of minor technical mishaps — not counting Vrenna's 17 stitches — is just the latest thing that has Trent Reznor down.

Backstage before the first San Francisco show, road manager Mark O'Shea types out the guest list on his portable Macintosh. He and a few others are cramped in a tiny room full of NIN gear boxes marked "First Aid, Candles," "Vinyl, PVC Clothes," and "Nylons And Such." Meanwhile, Reznor is in sound check, working through his current single, "March of the Pigs." Every few minutes the music stops, and a Nine Inch Nails manager, roadie or bandmate bursts into the room with a request from the boss: "Trent wants a Throat Coat." "Trent wants some Advil." "Trent needs some water." When Reznor himself appears in the doorway and asks where the bathroom is, you almost expect those present to jump up and offer to go for him. All communication between Reznor and outsiders takes place through

ers might be put out. Reznor later flies his regular makeup artist from New York to Los Angeles to prepare him for a photo shoot; the photographer waits in a studio full of rented equipment for three days, and the makeup woman cools her heels, but by the time Nine Inch Nails leaves L.A., the pictures have not been taken.

The following week, riding on the NIN tour bus from L.A. to the group's gig in San Diego, I spend the first hour talking with Reznor's bandmates about their new tattoos, and watching various managers bark into palm-sized cellular phones and pore over spreadsheets on two portable computers. Reznor, according to one of his bandmates, is playing video games in the back lounge.

When Reznor finally emerges, he bears remarkably little resemblance to the tormented, raving stage actor. Dressed in faded Levi's and a thin black T-shirt that hang loosely on his gaunt frame, he looks fragile, boyish. Stretching out on a couch amidst video tapes, video game cartons and loose CDs, sharp rays of sunshine glance across his ghost-like face and a cool breeze rustles his brittle, overly dyed black hair. Unlike the desperate and insecure alter-ego of his songs, he is articulate, quick-witted and savvy in conversation, brimming with the kind of earnest self-assurance that makes you wonder if he's confiding in you or trying to sell you something. Whether bemoaning his image as what one magazine called "the guru of gloom" or despairing over his inability to find satisfaction even in fame, Reznor seems acutely aware that his anguished disclosures only stoke the fire of his success. If his problems sound contrived, his solutions are just as calculated.

"I've got to get my shit together or I'm not going to want to keep going," he confides. "It's like, do a record and by the end it's not fun anymore. Then I think I want to go on tour and it's not fun either. My life is totally out of balance right now. Nine Inch Nails is 99.999 percent of what I'm doing. Trent — whoever the fuck he is, or was — is lost. The other day I was freaking out about

think of anywhere. Maybe I drive out in the desert somewhere, yeah," he pauses again, laughing. "There I am. Then what?"

Trent Reznor's past is the stuff of rock'n'roll mythology. He was raised by his grandparents in Mercer, Pennsylvania, a place he calls "a fuckin' piece of shit town in the middle of nowhere." He studied classical piano as a kid and coasted through school with good grades and a bad attitude. His parents — who split up when Reznor was five, and who he remains friendly with — encouraged him to go to college, so he enrolled as a computer engineering major at Allegheny College in nearby Meadville.

"No one in my family's ever finished school," he says. "I thought, 'OK, in high school I was a fuckin' loser, I didn't fit in. So I thought in college I'm going to make some friends, try to fit in. But I was banished instantly. I felt like a misfit.'"

"Misfit" is a word Reznor is fond of, and he uses it to describe his feelings of alienation both from his small-town roots and from his current fast-lane reality. Even though he is promoted by a major record company and is performing nightly for thousands, Reznor pretends the rock'n'roll establishment treats him like he doesn't belong. "When I go into an interview on MTV I don't kick into the David Lee Roth, joke-around-be-a-rock-fuckhead like they want you to be," he says. "When you're on tour you're expected to act a certain way and you're encouraged to act a certain way, and when you don't, they don't know what to do with you. It just makes me feel like a fucking misfit because, OK, I didn't fit into anything my whole life and now I'm doing this thing and I don't fit into that either."

Reznor dropped out of college after his first year, moved an hour and a half west of Mercer to Cleveland, and got a job in a music store. He played keyboards in various local bands and after a year landed a job cleaning toilets in a recording studio. Late at night, when the place was empty,

"I've come to the point where I don't give a shit, really."

Everyone's like, 'Oh, Mr. Gloom' and all this. Fine."

his handlers — including his decision to cancel an interview after keeping a writer waiting for two hours. "I'm sorry. Trent can't do the interview," O'Shea soberly announces. "He's in a bad mood. He thinks he's gonna suck tonight."

O'Shea reschedules the interview for the next day, but Reznor cancels that one as well. Frequently his commitments are secondary to his whims, regardless of how oth-

how much stupid bullshit is going on behind the scenes here, just getting the tour on the road, and I thought, 'What would happen if I just fucking leave, just fuckin' take off and let these fuckin' guys do whatever?' I could just take off, fuckin' go down the street, get a car and disappear.

"I wondered, 'Where would I go?'" He pauses, looking out the window at the shimmering Pacific Ocean. "And I couldn't

Reznor taught himself to use the equipment and started putting together his own songs.

"I heard stuff other people were recording and I always thought, 'This stuff sucks.' I thought I could do better, but for a long time I wasn't doing anything about it. I was arranging other people's music. I was playing keyboards on other people's bullshit demos. I was playing live, taking drugs

and being a fucking idiot — fooling myself that I was doing something when really I wasn't. Then when I got in that studio I realized that there's an opportunity here, I could make it happen."

He tried to enlist other local musicians to work with him, but says it was hard to find anyone interested in working from 3 till 8 a.m. without pay, so he decided to play all the instruments himself. "I had this romantic notion that, well, Prince did it himself, and I fully respected him for that. So I just started to do it. I was intimidated by guitars because I always liked them but couldn't play them worth shit. I thought if I could come up with a guitar part, every guitar player in the world

would say that's easy, anyone can do that. And then I realized, like, who the fuck cares?"

Ten of Reznor's earliest songs wound up on *Pretty Hate Machine*, the left-field smash that catapulted NIN into the 1991 Lollapalooza spotlight. Despite canned, monotonous rhythms and his often affected vocal delivery, the rich personality of his music made for an intriguing break from the heavy detachment of groups like Ministry and Nitzer Ebb. Mixing hard industrial sounds with a clear pop bent, Reznor says he was surprised at the album's sweeping success, and more than a little uncomfortable with the crossover fame it brought him.

"It was a situation where we come from a little pocket of subgenre music that a lot of people hold dear to them. The record comes out and it's embraced by those people, but then suddenly it starts to sell more records and suddenly the same album that everyone thought was cool, it's like, 'Uh-oh, now some asshole at school's wearing a T-shirt. OK, these guys suck.' Where we're coming from there's only a handful of bands in that world. I started feeling real guilty that people liked the band. I'm sure Nirvana's felt that too, but the type of music they're playing in general has such a broader, guitar-punk, pop music base."

Yet where the members of Nirvana adamantly refused to play the rock star game, Reznor seems cut out for the role. Posing for photos bound in barbed wire or clutching his face in his hands with an expression of perfectly frozen agony, he appears to revel in the image of pain that has brought him stardom. In interviews he often dwells on legal hassles with his former label, T.V.T., on his inability to live a normal, healthy life, or the disparaging irony of sharing his most intimate, personal secrets with an audience of complete strangers. The bigger Reznor becomes, it seems, the more alienated he feels. And the more alienated he feels, the bigger he becomes.

"I remember when we were just starting out we were opening for a couple other bands and nobody knew who the fuck we were and MTV didn't give a shit about us and radio didn't really give a shit about us," he says. "I remember the first time I looked down and I could see people singing words back at me, and it really seemed like they meant it. They're fucking yelling back at me and I'm yelling back at them and suddenly it seemed like it's starting to be worth it now. The fact that someone can relate to something that you, in an intimate moment, jotted down, just blew me away."

The feeling was fleeting.

"As soon as the show's over and you're backstage and someone says, 'Hey you want to go and have a drink,' and suddenly 500 people are around you — everyone's like, 'Can you sign this, your music means so much to me — then you realize that you're not human anymore, and it's not you they want. There's nothing more empty than that. A certain ten seconds is flattering and then there's no way to get past it. They're treating you like what you aren't. They're trying to be cool, but they're making me feel even more like a fuckin' freak."

Following his first flush of success, Reznor moved to Los Angeles in 1992 and set about creating *The Downward*

Bigger Than God...



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the minor label
with a major attitude

Spiral. With co-producer Flood, renowned for his work with Depeche Mode and U2, and guest musicians including guitarist Adrian Belew, Reznor remained in solitude at the former Tate house for over a year, letting the music simmer to maturity. *The Downward Spiral* has neither the simplistic sheen of *Pretty Hate Machine* nor the catastrophic edge of *Broken*. Its power is derived from the songs' tremendous subtlety and depth. Pretty hooks dangle on chopped-up rhythms. Piercing screams fade off into distant whispers. Industrial fuzz gives way to tender acoustic guitar chords. Even in the most wildly synthesized, alien-sounding moments is a bristling, relentless, unmistakably human energy that

sucks you in.

Reznor is a brilliant sonic architect and an even better media manipulator who has made a career out of transforming his own neurotic preoccupations into a musical persona of dark, brooding grandeur. Like Madonna, every stage and video move, every magazine cover pose, every media appearance is set up, rehearsed, and executed strictly on his terms. Yet where Madonna constantly reinvents herself in roles that are meant to shock, titillate or make you laugh, Reznor peddles only his own dark soul. His songs are calculatedly confessional, gleaned from drunken diary entries and self-wallowing memoirs of relationships gone sour. Screaming out from behind his massive

fortress of sound like a scared little Wizard of Oz, he twists even mundane expressions of alienation and self-torment into epic symphonies of despair. His music makes angst sexy, and for mixed-up adolescents across America, that is a major part of NIN's appeal.

As the Nine Inch Nails tour bus purrs along past golf courses and the whitewashed, stucco condo-land that lines I-5 into San Diego, Reznor slouches gradually lower on the couch to avoid the sun's glare, and rarely looks out the window. Sipping a Snapple and resting his loosely laced black boots on a pile of pillows, he explains how filmmaker Oliver Stone approached him backstage at NIN's concert at the Palace in Hollywood two nights ago and asked him to put together the soundtrack for his upcoming film about serial murderers, *Natural Born Killers*. (The soundtrack will be released on Reznor's own Nothing label.) Featuring 50 or 60 songs by musicians ranging from Bob Dylan and Patsy Cline to Jane's Addiction and Nine Inch Nails, Reznor plans to combine the songs with additional music and snippets of dialogue to create a multi-layered audio collage.

He talks excitedly about the project, even though it means turning this bus lounge into a mobile recording studio and working on the road and during the band's off days to make his June deadline. As the bus winds off the freeway and the conversation shifts from *Natural Born Killers* to Reznor's public image, the performer turns unexpectedly defensive — even though critics have generally swallowed his well-publicized shtick. Despite the fact that he demands control and final approval over photo shoots [not granted for his participation with this magazine — ed.], and is savvy enough to charm even skeptical reporters, the rock star insists he gets a bum rap. Heading past the flophouses, cocktail lounges and 24-hour bail bonds offices that are slowly being squeezed out of San Diego's downtown to make way for a revitalized tourist strip, Reznor says he used to try and combat his image as rock's most miserable icon, but now, well, he just doesn't care.

"I've come to the point where I don't give a shit, really. Everyone's like, 'Oh, Mr. Gloom' and all this. Fine," he says, as the bus pulls into the tiled parking lot of the posh Doubletree Inn. "That's me, but it's not all me. It's not really me. It's just who you want me to be. So here I am," he says. "Project me to be the biggest fucking cunt in the world. It's fine with me."

Senior contributing editor Jason Fine wrote about Overpass in Issue 56.

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