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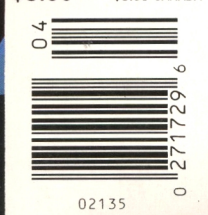
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Machine Head

Nine Inch Nails industrial magnate **Trent Reznor** builds his *Downward Spiral* with a little help from his old friend, Les Paul.

BY ALAN DI PERNA

TRENT REZNOR DOESN'T *look* psychotic. Standing amid the cool blue and red geometry of the lobby at L.A.'s Le Mondrian hotel, he could easily pass for a member of some pop band in town to do a bit of press—a trim little guy with his hair dyed jet black. Dressed in jeans, work boots and a purple shell top, Reznor is approachable, a bit ordinary even: he hardly resembles the yowling, frayed hellhound so memorable from Nine Inch Nails concerts. Or the author of masochistic lyrics like, "I hurt myself today, to see if I still feel. I focus on the pain, the only thing that's real."

How can such an apparently nice, regular guy be the source of all that angst? "It's all basically me," Trent assures me, speaking in that quiet, controlled voice that always surprises people who only know his music. "It's all my personality, but it's amplified in a certain direction. I get a lot of people saying, 'Wow, you must be the most depressed person in the world!' Well, I don't think I am. I'm not the happiest guy in the world, either. But when I'm writing songs, I deliberately try to explore incredibly black emotions—combining personal experience with imaginative projection—to see how far I can get. I often end up buming myself out pretty good."

We all have our dark sides—our demons. Trent Reznor has learned to harness his to create some of the hardest-hitting post-industrial music to be heard anywhere on the 1994 alternative rock scene. Trent Reznor, of course, *is* Nine Inch Nails. He writes all the material, plays most of the instruments and records much of it himself, often preferring the darkened lair of a home studio to the corporate atmosphere of a commercial recording facility. To music biz types, Reznor is the Man Who Put Industrial On The Map. His production prowess and innate sense of melody landed Nine Inch



Nails' debut, *Pretty Hate Machine*, right at the top of the alternative charts in 1990. Reznor is an obsessive and harshly self-critical studio craftsman who can take an ordinary guitar or keyboard track and mutate it til it starts sounding like the Crack Of Doom. Yet he'll tell you that, for him, the lyrics are the most important thing on NIN's records.

The road thus far hasn't been an easy one for Reznor. As soon as his first record became a success, he found himself embroiled in legal battles with his then-record label, T.V.T. He embarked on two years of hard touring, which included NIN's triumphant Lollapalooza stint. "We had to keep touring to pay our legal costs," says Trent, "because the label hadn't paid us

any money for what we'd done." But even from this adversity there sprang some good. Out on the road, NIN's sound became tougher and harder. A keyboardist by training and disposition, Reznor discovered the power of madly overdriven guitars. This discovery is reflected on *Broken*, NIN's amped-up 1992 EP.

Today, things are looking up for Reznor. He's got a new NIN album, *The Downward Spiral*, and his own new record label, called Nothing, which promises to be anything but. Reznor has already signed veteran electro-post-modernists Pop Will Eat Itself and Coil (the latter led by Peter Christopherson, formerly of Throbbing Gristle, the band that coined the term and concept "Industrial Music"). Trent has also scouted up some brand new twisted talent in the form of Prick

and Marilyn Manson, proving that something substantial can indeed come from Nothing.

As for *The Downward Spiral*, it's easily the most ambitious and intriguing Nine Inch Nails record yet. Reznor has begun to splinter his unrelenting slash-and-burn attack with moments of dark nihilism and black hole quietude. He's learned that a whisper can be far more menacing than a scream as he crawls inside a serial killer's psyche on the song "Piggy," barely moving his lips to warn us, "Nothing can stop me now, 'cause I don't care." Maybe it all has something to do with the fact that *The Downward Spiral* was recorded at the Bel Air house where the Manson cult murders took place in 1969.

While not quite as overt as it was on *Broken*, guitar still plays an important role on *The Downward Spiral*, taking on forms and colors that have never been heard from the instrument before. Holed up in Sharon Tate's former house with his longtime co-producer Flood (U2, Depeche Mode), Reznor was determined to make a record that both shattered and expanded all pre-conceived notions of what Nine Inch Nails might be. Along the way he enlisted the aid of such handpicked collaborators as guitar guru Adrian Belew, Porno For Pyros/Jane's Addiction drummer Steven Perkins, and mixer extraordinaire Alan Moulder (Smashing Pumpkins, Swervedriver, etc.) But in the final analysis, *The Downward Spiral* is entirely the product of Trent Reznor's own dark thoughts.

GUITAR WORLD: What did you set out to achieve with *The Downward Spiral*?

TRENT REZNOR: I wanted it to be a departure from *Broken*, where I wanted to make a real hard-sounding record that was just one big blast of anger. Not necessarily a well-rounded record—just one ultra-fast chunk of death. This time I wanted to make an album that went in 10 different directions, but was all united somehow. I didn't want to box Nine Inch Nails into a corner, where everything had to be faster and harder than the last record—where every song had to say, "Look how tough we are." I don't think that's really me. Or rather, there are lots of times when I'll come up with musical ideas that don't fit that mold. On this record, I was more concerned with mood, texture, restraint and subtlety, rather than getting punched in the face 400 times. Also I was trying to make a record that followed an evolving lyrical theme. I came up with a basic theme and said, "Okay, let's divide that into 10 or 12 slots." But in trying to write songs to fill those slots, a lot of the ideas, of course, got modified. Many times, what was meant to be a down moment lyrically wound up going with music that was really the opposite of that.

GW: What was your initial theme?

REZNOR: The big overview was of somebody who systematically throws away every aspect of his life and what's around him—from personal relationships to religion.

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This person is giving up to a certain degree, but also finding some peace by getting rid of things that were bogging him down. The record also looks at certain vices as being ways of trying to dull the pain of what this person is hiding. Of course, I'm talking about myself. So that was the general theme. Not that that's any great leap for me, thematically. The reason why I hope people like Nine Inch Nails is the lyrics. I think that's the element I care about most on this record, in terms of honesty and nakedness of emotion.

GW: This album has been a long time in the making, hasn't it?

REZNOR: I tend to get bored when people start

saying, "Where's the record already?" Hey, I'm not fucking off in there. It just takes a long time. Nirvana may be able to make a record in two weeks. That's great. We're not doing that. To me, every song means reinventing the whole process. There are no constants, except maybe that I'll sing it. But are the rhythm tracks going to be played or sequenced? Are they going to be real, fake, machines, drums, sounds, car doors slamming? It's not a simple matter of yelling out chords to someone across the room and starting the tape machine. It's a different situation. I'm not saying that makes my record any better than theirs. It's just a different set of parameters.

GW: Definitely. After all, you're not doing the old rock and roll.

REZNOR: Yeah. And I'm not saying anything to discredit that. But enough people are doing it already. I don't feel I have anything to add to that.

GW: What was the hardest song to write?

REZNOR: There's always one song per record—maybe two if you're *real* lucky—where you work and work and work, and it just takes a hell of a long time for the song to come together. On *Pretty Hate Machine*, it was "Kinda I Want To," which I still think sucks, and "That's What I Get." Those songs took an unbelievable amount of work. Then you get into the trap of saying, "Well, I spent so much time on this, it's gotta be good. I've gotta make it work." It's usually one part that's fucking the whole thing up. And that's usually the part that you think is really great. You'll hear a million playbacks of the song and say, "Man, that part is so fucking cool. Why is the song not happening?" Then finally someone hits the mute button for that part and the song's good. And you realize, "Oh fuck, it's that part I love so much."

GW: Sometimes it's difficult to let go of parts like that.

REZNOR: Yeah. So on this record, "Ruiner" was the hardest song to write. I still don't know if I got it right. I have such a bad vibe from that song now—from it sucking in so many different ways. That was actually two different songs stuck together.

GW: Seems like that is your "record business resentment" song for this album.

REZNOR: That's not what I wrote it about. But it could apply to that. I often don't consciously write about one particular thing. But then I realize, "That's a perfect metaphor for what is happening with TVT [*Reznor's former record label*]," or some other situation. But I don't set out to write songs about record labels. Nothing could be more boring—with the possible exception of writing about tour busses.

GW: What's your take on guitar these days? What does it give you in an arrangement that nothing else can?

REZNOR: Well, I'm not as intimidated by it as I was at one time. 'Cause I always thought I wasn't very good. So if I wrote a guitar part, I would say to myself, "Every guitar player in the world is going to hear this part and think, 'Here's a real easy, stupid part.'" But nowadays I just find the guitar much more expressive than a keyboard. Just because of the interface, obviously—strings and randomness. I find it interesting to sample sounds from a guitar track and then process them to the point where the performance has randomness and expression, and the sound becomes something completely new.

But I find your basic guitar through an amp with a mic in front of the speaker incredibly boring. Every band in the world does it, so why bother? Someone out there is gonna do it better than I ever will. Let them do it. I look at things differently than someone like [*Nirvana producer*] Steve Albini, who seems to

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think that the point of the studio is to record a band efficiently and with no frills, in its truest and most honest sense.

GW: The documentary approach.

REZNOR: Yeah. And I don't think anything's wrong with that, but at the same time I'm looking at the studio as a tool; why not use it? The challenge for me is not to go so overboard that the music becomes Boston: soulless and overproduced. Or Whitney Houston vocal performances, where every note is exactly right. I'd rather retain some sort of humanity amidst machinery.

GW: You created many of your drum loops by recording Porno For Pyros drummer Steven Perkins live in the studio. Is that one way you've retained some humanity?

REZNOR: Yeah. He just played a bunch of beats. We recorded them and made some loops of his playing. It's a great way to work. I don't really mind that most people shy away from that stuff, because that just gives me an edge over some other guy who's too close-minded to accept that technology exists. He'll get a cable-ready television set, but he won't get a DAT machine because "Ooooh, that's digital recording. I heard Neil Young say that doesn't sound good." Like Neil Young would know his ass from a hole in the ground about digital recording. Nothing against Neil Young, but people get these archaic notions.

GW: It goes in cycles. In the early Eighties, people couldn't get enough high-tech stuff on their records.

REZNOR: It ties in with a fear of change, which has brought about this current wave of retro—whether it be Seventies disco or Pearl Jam, which to me just sounds like a Seventies rock band. Or Lenny fucking Kravitz. He writes good songs; you think, "Sounds good. Almost like I heard it before." I think he does a good job at what he does, but I find it completely uninteresting. That whole mentality of "real rock" and "back to our roots," or "Let's go back to what's safe—to be a real band like the Who or Rolling Stones, with two guitars, bass and drums." Some people find entering a new technological era kind of scary and think, "Let's go back to what we liked when we were kids." But when we were kids everyone thought Queen and Kiss were terrible. Now they're a point of reference of "duh good old rock bands."

GW: They were both in extreme critical disfavor.

REZNOR: Yeah. But having said that, probably the biggest influence on *The Downward Spiral* was David Bowie's *Low* album. Actually, all his stuff from *Hunky Dory* through *Scary Monsters*. Plus old Lou Reed, Iggy Pop... stuff that I'd never really heard before, because I was listening to New Wave at the time. But you compare a record like *Low* to any random assortment of the Top 100 records at Tower right now, and the amount of craftsmanship and depth

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are much higher. Everything is so product-oriented now. I was never a great fan of vinyl, but it seems that around the time that vinyl died and CD came to life, the quality of music went way down. Around the same time MTV came into its own. And now there's very little that's genuinely dangerous, rebellious or exciting about rock.

GW: One of the greatest hooks on your new album is the chorus "I want to fuck you like an animal," in the song "Closer." It's brilliant how you set it up with that very poppy change to the IV chord.

REZNOR: Yeah. The song started with that line. Everything else kind of got pieced

around that. I was trying to get a vibe something like the song "Nightclubbing," from Iggy Pop's album *The Idiot*. I don't know what it sounded like when it came out. But now it sounds like a real obvious, cheesy, almost disco, song—but in a cool way. I actually sampled the drums off that song to get a totally bad-sounding electronic drum effect. When I started doing that and the Prince-like harmonies on the verse I thought, "How am I going to be able to do this? I'm supposed to be tough. I gotta act tough." But I'm having fun doing it, so I'm gonna do it. It's scarier to do that than to just do "Self Destruct" type songs. You try to do something light or bordering on a forbidden genre of music, like dance music....

GW: I've always thought that things like disco and pop are far more subversive than some guy atonally bellowing "shitfuckpisscockcunt."

REZNOR: Oh, when they're at their best, they are.

GW: Because millions more people hear it.

REZNOR: Exactly.

GW: Whenever I hear that chorus in "Closer," I have visions of people on dance floors, joyously singing along.

REZNOR: "Music For Strip Clubs," by Nine Inch Nails. Maybe that should be the title of our new album.

GW: On your records, the guitar is often sampled from a guitar track you played and then looped and manipulated via computer? Is that accurate?

REZNOR: Very often, yes. I'll do a few 20 or 25-minute sessions of me just playing guitar. Then I'll listen back to it and say, "Around 10 minutes in I did something cool." I'll cut that section out and put it aside. I'll cut maybe 20 parts out that way and put each one in the right space. It's not so much avoiding having to play the whole song as it is a tool to flesh out an arrangement.

GW: How do you do this? On digital tape? Analog?

REZNOR: On a hard disc recorder [*the Digidesign Pro Tools system for the Mac*] with a Studio Vision sequencer. I use it to take parts that were played fairly sloppy and loop it so that it repeats maybe every bar. The looping gives it a weird kind of precision, yet the looseness of the playing makes it sound a little "off." You'd have a very hard time achieving that kind of result just by playing a keyboard into a sequencer. So, 99 percent of the stuff we do—even vocals—is recorded into the computer [*hard disk*] first. We get an arrangement together and then dump it to tape.

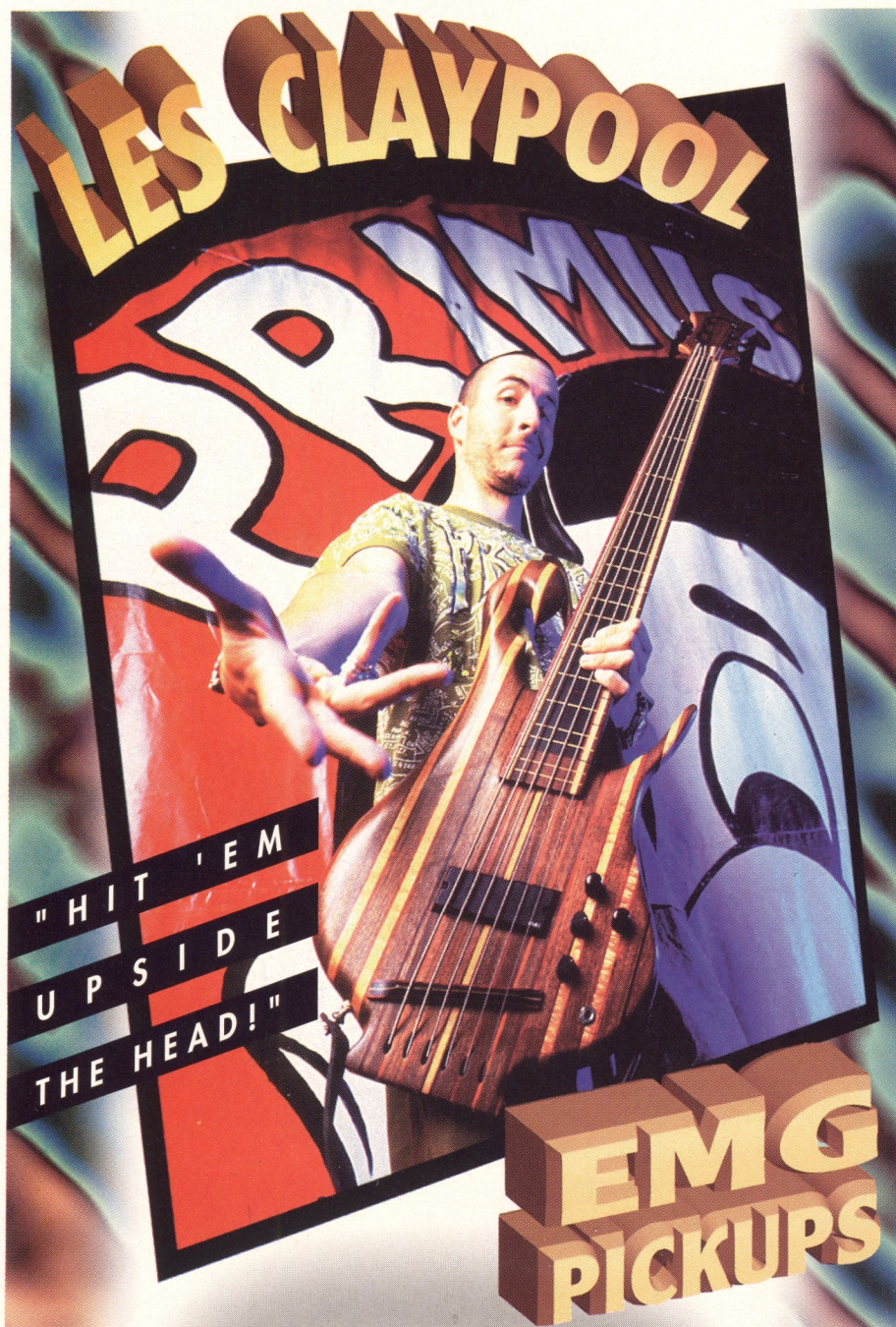
GW: How did you hook up with Adrian Belew?

REZNOR: His name just popped into my head. I called my manager and two days later Adrian was here. As it turned out he was already in L.A., working on something else.

GW: How far had your record progressed by the time Adrian entered the picture?

REZNOR: The songs were pretty much arranged, but we thought, "What would it be like if we got somebody in here who can really play his ass off? Let's see what happens." We basically told Adrian, "Just play whatever you want and we'll piece it together however we see fit. Maybe stuff from one song will fit into another." We did about six or seven songs with four or five passes each. One time we'd tell Adrian something like, "Concentrate on a rhythmic part." Another time, "Think in terms of a countermelody." Or, "Think in terms of no pitch at all, just noise." He pulled out a bunch of great sounds that he never gets to use.

Flood and I were definitely intimidated when he first came up. We were sitting in the living room of Sharon Tate's house—our studio—with this guy who's played



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with Paul Simon and David Bowie. The first song we played him was "Mr. Self Destruct"—the hardest-sounding one we had. I said, "Play whatever you want." He said, "What key is it in?" And I had to say, "Uh, I don't remember. It's probably in E." It's a real fast track. For a moment he thought, "What the fuck?" Then he kicked in and it was just the most awesome thing.

GW: Had you admired his playing before?

REZNOR: Absolutely. For different reasons, obviously. I'm not someone who quotes 30 names as big guitar influences. Because I look at instruments in a different way. I appreciate someone's being a virtu-

oso. But I'm not that concerned with it. At one point I think I could have become a really good concert pianist. But then I realized that I'm more concerned with composing—and being able to serve that end on a bunch of instruments, rather than being magnificent at one. I'm not saying that as an excuse. With Nine Inch Nails, the focus has never been on magnificent soloing, or "Look how great I am on this instrument," as much as on creating a mood and playing what's right for the song.

GW: Is that Adrian doing the thrash power chording on that song?

REZNOR: No, that's me. Ol' Lightning Fingers.

GW: What kind of guitar gear did you use?

REZNOR: Almost everything was direct—

there was almost no miking of cabinets. I just don't like that sound very much. It sounds boring to me. So we ran through a variety of preamps and speaker simulators. Our main preamp was the new Marshall JMP-1. But I didn't use the speaker simulator in it. I took the direct out of the Marshall into the Zoom 9030, employing just the speaker simulator on that. I really like the sound of the speaker simulator on the Zoom, but I don't like the preamp section. It sounds like what it is: a little box. I also have a Demeter tube preamp that I used sometimes. That one was totally direct, no simulator. It's the ultimate terrible sound. But it works in the context of some of the songs. I also used some of the little Zoom 9002, the old one—the one that clips on your belt. I just used it straight. I like its sound sometimes.

GW: Don't you also use that for vocals a lot?

REZNOR: Actually, the 9030 is the one I use a lot for vocals. That and the mic preamp from an old Neve board. That's the best distortion. It's not the way the manufacturer thought it would be used. But all the vocals are from that and the Zoom. We also went and got an old Mutron envelope filter. The one that gives you the Bootsy [Collins] sound. Awesome. The one we had would eat four nine-volt batteries in half an hour. It's awful. But it sounds amazing when the batteries are dying. We did a lot through that. In fact all of the drums on "I Do Not Want This" was just one two-bar loop that Steven Perkins played. We just ran it through every effect we had in the studio—the Mutron, [Eventide] H3000 harmonizers, a Digitech Whammy Pedal.... Flood and I just went crazy.

GW: What kind of guitars did you play?

REZNOR: Mostly an Eighties' Les Paul Custom. I also used an Explorer, and a Jackson I have, for which I just told the company, "Put the world's loudest pickup in this." But to be honest, I process the guitar tracks so much that it doesn't really matter what guitar I'm playing. Since the guitars are usually recorded into the computer, we'll import them into the Turbo Synth program [Digidesign's signal processing software for the Mac], which totally turns them into other things. I've come up with about four patented tricks that I use in Turbo Synth, all of which are really dependent on the input sound. If you process the sound on the bridge pickup versus the neck pickup, it'll be totally different—not even remotely similar. Because the program finds certain frequencies that it accentuates and distorts. A lot of the sounds on "Mr. Self Destruct" that seem like guitar performances that no human being ever played are actually real performances that have been processed to unknown depths using Turbo Synth.

Another thing I'll sometimes do is play the guitars twice as fast as the song's tempo, recording them at 30 ips [inches-per-second] on the multitrack. Then I'll slow it down to 15 ips. I'll play the part an octave

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high, too, so when I slow it down, it's in the right register and at the right speed. But if you saturate the tape real hard when you record it at 30 ips, it takes on a really clear, thick, warm and bizarre quality when you slow it down. The guitar on "Suck," [*Broken*], which I think is the best guitar sound I've ever gotten—was done that way.

GW: I wanted to ask you about the solo in "Ruiner." How did you get that really nasty, ultra-quantized digital sound?

REZNOR: Ah yes, the great, Pink Floyd-esque, Seventies-sounding section of the song. That's just a preset on the Zoom. I think I accidentally called up the wrong patch. I'm not a soloist. I was just laughing when I was playing with this ridiculous sound, recording into the computer, saying like, "This is so cheesy," you know? I later realized that basically tried to play a "Comfortably Numb"-type solo with this sound. I played the song for Chris, our drummer, and I was thinking, "He's going to start laughing. It's silly." But he goes, "Man, that guitar section was fucking great."

GW: So, what was the weirdest experience you had living in Sharon Tate's house, where the Manson murders took place?

REZNOR: Actually, it's a really beautiful place. That's what people don't know from reading the Manson books and seeing the TV specials and all. The view from the front door is the best view of L.A. I've ever seen. It's amazing how beautiful looking down into a smog pit can be. When I rented the place I didn't even realize it was *that* house. When I found out I thought it was kind of interesting. I didn't think, "Oh, it'll be spooky to tell people that..." I don't idolize Charles Manson, and I don't condone murdering people because you're a fucked-up hippie trying to make a statement. But it's an interesting little chapter in American history that it was cool to be a part of.

GW: But you didn't feel any funny vibes around the place?

REZNOR: The first night was *terrifying*. By then, I knew all about the place—I'd read all the books about the Manson murders. So I walked in the place at night and everything was dark, and I was like, "Holy Jesus, that's where it happened." Scary. I jumped a mile at every sound—even if it was an owl. I woke up in the middle of the night and there was a coyote looking in the window at me. I thought, "I'm not gonna make it."

But after about a month I realized that if there's any vibe up there at all, it's one of sadness. It's not like spooky ghosts fucking with you or anything—although we did have a million electrical disturbances. Things that shouldn't have happened did happen. Eventually we'd just joke about it: "Oh, Sharon must be here. The fucking tape machine just shut down." ●