

Rolling Stone

NINE INCH NAILS' KILLER INSTINCT[®]

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TRENT REZNOR OF NINE INCH NAILS PREACHES THE DARK GOSPEL OF SEX, PAIN AND ROCK & ROLL

LOVE IT TO DEATH

BY JONATHAN GOLD

Tables sprout candles in the darkened control room as thick and as numerous as mushrooms on a dank forest floor, and miniskirted department-store mannequins are scattered about in various states of bon-



GROOMING BY NASSIM

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTON CORBIJN

dage. One mannequin has masking tape wound violently around its mouth and a plastic bag pinned over its head; another is gagged and has a pair of silver Lurex panties around its knees; a third has its wrists bound and is blindfolded. Four men huddle around a computer screen that displays jagged green wave forms; several dozen recording levels jerk angrily into the red. Electronic drums as

big as redwoods pound from the studio speakers, and the breathy, oddly calm tenor of Nine Inch Nails auteur Trent Reznor sounds as if it were being broadcast by a shortwave radio from halfway across the world.

"Something inside of me has opened up its eyes/Why did you put it there, did you not realize?/Something inside of me, it screams the loudest sound/Sometimes I think I could . . . burn."

Nine Inch Nails are in Miami's South Beach Studios putting the final touches on the soundtrack album for Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, which Reznor has compiled from the 70-odd snippets of rock & roll used in the film, and the going is getting weird.

The last time Reznor used this studio — for the clandestine sessions that resulted in Nine Inch Nails' 1992 EP *Broken*, which resulted in a Grammy — a studio employee made a crack about the concentration of gay men on the beach. In retaliation, Reznor bought dozens of gay porno mags, clipped out hundreds of pictures of phalluses and hid them all over the studio — some in places where they didn't turn up for months. This time, Reznor screened an extreme S&M video for assistant studio engineer Leo Herrera that still gives Herrera the willies a week later.

NIN bassist Danny Lohner darts in and out of the studio, clutching DAT tapes; NIN drummer Chris Vrenna pushes the buttons on the console that Reznor can't get to; Herrera works on the levels.

"We try to name all our hard drives something easy to remember," Reznor explains to computer consultant Charlie Clouser, "like Bum Cleaver, Cunny or Big Hairly Pussy. Sometimes it gets complicated when we don't remember if the file we're looking for is Assfuck 25 on the Fuckfuck 12 drive or Fuckfuck 12 on the Assfuck 25 drive. And when we're talking to each other in the studio, wondering aloud whether running the Cunnykick file through the Fuckchop program on the Asslick disc would help us access the Turbocunt compression . . . it's really like speaking another language altogether."

To paraphrase the late poet Philip Larkin, hatred is to Nine Inch Nails what daffodils were to Wordsworth.

"Ah, it's down to the comfortable last seconds of mixing," Reznor says. "Imagine this on AM radios across America."

Reznor drags his mouse across the desk until the cursor reaches SHUT DOWN on the menu bar of his Macintosh, and he releases the mouse with a flourish. The computer screen flickers, then goes dark.

"No more excuses," he says.

REZNOR, 29, MAY BE just another black-clad antihero in the great American tradition — take a number, Ethan and Keanu — a good-looking loner bashing up against the

thick wall of middle-class sexual mores until his forehead starts to bleed, but he is also as complete a video, audio and literary artist as anybody working in rock & roll right now. And he's popular: His 1994 concept album, *The Downward Spiral*, opened at No. 2 on the *Billboard* album chart, and this month, NIN are playing a megashow in Toronto with Soundgarden and will be featured artists at Woodstock. Beavis and Butt-head want to be him.

But as an ultimate antihero, Reznor stands as far out-



REZNOR (CENTER) IN THE MERCER, PA., HIGH-SCHOOL BAND, 1983

side the mainstream of American popular culture as it may be possible for a million-selling rock singer to get.

One video, for "Happiness in Slavery," from *Broken*, in which the naked performance artist Bob Flanagan sacrifices himself to a gnawing machine, may be as close to a snuff film as has ever been banned by MTV, a torture-lashed essay on the ecstasy of submitting to ultimate control. Reznor's current video, for "Closer," is a grainy meditation on the great fetish photography of Joel-Peter Witkin, shot partially on supersaturated '20s film stock Reznor managed to cadge, overlaid with the scratchy patina of early surrealist shorts and shot through with indelible images: crucified monkeys; sneering industrialists straight out of a German expressionist print; siblings with their hair braided together; and Reznor himself, spinning in midair so out of control he

cannot even touch the ground. MTV made Reznor edit the hell out of it but plays it several times a day.

The album *Downward Spiral* is a carefully mapped descent through Reznor's willful self-destruction, through sex, through violence, through drugs, through suicide and through despair.

Reznor is a master of control and a perfectionist to the extent that when the stage lighting did not work out to his satisfaction at the beginning of the *Downward Spiral* tour, he spent two days reprogramming the system's computer software. "It was looking like a Genesis concert," he says. "Somebody had to get the job done."

In the light of day, maybe yelling at a soundman or discussing marketing strategy with his manager John Malm, Reznor looks pretty robust for a rock & roll guy. He has ruddy Midwestern cheeks and an athletic ease you might associate with the quarterback of a small-college football team. Perhaps surprised by his rude health, strangers meeting Reznor for the first time often describe him as normal. (He is more likely to describe himself as a "computer dweeb.")

Onstage though, splayed like a St. Sebastian without the torturing arrows, Reznor resembles nothing so much as the Bronze Age man they dug from that glacier in Austria a couple of years ago, give or take a pair of fish-net stockings: rough-edged bowl cut, leather cod-piece thing, garters, tunic and pre-industrial boots. Though the subject of control is as central to Reznor's collected works as the subject of marijuana is to Snoop Doggy Dogg's — an early press release for *Pretty Hate Machine* took pains to point out "Trent Reznor is Nine Inch Nails" — Reznor appears powerless onstage, buffeted by harsh, glowing fog, martyred to the noise and to the crowd, enraged by a world he does not understand.

DETROIT'S STATE THEATER IS one of those baroque old piles that sometimes still exist on the edges of American downtowns, and when Nine Inch Nails are onstage, the orchestra of the great hall seems like some Victorian notion of hell: roiling bodies smashing up against the brass railings that separate each level from the next, pierced lips and noses coming up bloody from the pit.

You haven't really lived, I think, until you've heard a gang of Wayne State sorority sisters moan, "I want to fuck you like an animal," the chorus to "Closer," which has sort of the same resonance that "I Want to Hold Your Hand" might have had 30 years ago. Dressed in already-clammy NIN T-shirts newly purchased from the concession stand, whipping clean hair over their eyes, shoving the pimply skanks who dare to block their view, wild-eyed with hatred and desire, the

women howl along with Reznor, who in turn howls into the black-rubber void with such intensity that you fear the throbbing balconies will sag and collapse, sending 200 tons of concrete, steel and slam-dancing teen-agers onto your sweaty head.

The women crush their eyes shut and scream, "You get me closer to God." All of them sound as if they mean it.

There are four other musicians performing — though you would never guess it from watching the stage show — and a zillion gigabytes of RAM and a giant, costly rubber-fetish backdrop that is all but invisible to everyone except for the roadies. Banks of colored lights, like stands of bright, mutant poppies, exist solely to shine in your eyes; infinite layers of computer-generated racket deafen you to all but the most basic blocks of harmony and rhythm and fucked-up guitar.

JONATHAN GOLD writes about taco stands and rock & roll for the *Los Angeles Times*. He profiled Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg in RS 666.

When Reznor changes up and sings a chorus in a sobbing croak that might well have come from David Bowie's "Heroes," he displays a hundred times more emotional vulnerability than, say, Eddie Vedder. "I just want something I can never have." Then again, unlike Vedder, Reznor is acting. The crowd is silent, rapt; the slam boys pause, then slowly begin to writhe until the pit undulates like a single-celled organism; and sex power radiates from the floor.

"I'm not trying to hide," Reznor says later. "Or make up for a lack of songs, but essentially Nine Inch Nails are theater. What we do is closer to Alice Cooper than Pearl Jam."

After the show, deli platters picked at and schmoozers briefly dealt with, Reznor ducks out of the theater and runs into the knot of people waiting patiently outside the stage door.

"Trent! Trent!" one guy yells, a scruffy-looking goth boy who looks as if he has just graduated to blue-black hair from a faded Metallica T-shirt. "Can I ask you one question?"

Reznor looks back over his shoulder and rolls his eyes, anticipating the question. "Um, sure," he says.

"So, man," the guy says. "Tell me, what was it like living at the Sharon Tate house?"

Goth Boy cannot see it, but Reznor is mouthing his interrogator's words like an especially goofy ventriloquist's dummy. *The Downward Spiral* is perhaps more famous for having been recorded in the house where Sharon Tate was murdered by the Manson family than for any of the songs that happen to be on it. Reznor has heard this question before; he will hear it many times again.

"Trent!" interrupts a second dude, who materializes from behind a parked car. "Have you seen all the shit they talk about you on the Internet?"

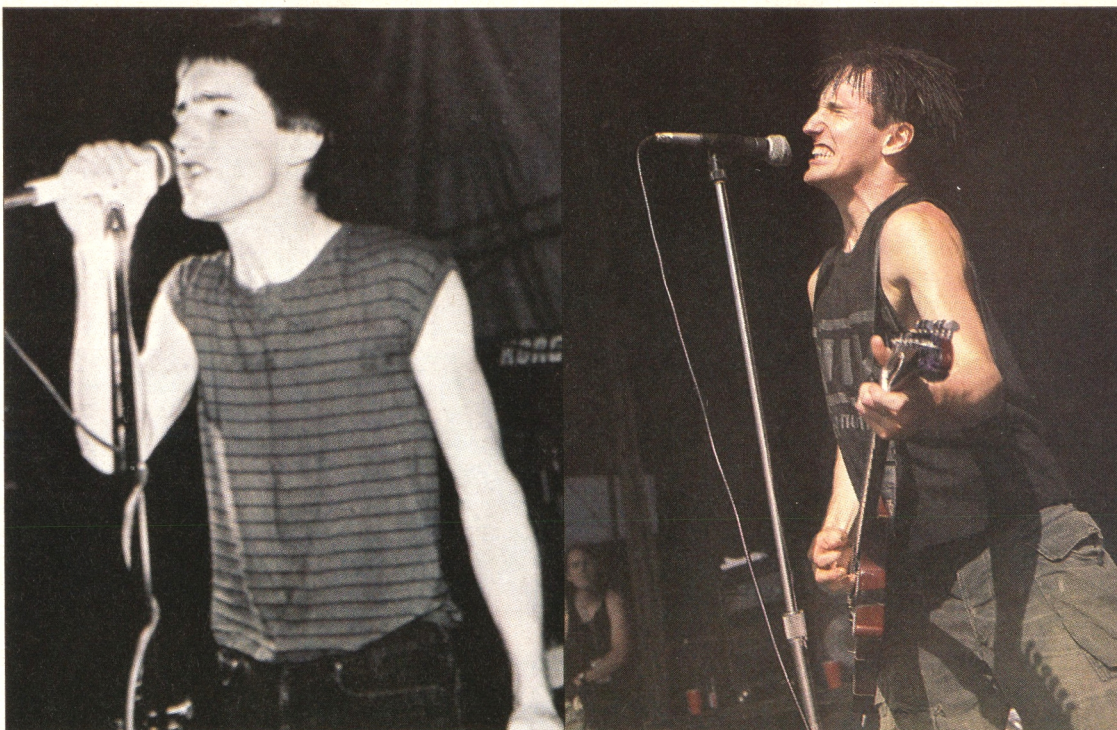
Reznor, head down, peeling leather jacket gleaming in the dim street-light glow, shuffles toward the darkness and anonymity of the bus that will take him back to the hotel. "Of course those techno-computer guys hate me," he says. "You can't really dance to Nine Inch Nails, we don't play fast enough, and I don't know what the music sounds like on ecstasy. Yeah, I believe in song structure. Yeah, I care about the melody. I don't imagine they like us at all. But that guy probably waited out there for an hour. Why was it so important for him to tell me somebody I don't even know thinks that I suck?"

That night, as bass player Lohner and guitarist

Reznor says. "I think Nine Inch Nails are big enough and mainstream enough to gently lead people into the back room a little bit, maybe show them some things it might have taken them a little longer to stumble into on their own. I don't mean that in a public-service kind of way."

"I think that back room could represent anything that an individual might consider taboo yet intriguing, anything we're conditioned to abhor. Why do you watch horror films? Why do you look at an accident when you drive past, secretly hoping that you see some gore? I shamefully admit it — I do."

Reznor spots a NIN sticker next to a Metallica sticker on a van that roars by the bus, and he momentarily frowns.



SIGN OF THINGS TO COME: REZNOR IN HIGH SCHOOL (LEFT); ONSTAGE DURING LOLLAPALOOZA I, 1991

"I'm not as afraid to question my own sexual orientation as I might have been 10 years ago," he says. "I'm not afraid to think about certain things you aren't supposed to think about. I mean, I do wonder what it would be like to kill somebody, though I'm not going to do it. I don't want to do it. But I know why people idolize serial killers."

"I can make something loud, but how can I make it the loudest, noisiest, most abrasive thing I've ever heard?" Reznor asks. "Can I go 10 steps past the goriest horror film you've ever seen in a way that's

more disturbing than cheesy? I know I can; I've done it. Peter Christopherson and I made a long-form video for *Broken* that was the most horrific thing you'll ever see, but I didn't put it out because I didn't want to spend the next five years explaining the thing to every reporter I meet. It makes 'Happiness in Slavery' look like a Disney movie."

The framing device for the video, which was inspired by certain scenes from *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, involves a lazy, brutal torture killing in which a victim is slowly dismembered while being forced to watch Nine Inch Nails videos — it may be a metaphor for the vivisection of the soul by American media culture, or it may just be the expression of a gore-film-obsessed rock guy who has been reading way too much Bataille and Artaud. Every good R&B fan has at least a second-generation copy of Prince's *Black Album* somewhere in his collection, but videocassettes of "Broken" are as hard to come by as goatskin-

bound copies of Baudelaire poems inscribed in blood — outside of Reznor's inner circle, the tape seems to have been viewed mostly by professional dominatrixes.

And the soundtrack for *Natural Born Killers* illustrates a brutal, grotesque comedy about serial killers that may not strike that far from Reznor's own muse. "I know what you probably think of Oliver Stone," Reznor says. "But I saw the film, and surprisingly enough, it was really good. He asked me if I wanted to put together the soundtrack album — there's no original music in the soundtrack, just pieces of 70 songs — and I wasn't interested in doing a *Reservoir Dogs* kind of thing, but I told him my idea for, like, a multi-layered collage with dialogue, and he made it happen."

"That agony, that pain, that overwhelming sense of suffering," says Stone from the remote village in India where he is shooting his next movie. "Trent reminds me of Hendrix or Jim Morrison, but with a heavier overlay of romanticism. The moment I heard Nine Inch Nails, I knew we had to get as much as possible of it in this, and there is quite a lot."

"I don't know why I want to do these things," Reznor says, "other than my desire to escape from Small Town, U.S.A., to dismiss the boundaries, to explore. It isn't a bad place where I grew up, but there was nothing going on but the cornfields. My life experience came from watching movies, watching TV and reading books and looking at magazines. And when your fucking culture comes from watching TV every day, you're bombarded with images of things that seem cool, places that seem interesting, people who have jobs and careers and opportunities. None of that happened where I was. You're almost taught to realize it's not for you."

REZNOR GREW UP in Mercer, Pa., a farming town so small that when it came time to leave home and move to the city, that city was Meadville, Pa. (pop. 14,258). After a year at Allegheny College, where he majored in computer engineering, he moved again, this time to Cleveland.

"I was trained as a classical pianist," Reznor says. "I started when I was 5 years old. And it got to the point where I was encouraged to drop out of school, get tutored, practice for 10 hours a day for a concert career. But I'd just discovered Kiss, so that was out of the question. I knew I wasn't going to get laid studying

I'm not as afraid to question my sexual orientation as I might have been before.

Robin Finck check out a downtown disco, as keyboardist James Woolley scarfs some chicken at an all-night hang in Greektown, Reznor is nowhere to be seen.

Woolley, an engaging guy who has been with Nine Inch Nails on and off since the 1991 Lollapalooza tour, looks down at the floor of the diner as if he were memorizing the arrangement of the sawdust. "Usually we find out what's going on with Nine Inch Nails by reading Trent's interviews in magazines," he says. "I think he likes the band now, but I guess we're all still a little too nervous to ask him."

THE DAY AFTER the Detroit show, blasting down the highway toward Cleveland, Reznor curls up in the back seat of the tour bus and strokes a bottle of mineral water as if it were a kitten.

"I probably rely too much on sexual imagery as a metaphor for control, but I'm totally intrigued by it,"

piano with a nun.

"It wasn't cool to play music where I was from. You had to be an athlete, or else an athlete, a fucking turd in a football uniform. The teachers in my school were shitty for the most part, and I got a pretty bad education because I had a bad attitude. If I wanted to get good grades, I could. Stuff I'd like to know now, at the time, I thought was irrelevant: typical teen-age stupidity."

At first, college was even worse. "Where I went to school for a year was super fraternity oriented," Reznor says. "But when I started to hang around better colleges, I realized, Jesus Christ, there's a lot of music I'd never heard. It was like a musical awakening — from Test Dept. to XTC, all these bands I never knew existed. All those classic one-hit-wonder synth bands were permeating the airwaves, and it was kind of interesting just to see Devo and Human League briefly edge out Bruce Springsteen and Rush. That was about when synthesizers were becoming relatively affordable, and sequencers for home computers were just coming out. And when I stumbled into all that harder-edged music that incorporated electronic elements — what you, but not I, would call industrial — it pretty much fit with things that were already in my head. Suddenly, music started to make sense."

In Cleveland, Reznor worked in a music store and in a recording studio — and he cleaned toilets. He shared a grungy apartment in a bad neighborhood with Vrenna, still his drummer and closest aide. "When we were living together broke in Cleveland, our unit of currency used to be LPs," says Reznor. "That shirt costs three LPs and two 12 inches? No way." Then it became video-game cartridges, back when a \$40 gas bill was enough for us to worry about for a week. The currency was drugs for me for a while — that's the ultimate no value for your money — and at a low point, it was Top Ramen noodles and Busch in cans, because Budweiser was too expensive, and Ramen will technically keep you alive. We kept some Old Milwaukee around in case friends came by."

Reznor played keyboards in a succession of lousy Cleveland bands before he found religion in early records by Ministry and Skinny Puppy, the boom-whack disco, full-on, pumping, double-time bass line, anguished megaphone-sound vocal thing that became known as industrial music almost by default. In 1988, Reznor started recording as Nine Inch Nails.

The band's first album, 1989's *Pretty Hate Machine*, on which Reznor wrote, co-produced, sang and played all the instruments, has been called the *Appetite for Destruction* of industrial disco. It may have been the first industrial album — and perhaps the first rock & roll indie album — to sell a million copies. TVT Records, NIN's first label, started to sniff the long green, and Reznor felt so alienated by what he calls the label's creative interference that it would be four years before NIN would put out another record. (The band's struggles, largely unsuccessful, to break out of its contract are legendary within the music industry.) NIN stole the show from Jane's Addiction on the first Lollapalooza tour — also sold more T-shirts — and the single "Head Like a Hole," a disco-metal hybrid with a hook raw enough to shatter concrete, came within just a smidge of becoming the battle cry for smart-teen rebellion that "Smells Like Teen Spirit" would become a year later.

As a low-billed act at Lollapalooza, almost green complected in the dimming sun, Reznor whipped and thrashed, leapt onto his band's instruments, lowed until you feared his throat would bleed. Nobody had ever seen industrial music in the light of day before — early live NIN shows had relied heavily upon glowing billows of fog and pulsating planes of colored light — but it hardly mattered, so intense was the sound.

Monstrous electronic disco beats washed with jungle

drums and shrieking feedback guitar were so loudly amplified that it actually felt a couple of degrees cooler when the music stopped for a bit between songs. Even Reznor's backup musicians looked terrified. It was as close to the anarchic assault of primo rock & roll as it is possible for, er, disco to get. But suddenly, Reznor was something close to a heavy-metal star, and he didn't like it.

"By the end of Lollapalooza," Reznor says, "it wasn't uncommon to hear someone come up to me and say, 'I saw you guys play, and you were fucking awesome, but I went out and bought your record, and it was fuckin' synth-fag music.' We just weren't prepared. I felt like the fucking Beverly Hillbillies onstage."

Reznor stretches his arms above his head into something of a Vargas-girl pose and yawns. "When I see a band," he says, "I'd rather see them in a theater than in an amphitheater or arena. At huge shows like Lollapalooza you're up on a pedestal rather than going head-to-head with people. It's hard to know if the energy you send out is even coming back."



VRENNA, WOOLLEY, REZNOR, FINCK, LOHNER (FROM LEFT)

So why is NIN doing Woodstock?

"The money," Reznor says. "To be quite frank, it's basically to offset the cost of the tour we're doing right now."

After Lollapalooza, Interscope Records, then best known as the home of Gerardo and Marky Mark, absorbed Reznor's contract with TVT and helped Reznor set up his own label, Nothing. (Nothing's first non-NIN release is a Reznor-produced splatter-glam album by the Florida group Marilyn Manson that includes a song about child molestation that could be seen by some as not entirely disapproving; there are also upcoming Nothing releases by the British electronic artists Pop Will Eat Itself and Coil and by the brutal Cleveland post-industrialist synth guy Prick.)

"All you can do with a guy like Trent is to believe in him and let him go," says Interscope co-chief Jimmy Iovine. "No matter how odd what he's doing may look

to us now, it will all seem exactly right in a year or so."

NIN immediately released the intriguingly unlistenable EP *Broken*, which went Top 10 and quelled any rumors that the band had gone soft. Reznor moved to Los Angeles, rented the infamous Tate house without at first knowing the mansion's history, began to work

I don't know why I want to do these things other than my desire to escape, to dismiss the boundaries, to explore.

on *Downward Spiral* and became blocked.

"I'd been talking to my friend Rick Rubin a lot — Rick's a pretty good friend of mine," says Reznor. "And I was completely bummed out. Rick asked me what my motivation for doing this record was, and I told him the truth: Just to get it fucking done. And he said, 'That's the stupidest fucking reason for doing an album I've ever heard. Don't do it. Don't do it until you make music that it's a crime not to let other people hear.'"

"I started thinking about it, and I realized he was right," Reznor says. "I was in the most fortunate situation I could imagine. I had a decent budget for the record. I've got really cool equipment and a studio to work at. And for the first time, recording music was my job. . . . I didn't have to fucking clean toilets all day just to afford a few minutes in the studio. So I kind of got my head back straight. I started noodling around with ideas, with computers, and five or six months later I've got two-thirds of a record written. It's like I came up for air."

"But I got dragged into a strip club a few months ago," Reznor says, "and it was, like, 1:30 in the morning. To my horror, to my absolute horror, I realized the DJ was playing 'Hurt,' the last track on *Downward Spiral* and a song based on the most personal sentiments, the deepest emotions I have ever had: 'I hurt myself today/To see if I still feel.' We were crying when we made it, it was so intense. I didn't know if I even wanted to put it on the album. But there we were, and there it was, and girls were taking their clothes off to it."

LATER THAT NIGHT in Cleveland, in front of a hometown crowd of people that stand as impassively as if they were jaded A&R men at an industry showcase in Manhattan, Nine Inch Nails are if anything more intense than they had been the night before, lunging into their power chords, Reznor alternating between shrieks of deepest anguish and exquisitely sustained quieter bits that in their way are not unlike the emotionally wrenching moments that raise the artistry of Frank Sinatra above that of, say, Tony Bennett. Then it's back to heavy-metal thunder.

"I want to know everything/I want to be everywhere/I want to fuck everyone in the world/I want to do something that matters."

Reznor craves the respect from Clevelanders that was denied him when he lived here. The town had not been good to him: He had escaped it as eagerly as he has left Mercer and Los Angeles. "The thing about a town like Cleveland," Reznor says, "is that nothing really ever comes out of there, and the idea of getting a record contract is unimaginably distant. People go about it in such a fucking dumb-ass way: 'Let's just play bars and try and fuck girls, and maybe somebody from a record company will see us.' When I was here, the local media was incredibly unsupportive of local acts. There was [Cont. on 88]

[Cont. from 54] a local music magazine that was OK, but at the time, the big radio station's big contribution was an hour a week on Sunday nights where they'd play the local bands. It's really this whole incestuous power struggle.

"I was working on a demo tape," Reznor says. "We sent it out to labels, didn't make a big thing out of getting a deal, got a deal. Kept our mouths shut, made a great record — what I thought was a great record. And then I went to this club that we used to go to that played this kind of music we liked, and I brought a test pressing of a 12 inch that [British producer] Adrian Sherwood had mixed and said, 'Hey, you guys are going to be the first people in the country to get this record.' We were so proud of it. 'We don't play local bands,' they said. 'You don't understand, we're from Cleveland, but this is a nationally released thing. Adrian Sherwood produced it.'

" 'We don't play local bands.'

"I was like 'Fuck you,' you know? A month later, they were playing it because it was in the stores and on the charts. It was OK. But still, when *Downward Spiral* came out, it got almost universally good reviews . . . except for the scathing, scathing reviews in Cleveland."

Tonight, Reznor is redeemed. During the last encore, a version of "Happiness in Slavery" that sounds like 200 guitar players methodically shorting out 200 Marshall stacks with 200 faulty cords, Reznor tackles guitarist Finck. Then he wrestles his own keyboard from its stand and strips off the keys with his boot heel as if he were stripping corn kernels from a cob. The audience screams its approval even louder than the din from the triple-cranked guitar. Reznor looks out at the crowd, then down at the destruction he has wrought and grins for what may be the first time in weeks.

The next day as Reznor is preparing to catch a plane to Boston, somebody runs into the hotel and fetches him to see the near-total solar eclipse that is about to occur. On the sidewalk outside, road manager Mark O'Shea positions a couple of sheets of hotel stationery to make the kind of jerry-built camera obscura recommended by all the newspapers. The air grows dark and still.

Reznor leans over and squints through O'Shea's construction, trying to make out the vague nimbus of light, but he is as frustrated as he would be by a malfunctioning microphone or an incompetent roadie, and you can almost see the anger beginning to vibrate within him. Suddenly his shoulders relax, and he almost begins to smile.

Tilting his head toward heaven, shading eyes with outstretched fingers, Reznor stares up at the blackened sun. ■