

Trent Reznor,
Holland, c. 1991



NINE INCH NAILS

TRENT REZNOR'S UNCOMPROMISING MUSIC —
INDUSTRIAL ROCK WITH STRONG MELODIES AND
RUTHLESS ATTACK — GAVE VOICE TO A NEW GENERATION.

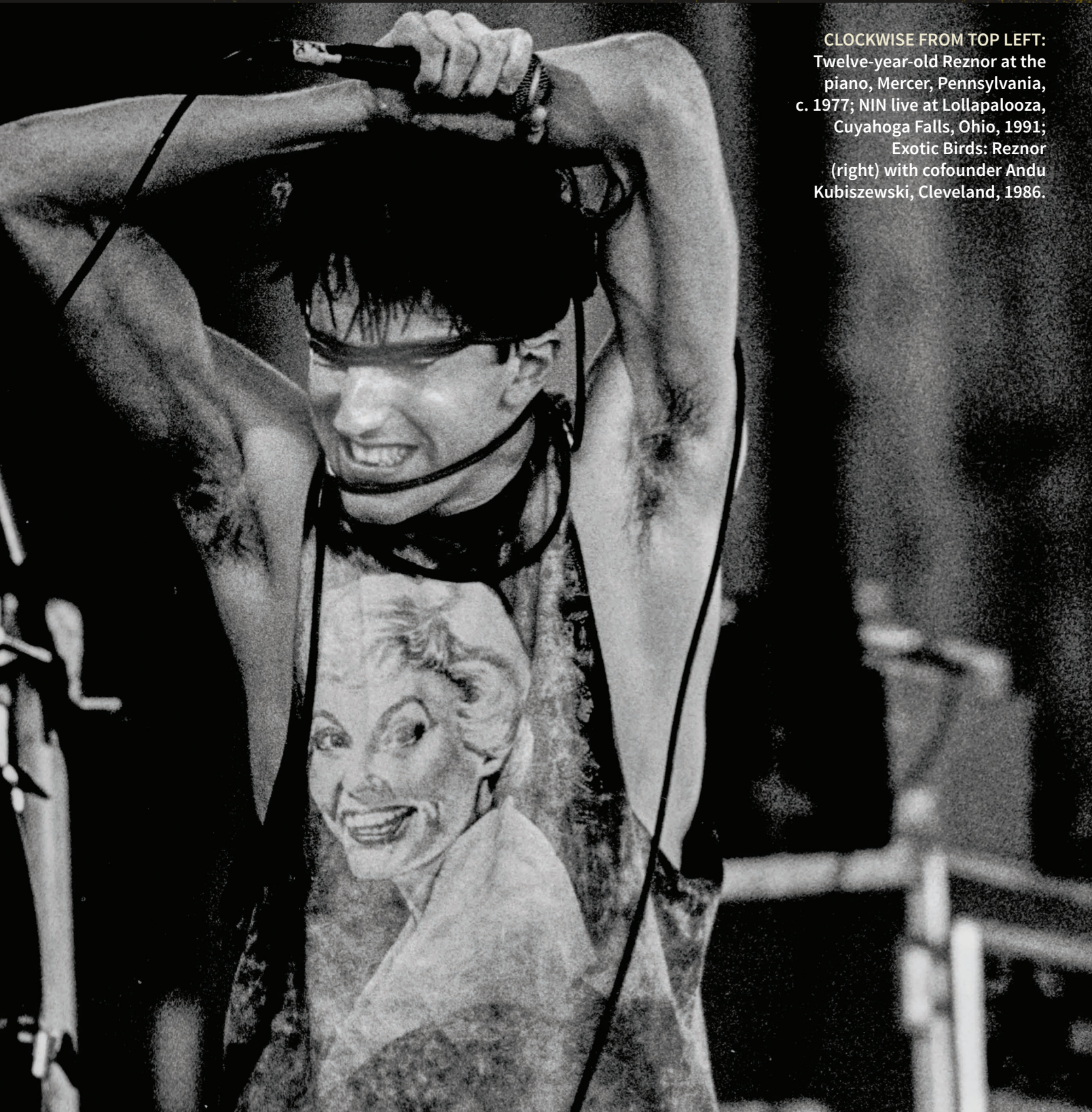
By BILL FLANAGAN

If you want to nail down the moment when the rock & roll of the 1980s gave way to the rock & roll of the 1990s, consider October 29, 1989, and the release of the first Nine Inch Nails album, *Pretty Hate Machine*. Working nights in a borrowed recording studio in Cleveland, multi-instrumentalist Trent Reznor (b. May 17, 1965) poured his heart and talent into a collection of songs that articulated the frustration, ambition, and righteous fury of a generation whose dreams had been lost between the narcissism of the baby boomers and the selfishness of the Reagan era. When Reznor, who grew up in Mercer, Pennsylvania, sang, "Head like a hole/black as your soul/I'd rather die than give you control," he was speaking from his heart in a way that gave voice to millions of lost kids. He was also laying down a creed that he would spend much of his career living up to.

One of the great attributes of Nine Inch Nails over the next thirty years would be this: Trent Reznor always meant exactly what he said.

Pretty Hate Machine was a transformative record. Reznor combined elements of Prince's one-man-band approach, the Cure's electronic pulse, and Ministry's industrial grind into something wholly new: a commanding hard rock with strong melodies and ruthless attack. When Reznor assembled a touring band to perform the music live, the aggression was turned up to eleven. The *Pretty* was sacrificed for the *Hate Machine*. To walk into a Nine Inch Nails show when the band was still playing in clubs was to feel the force of an army and a room full of impassioned volunteers. When Nine Inch Nails played the Ritz in New York City on April 11, 1990, one seasoned record executive said, laughing in astonishment, "I don't know what's going on here but these kids are going fuckin' nuts!"





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Twelve-year-old Reznor at the
piano, Mercer, Pennsylvania,
c. 1977; NIN live at Lollapalooza,
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, 1991;
Exotic Birds: Reznor
(right) with cofounder Andu
Kubiszewski, Cleveland, 1986.

Pretty Hate Machine was released by TVT Records, a small independent label whose initials stood for “TV Tunes.” The company’s success was built on a series of albums that compiled the themes to old television shows, like *I Love Lucy* and *Popeye*. The major labels approached the owners of TVT to buy Reznor’s contract, but were turned away. TVT had no intention of letting Nine Inch Nails go for any price.

Unfortunately for TVT, Reznor had fallen out with the owners, finding the label unsupportive and difficult to communicate with. As the success of *Pretty Hate Machine* increased, the hard feelings multiplied. Reznor made it clear that he had no intention of ever giving TVT another record, and TVT made it equally clear that it would never let him go. It was not a nego-

tiating tactic for either side. Reznor said he would go out and play his music live, his way, and abandon the corrupt record business.

For three years (1989–1992) – a crucial time in the life of any new band – Nine Inch Nails released no recordings. Playing live to expanding audiences, their sound became more aggressive, more furious. NIN did not put on a show. They raged.

Reznor’s mistrust of record companies led him to turn down approaches from major label A&R men who suggested strategies to break the impasse with TVT. But the persistence of Interscope Records chief Jimmy Iovine began to get past Reznor’s defenses. An acclaimed record producer, Iovine had been with Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty when they put their





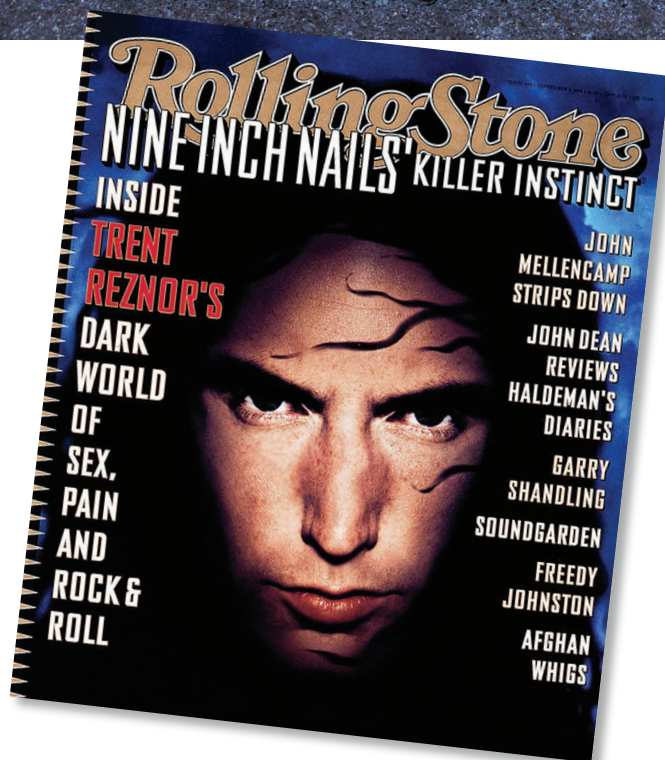
recording careers in jeopardy to fight for control of their music. Springsteen and Petty had won those battles, and Iovine told Reznor he could win his.

When it became clear to TVT that Nine Inch Nails was prepared to never record again, Interscope suggested a solution by which Reznor could start his own label, distributed by Interscope, TVT could share in the profits, and Reznor would never have to see or hear from TVT again. The strategy worked for everybody. Trent Reznor launched Nothing Records, and put out the next Nine Inch Nails EP, *Broken*, in the autumn of 1992.

Broken reflects the war Nine Inch Nails had been through: musically aggressive, lyrically brutal, and right on time. While Reznor had been in exile, the rock world had been turned over by Nirvana, Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, and a new generation of angst-fueled bands. With *Broken*, a companion EP called *Fixed*, and *The Downward Spiral* in 1994, Nine Inch Nails took back their place at the vanguard of the new rock movement.

David Bowie compared the impact of Nine Inch Nails to that of the Velvet Underground and asked Reznor to remix his songs "I'm Afraid of Americans" and "The Hearts Filthy Lesson." Bowie co-headlined a tour with Nine Inch Nails, saying it meant more to him to connect with NIN's fans than to keep playing his old hits for his old audience.

In 2002, Johnny Cash recorded the Nine Inch Nails song "Hurt," a Reznor composition from *The*



OPPOSITE PAGE: A portrait shot from 1999. THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT: With U2's Bono post-Grammy, 2005; with David Bowie on the set of the "I'm Afraid of Americans" video shoot, 1997.



FROM LEFT: Clutching Oscars with co-composer Atticus Ross, 2011; shadow play onstage in Holland, 2013.

Downward Spiral. It was the last great recording of Cash's life. The music video, featuring an aged Cash amid the ruins of his souvenirs, is considered one of the greatest ever made. Reznor said in praise of Cash's cover, "That song isn't mine anymore."

Trent Reznor never backed down. He was never afraid to bite the hand that fed him. He publicly decried the parent company of Interscope, Universal Music, for charging too much for records, suggesting that fans take the music for free from the Internet. And he put his money where his mouth was: Once he completed his Interscope/Universal contract, he began offering new Nine Inch Nails music for free download.

Always interested in ways to connect the audience to music without the dictatorship of the major label system, Reznor served as chief creative officer for Beats Music, and was involved in the launch of Apple Music.

Those who pegged Reznor as an enfant terrible had to reconsider when he began a second career composing film scores with his collaborator Atticus Ross. In his movie music, Reznor proved the range of his gifts, mixing delicacy, melody, and subtlety with the occasional burst of muscle. After producing the soundtracks for Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997), he teamed with Ross to score the David Fincher films *The Social Network* (2010) – for which they won an Oscar as well as a Golden Globe – *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), and *Gone Girl* (2014). In 2016 Reznor announced that from now on Ross would be a member of Nine Inch Nails.

By 2018 and the release of *Bad Witch*, Reznor and Ross had gathered every aspect of their musical vocabulary into Nine Inch Nails, from the power of industrial rock to the precision of their film scores. Any sound that could be sampled was fair game for NIN – electronic noise, wobbling saxophones, and voices that repeated short phrases ("We just can't help ourselves," "Time is running out/Over and over again") while the shifting sonic context changed the meaning of the words.

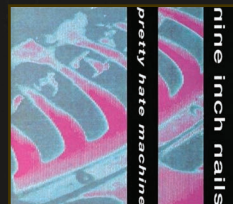


Trent Reznor had created something like a musical equivalent of abstract expressionism. There were echoes of Philip Glass and Ornette Coleman and David Bowie in the music, but it did not sound like any of them. It sounded like Nine Inch Nails.

For all the darkness, rage, and alienation Reznor wrote about, Nine Inch Nails' music always transmitted a sense of joy in its creation. Even when Reznor was exorcising demons, his work displayed the musician's delight in his design. When you listen to Nine Inch Nails, you feel Trent Reznor behind the curtain saying, "Get a load of THIS!"

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Selected DISCOGRAPHY



Pretty Hate Machine
1989 (TVT)



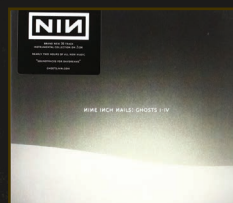
Broken
1992 (TVT/Interscope/
Nothing)



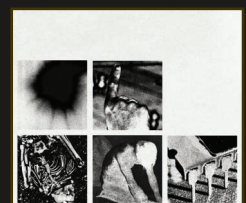
The Downward Spiral
1994 (TVT/Interscope/
Nothing)



The Fragile
1999 (Nothing/Interscope)



Ghosts I-IVA
2008 (The Null
Corporation)



Bad Witch
2018 (The Null
Corporation)

In the thirty-one years since *Pretty Hate Machine* introduced Nine Inch Nails to the world, Trent Reznor has remained committed to musical honesty at any cost. He has taken on the recording establishment and has contributed to the remaking of the music business. He has triumphed, both creatively and financially, while being willing to walk away from the table rather than compromise his ideals.

And he has made intensely personal music that turned out to speak for millions of people, under the name Nine Inch Nails.