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Reznor coaxes beauty out of despair

By Edna Gundersen, USA TODAY

NEW YORK - Trent Reznor climbed to the top only to discover it's lonely at the bottom. After winning legions of fans and achieving the success he'd craved since his teens, he dropped through a trapdoor into clinical depression.

"Emotionally, mentally and spiritually, I arrived at a place of utter unhappiness," says Reznor, the visionary behind industrial-rock icon Nine Inch Nails.

The despair that initially paralyzed him ultimately triggered a search into soul and sonics that resulted in Tuesday's release of the long-anticipated *The Fragile*, NIN's first studio album in five years, an infinity in the pop music continuum.

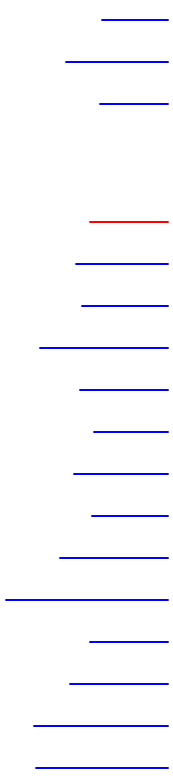
The wait proved excruciating for an industry hoping NIN could reverse rock's decline and reclaim market turf lost to rap and boy bands. Early indications are encouraging. *The Day the World*

'The Fragile': Eerily glorious

The coats of polish on Nine Inch Nails' art-rock opus can't camouflage Trent Reznor's perverse and subversive paths to musical glory. *The Fragile* (★★★★ out of four) is a 23-track marathon of cyberized omni-pop, meticulously honed and twisted to baffle, tantalize, disarm and challenge the listener.

Armies of guitars, riptides of bass and swarms of strings are filtered through Reznor's merciless computers and warped imagination, resulting in rich orchestrations poisoned by otherworldly racket and industrial-strength din tethered to sublime pop hooks.

These are sounds shaped by an





Went Away, though lacking a video and not serviced to radio, sold 70,000 copies its first week, landing in *Billboard's* Hot 100 at No. 17, NIN's highest-charting track to date. First single *We're In This Together* was the top add to modern and active rock radio formats. Though evolved beyond NIN's early nihilism, neither song indulges today's appetite for syrupy confections.

"To me, this record is an attempt at repair," says Reznor, gulping coffee in a hotel suite overlooking the concrete circuit board of midtown Manhattan. "It attempts to put the pieces back together, but it's inherently flawed. In the end, you don't arrive. You swallow your tail."

The 23-track double CD, a complex fusion of organic and synthetic forces, sprawls restlessly across alien terrain, erasing boundaries and confronting challenges with a level of ambition and abandon foreign to late-'90s pop. *The Fragile* faces expectations that have escalated sharply since 1994's *The Downward Spiral*, a fury-filled industrial rock grenade that sold 5 million copies globally and earned Reznor artist-of-the-year titles in *Spin* and *Musician*. *Spin* anointed him "the most vital artist in music." *Time* named him one of the 25 most influential Americans.

Since 1989 debut *Pretty Hate Machine*, Reznor has issued 10 records, won two Grammys, founded Nothing Records,

uncompromising auteur confident enough to assemble his visions on a foundation of quicksand. True to its billing, *The Fragile* is spindly and impulsive. Monster riffs hobble over cliffs into rivers of static. Even the gentlest piano interludes have an eerie menace and instability. The electronic pulse quickens, then turns erratic, as ambient beehives of noise engulf pristine melodies, huge choruses and disfigured violins, cellos and ukuleles. Part of *The Fragile's* unsettling charm lies in its constant threat of imminent doom, a reminder that Reznor is dancing on a high wire suspended over flames and demons.

The misery in *Somewhat Damaged* and contempt in *Starf*****, Inc.* (presumably a swipe at estranged pal Marilyn Manson) are familiar NIN hues. While there's gloom-a-go-go, Reznor lets hope, albeit fading, seep into his self-lacerating tirades and seems more inclined toward enlightenment than suicide. Despite the music's emotional and structural frailties, *The Fragile* has the creative sturdiness of a classic.

- Edna Gundersen



produced Marilyn Manson's CDs and did soundtracks for *The Lost Highway* and *Natural Born Killers*. He'd conquered the masses, yet a two-year tour promoting *Spiral* ended in retreat.

Sycophants, sudden wealth and a rootless existence in hotel rooms "distorted my personality," Reznor says. "It's New Year's Eve every night. I had everything I wanted, and I wasn't feeling good about it."

That gloom was compounded by an absence of scapegoats. He could no longer blame his misery on a lack of fame, money or opportunities.

"I neglected things that make me human," he says. "I gave up friends and relationships, thinking, 'I'll get to that later.' And I forgot I was in this for the music, not to run a label or to get sued or to hear Courtney Love make up stories about me."

Hollow career victories, the strain of touring, lapsed friendships and the death of a grandmother who raised him fed reluctance to record.

"*The Downward Spiral* came true," he says. "Through self-analysis, a shedding of skin and breaking down everything around me, *Downward* started at one spot and ended a lot lower. The process was healthy, but I arrived in a very raw place. I wasn't strong enough to make another record. I wasn't tough enough to be critiqued and picked at. I wanted to hide out and get away from me."

Reznor finally entered the studio with a mental blueprint: the concept of fragility, conveyed in lyrics about betrayal and aural constructions teetering toward collapse.

"I wanted it to sound distressed and delicate, like it's not strong enough to hold together," he says.

The theme dictated his approach and the music's form. To underscore issues of alienation and rage, a cold, impenetrable armor cloaked *Machine* and *Spiral*. *The Fragile* required a

frail, less icy exterior.

"I grabbed every instrument I didn't know how to play right," Reznor says. "If I play keyboards, I think too much. On guitar, I don't really know what I'm doing, so there's a naivete I like. It was a matter of letting the subconscious take over."

Feral and sophisticated, gentle and violent, ominous and inviting, *Fragile's* machined beauty is as dual-natured as its creator.

"The overanalytical guy in me was fighting the guy who plays by ear and follows whatever feels natural," he says. "It came time for the analytical guy to step in and say, 'How do we make this a cohesive piece of work instead of, at its worst, a self-indulgent exercise in studio nonsense?' At times, I thought I'd built the whole empire on a fault line."

The process entailed a posted list of code words and desirable influences: Tom Waits, Atari Teenage Riot, Dr. Dre, Daft Punk. Reznor cyber-crunched ukuleles, cellos, violins, pianos, guitars, drum machines and vocals into swelling symphonies and waves of inscrutable noise.

"I'm envious of a band that sounds like a band," Reznor says. "I always wished I had the structure of The Cure or The Smiths. Every song I've ever done starts with a feeling I want to get across or a visual in my head. Do I want drums? I don't know. Let's make it sound like wood falling off a ledge. Real instruments? Synthesizers? A choir? A whisper? I was mad at Nirvana for recording an album in two weeks. It takes me that long to find my notebook."

He and co-producer Alan Moulder spent two years painstakingly crafting *The Fragile* in Reznor's New Orleans studio, a former funeral parlor. The process lifted Reznor's spirits and restored his confidence but did little to end his painful isolation. Is there life outside music?

"Absolutely not," Reznor says in his most emphatic response yet. "What are my hobbies? Hmm, I like guitar pedal effects."

Every day was *Groundhog Day*: sleep four hours, wake up to the same song over and over. Same clothes, same people, same three restaurants to choose from. There was something almost endearing about that kind of camaraderie, like soldiers going off to war. But it's also a way of putting off real life, whatever that is."

Conventional yearnings for marriage, children and suburban languor tug at Reznor, but so does an impending tour and a restless muse.

"I realized these last few years that there's a human being in here that needs basics like friendships, love," he says sheepishly. "I can't make great art based on memories of what it's like to be a human being. Through more mature eyes, I realize some of my early goals - a record deal, a plaque on the wall - were very shallow spiritually. Now I want to achieve some sort of peace and well-roundedness. I'll get to that. Someday."

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