

In The Flesh....

Roger Waters & Trent Reznor

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They've created some of the most profoundly depressing music in the history of rock, but Roger Waters and Trent Reznor are just tickled pink to shake hands.

Roger Waters is waiting for Trent Reznor. "Presumably, they have to rouse him from a drug-induced coma?" Waters remarks dryly. "These young rock stars..." Just then Reznor turns up, and, far from being comatose, he seems well-rested and sharp. In fact, anticipation has driven him from bed at an hour most unbecoming a rock star. "I woke up at 7:30 this morning" he confides. "I was going, 'God, I'm gonna talk to Roger Waters today!'"

REVOLVER: Trent, what role has Roger's music played in your own life and work?

TR: I grew up on a farm in the middle of nowhere in Pennsylvania. Not to sound too kiss-ass, but when The Wall came out, it was a turning point for me. I was in high school at the time, and I remember that music had always been my friend--a companion, the brother I didn't have, or whatever. I came from a broken home. I was alone a lot as a child. And when The Wall came out, that record seemed very personal to me, even though I was in a completely different lifestyle, place, and situation than Roger would have been at that time. I'd never heard music that had that sort of naked, honest emotion. I had that sense of, 'Wow, I'm not the only person who feels this way.' When it came time to start writing my own music, after some failed attempts at generic lyrics, I realized that if I went inward and took journal entries and turned them into songs, it seemed to strike a chord in others. And then when I made my second album, The Downward Spiral, I aspired to start with a story. I tried to write songs that fit into the slots in the plot line. I soon realized how hard that is. I tried to abandon it. But when I got toward the end of the record, I realized I had kind of done that anyway--what I thought I couldn't do.

RW: Forgive me, Trent. I don't know your work. I tend not to listen to rock and roll very much--if at all. But it sounds to me as if what you're doing fulfills all the functions that you've described in my work. So there are still those kids on farms in the middle of Pennsylvania yearning to find some meaning in their own lives and discovering it--some of them at least--in music that could be described as underground, or at least not in the mainstream of popular culture.

REVOLVER: Both of you have adopted the full-length concept album as your main medium. You tend to make large statements about the human condition

in your work. What is it like to do that in the current musical climate, so characterized by disposability, one-off hit singles, and short attention spans?

TW: It's very difficult, as I've discovered with my most recent record, *The Fragile*. It's a double album, and it's pretty dense. It takes about five or 10 listenings to really get into it. As a fan, that's what I want when I buy a record--to dig in and go several layers deep. That's the thing about your work, Roger. If you look deeper, you find things.

RW: But not everybody wants to go that deep.

TR: I fully understand that, too. And I think there's something to be said for a nice, appealing surface. But when you want to go looking for a deeper meaning, it ought to be there too. But nobody seems to have the time for that anymore. I guess from hiding in my studio for the past five years, making *The Fragile*, I wasn't quite aware of how disposable the scene has become. It's a tough blow to withstand--just the way commercialism has turned music more into product than art. You're judged immediately by the first three weeks of your sales. And if it isn't what somebody at the record label said it would be, then it's a failure.

RW: But don't you think it was always that way? All record companies are profit oriented. The holy grail for them is to discover the motherlode of popular taste, in order that they should move huge numbers of product. And they were always that way, in my view. Ahmet Ertegun or anybody else. You know, there are these mythic kind of figures from the early days, like Sam Phillips. But Sam Phillips wouldn't have stuck with Elvis if people hadn't bought the records!

TR: But are the record companies really catering to what the public taste is? Or do they, to a degree, dictate that taste to the public? MTV pumps out their boy bands and their generic blonde teenage icons to the masses. And I wonder how much of that is the public saying, 'What are we supposed to like?' And they're bombarded with that.

RW: I'm sure you're right. MTV is pure Big Brother. It's pure Brave New World. And there's no question but that those who make decisions about the way society works become the arbiters of the quality of human life. In North America, the general trend has been this: You find a piece of wilderness. If there are people or animals living on it, you kill them. Then you build a strip mall that contains a number of the most obviously successful and recognizable icons of the culture you're trying to spread over the land. So, inevitably, there's a McDonald's, a Sam Goody, and all those things. I assume the reason for this is that it's convenient for the policy makers.

It provides them with a system where there's plenty of cream floating around the top to be skimmed off. And I suppose the reason the human race goes along with it is that, as yet, we don't know any better. That seems to be enough for most human beings. Although, if you ask most people, they don't actually feel a great sense of satisfaction in their lives, buying that dream. It's

interesting, Trent, that you should be voicing these concerns about this kind of stuff. I find myself not caring about that, really, or about the way the record industry is or what's going to happen to it. Maybe that's very selfish of me. But it may be that that wall of unconcern is almost necessary to some of the rest of us, in order that we should have a reference point to develop against.

REVOLVER: Speaking of the demands of the marketplace, you are both in the midst of preparing DVDs of your recent tours. What is it like to encapsulate something like a rock and roll tour in this new medium?

TR: Roger, is your DVD basically your live show?

RW: Yeah, it's the live show--and a documentary, if we can get it all on. Well, actually, we can't get it all on. So I'm trying at the moment to persuade the record company to give the documentary away with the rest of the stuff. This particular DVD can be only two and half hours long, and our show is two-and-a-half hours long. So I'm under a lot of pressure to edit it--take stuff out.

TR: Make your product more appealing to the marketplace?

RW: Yeah, exactly. We were under that pressure with the live album of the shows, as well. 'You should really put this out as a single CD, because it's more marketable.' And I confess I did have a look at editing. I wrote a few song lists and thought, 'I can't do this. This is ridiculous.' So we persuaded the record company to sell a double CD at a reasonable price. I think live albums should be much less expensive than studio albums. The costs of making a live album are minimal compared to a studio album. You just take a mobile to two or three gigs, record them, and choose the best bits.

REVOLVER: Are you taking the same kind of approach on your DVD, Trent--a straight document of the show itself?

TR: That's the focus of this one. And I'm taking a very hands-on approach. In the past I've made the mistake of hiring 'the guys who really know how to do this.' What happens is your concert footage ends up looking just like everyone else's. So for this one, we just got seven good digital video cameras and filmed the last 10 shows of the tour from seven different perspectives--some locked-off shots, some hand-held, a lot from the audience--to give a sense of what it was like to be there, in a non-professional kind of way. We adopted that same kind of attitude in post production too. We thought we would edit it here in my studio on a Mac in Final Cut Pro. That led to, 'Maybe we could adapt our studio for 5.1 Surround Sound,' which we ended up doing. There have been a lot of hassles, but it's also been very educational.

RW: You're lucky enough to be in a position where you can make those choices, which is great.

TR: Well, the timeline might be running out on that, given the sales of my last record. But I'm trying to keep as much in-house as possible. You see, I had a really bad experience with the first record label I was signed to. And when I

finally got out of that situation and onto a new label, I said, 'Here's the deal. You give me a chunk of money and I'll give you a record. I don't want A&R. I don't want any interference. I'll give you magazine ads. I'll give you a video. I don't want your help.' So that provided me with an in-house situation where I could do what I want without meddling fingers from record label strangers.

And now I'm trying to get this DVD done to meet what is a pretty unrealistic deadline. And trying to get my head around the fact that almost nobody is ever going to listen to this with the right setup. Most people can't set a stereo up, let alone six speakers with the right level balance and the right distance between speakers.

RW: I actually think you're fighting a losing battle, trying to recreate anything like the experience of being at a rock and roll show with a DVD. Basically, they're home movies. I regret not having made home movies of The Pros and Cons of Hitch Hiking and the Radio K.A.O.S. tours [1984 and '87, respectively]. And I'm so glad that I will have a home movie of the 2000 In the Flesh tour. I want to have it to put in a cupboard somewhere and maybe show to my grandchildren. But I don't know if it's something that interests me that much, I have to say. I don't really care about it. Frankly, I'd rather be fishing. Or reading. But you know, I'm 56 years old. How old are you?

TR: 35.

RW: So it's kind of relative. There's 21 years? difference. I might have cared more when I was 35. Not that I'm saying that you will eventually achieve fishing.

TR: I'm looking forward to it, actually.

RW: But from the tenor of this conversation, it sounds like you're more involved in this stuff than I am.

TR: I suppose I can't help it. My first record came out 10 years ago. It unexpectedly touched a nerve. The second record got 10 times bigger than we ever thought it was going to be. We just happened to be in the right place at the right time. It propelled us 20 levels higher than we should have been, really.

RW: You mean 20 levels more popular.

TR: Yeah. You find yourself being referenced by popular culture now.

RW: Well, you do. But you can either choose to reference yourself like that, or not. And we all chose to do that, to a certain extent. If you're in rock and roll, you have to accept that part of the reason why you're there is because you like being patted on the back. Probably didn't get enough of it when you were a kid. That's certainly true of me. If we didn't have those needs we wouldn't be in rock and roll anyway.

TR: That's true. But I disappeared for five years to get my brain straightened out. I came back with a really dense album that I think is the best I can do. But it's substantially different from what I've done in the past. It's not as obvious. And it sold well, but it didn't sell great. So now I'm settling into this...When I first started out, I'd ride around the country in a van 10 times if I needed to. I'd do interviews all day if I needed to.

RW: But you sound confused by this, slightly.

TR: Well, I'm getting over the hump of realizing that I'm settling into what is right for me, artistically. But it might not be accessible for mass consumption.

RW: Well, okay. So it's not. So you've recognized that. All you need to do is recognize that and then forget about it. Because it's uncontrollable. I think the one thing we all have to understand is that you can't go chasing the audience. That would be a living death for anyone who is serious about what they do. It sounds like you're agonizing about this stuff. And this is now me being wise after the event. I've been through the same agonies. But at the end of the day, I've had to understand that all you can do is your work. Maybe nobody will buy any of it. That could happen. You might make a record five years down the road and four people will buy it, you know?

TR: Right.

RW: Modigliani never sold any pictures. Van Gogh peddled his pictures for a bowl of soup. Some of these geniuses never got any reward at all in their lifetimes. Except the reward that comes from doing your work and understanding your connection with the mathematics of life, or God, or whatever you want to call it.

TR: That's obvious to me. But it's really nice to hear you say that.

RW: I've been through some of the same things, clearly. I've had a couple of big hit singles in my life, when I was with Pink Floyd. And I feel good about the work that I've done since then, particularly *Amused to Death* [1992]. I've sold a few records. Not big numbers. But that's just the way it is. The cool thing is the moment when you put that last brush stroke to the painting, stand back and go 'Ahhhh.' You know you've done good work. That's all you can expect.

REVOLVER: All these concerns about how your work is received by the public--do they become more acute, more stressful, when you're touring?

RW: Not any more for me. On my last tour the audiences were ages 15 through 50, but more 20-year-olds than anything else, as far as I could see. And they knew the songs. They like them. The songs have meaning to them. It was kind of a warm, touchy-feely experience for me. And I'm ashamed to say that I loved it. I'm now in a state emotionally where I can recognize, absorb, and enjoy that connection with the audience. Whereas maybe 10 or 15 years ago I couldn't. Because I was still essentially the tall guy in black, standing in the corner scowling at everyone: 'Stay away. Leave me alone.'

TR: I know that guy.

RW: And I don't feel like that now. So it was fun. And we have really good relationships within the band, so I wasn't going through all that muck I went through with Pink Floyd.

TR: It's gotta feel good to look out and see an audience of some young people who are just discovering your music, realizing that it has a timeless quality to it.

RW: It's great. We're only just beginning to discover that about rock and roll. It didn't really start until the mid-Fifties, so it's still a very young thing. And it may be that some of us will eventually turn into Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong. The artists involved in rock and roll only have to get old enough for people to say, 'Hey, what a big surprise. They lasted. It wasn't just an overnight teenage rebellion thing. It was jazz!' So there's room for what you and I do, Trent, and there's room for the boy bands and all the soft porn that's out there masquerading as rock and roll. Actually, it doesn't masquerade as rock and roll. It calls itself pop music. And I guess it was always that way.

REVOLVER: Do either of you resent being portrayed in the media as gloomy purveyors of depressing music?

TR: When Nine Inch Nails first got big, I got labelled as the most gloomy person in the world. I realized in time that my own self image was starting to become what I'd read about myself. Or how I was being treated by people around me, who only knew what they'd read about me. So it became a self-fulfilling prophecy, because there was no time for rational thought amidst the madness of touring and not having a home. No time to get a perspective of how my life was changing--from poverty to wealth, from obscurity to being some sort of icon. In the end, it took some time to say, 'Okay, who is really underneath all these layers of shit that have been built up?' From that point on, you realize that the media's just a game. The celebrity thing means nothing to me. It's more of an irritant than anything else.

RW: About the time Pink Floyd really got popular--which was after Dark Side of the Moon [1972] and during The Wall, I guess-- I just distanced myself from everything. On the Animals tour [1977] and the one before that we had a publicist, and his job was to say no [i.e., to interview requests]. Just politely say no to everything. I did that for years and years. Looking back on those days, I'm so glad I refused to do The Tonight Show, refused to speak to Barbara Walters or do the covers of magazines. Particularly the chat show TV thing. I think if you start doing that stuff, you're saying to people, 'Okay I'm yours. Take me.' But hey, guys, il faut partir. I must go.

REVOLVER: Thanks for doing this, Roger.

RW: Hey, it's been a pleasure. And nice talking to you, Trent.

TR: Really nice, Roger.

RW: Now I'm going to have to buy one of your records to see who you are.

TR: Maybe I'll even send you one.

RW: That would be great. Why not all of them? That would be good. I look forward to hearing them.

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