

CD review: Year Zero

Contributed by admin
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The best thing to hit YouTube in the past few weeks is Sad Kermit singing Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt." Everybody's favorite Muppet amphibian strums an acoustic guitar, warbling Trent Reznor's classic ballad of self-loathing to a montage of scenes illustrating his degradation: Kermit shooting up, Kermit passed out in a pile of beer cans and pill bottles, Kermit blowing rails off a copy of *The God Delusion* near a topless photo of Miss Piggy. By the end of the song, Kermit's going down on Rowlf, who brandishes a leather whip. "You can have it all, my empire of dirt," Kermit sings, and you feel his froggy pain. It works because Kermit and Trent aren't so far apart -- they're both sweet and sad and vulnerable, behind a brittle formal pose. On Sad Kermit's MySpace page, he sings an even bleaker NIN song -- "Something I Can Never Have" -- but I don't know if I'm strong enough to take that one.

Reznor brings the pain on *Year Zero*, his strongest, weirdest and most complex record since *The Downward Spiral*. On his surprise 2005 comeback, *With Teeth*, Reznor sounded unsure of himself, sweating for a hit. He front-loaded it with mediocre radio-rock bangers like "The Hand That Feeds," pushing the kinkier material to the second half. But after the success of *With Teeth*, he's got his bravado back. This time, he's cooked up a concept album about an American police state, fifteen years in the future. To suit the paranoid vibe, *Year Zero* is dense yet minimal, inspired by the Bomb Squad production on early Public Enemy records. Reznor leaked the tracks onto the Interwebs by leaving them on USB drives in bathroom stalls at his European shows, a very Crying of Lot 49 way to do it.

The target of his rage on *Year Zero* is "Capital G," and you'll never guess who that stands for. (Hint: "I pushed a button and elected him to office/He pushed a button, and it dropped the bomb.") In Capital G's regime, the military runs the government ("Survivalism") and the church ("God Given"), watching every move you make. The nation keeps a permanent war going, using up soldiers and spitting them out, until they finally rebel in the anthem "Your Violent Heart." As science fiction, *Year Zero* is nothing special; fifteen years in the future sounds like a fifteen-year-old X-Files rerun, complete with the slogan "I am trying to believe." But just by forcing Reznor to get out of his head and imagine the world beyond his own private Idaho, the concept inspires him musically. "The Beginning of the End" stays on the scene with a "My Sharona" drum hook; "Vessel" is a cosmic sex/drug meltdown ("I let you put it in my mouth/ I let it get under my skin") with a nasty electro-goth disco twitch.

"Me, I'm Not" is his toughest song since "Closer," which it resembles; over a sinister, mechanical death-funk groove, Reznor whispers about dangerous pleasures, pleading, "You've got something I need." (Hey, another X-Files connection.) In songs like "The Good Soldier," "My Violent Heart" and "Meet Your Master," Reznor makes facing up to sobriety sound like a soldier getting over a war, whether he's using militarism as a metaphor for addiction or vice versa. And not since his debut has he sung so much about masters, servants, getting down on your knees, bowing to the one you serve, etc. The density of the mix evokes not just Public Enemy but Pere Ubu, the 1970s Cleveland punk-industrial pioneers who did *Datapanik* in *Year Zero*, giving NIN more fruitful musical templates than *The Wall* ever did. On *Year Zero*, Reznor doesn't exactly sound like he's having fun -- does he ever? But he runs out of disc space before he runs out of ideas, and it's the first time that's happened in quite a while.

Written by Rob Sheffield for Rolling Stone magazine