JG Thirlwell

He's the experimental mastermind behind post-punk project Foetus, and has collaborated with Nick Cave, Swans, Zola Jesus and even the Kronos Quartet. This Australia-born singer and instrumentalist, now living in Brooklyn, NY, is a singer, sound artist, producer and arranger whose only boundary is his imagination.

So now we have to ask: How prog is JG Thirlwell? Words: Dom Lawson  Portraits: Marylene Mey

I f you listened to a lot of weird music in the 1980s, there's a very strong chance you will have come across JG Thirlwell at some point. He's best known for releasing extraordinarily eccentric and perverse records under such names as You've Got Foetus On Your Breath and Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel, and was one of the post-punk world's wildest mavericks. His sound drew from the nascent industrial music scene and punk's more left-field tendencies, but also from soundtracks, cartoon music, big hand swing jazz and even experimental noise and musique concrète. More than 30 years on from early career milestones like 1984's classic Hole album (featuring fan favourite Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel anthem I'll Meet You In Poland, Baby), Thirlwell is now simply one of modern music's great polymaths, with a huge and insanely varied catalogue of music performed both as a solo artist under a variety of pseudonyms and in endless collaboration with all manner of likeminded musical anarchists.

Today, Thirlwell allows himself a wry smile at the thought that our readers might question his prog credentials. "Funny, there's definitely Yes and Genesis and ELP in my DNA, and particularly King Crimson," he says with a shrug. "If you listen back to that music, it really was about shedding the shackles of rock. So I feel that not only do I have a lot of that music in my DNA, but I feel I'm constantly questioning my own musical vocabulary in the same way, and wanting to move forward and try different things."

In truth, JG Thirlwell has always been incapable of following anyone else's creative path. In his late teens, he moved from his native Australia to London, fascinated and enthralled by the explosion of underground music that was happening in the city as punk entered its death throes. Starting the Foetus story with 1981's debut single Scrape Your Face/OKFM, released as Foetus Under Glass, he was in the right place at the right time.

"The whole Foetus thing was facilitated by punk rock and the explosion of independent labels, and then it was informed by being a musical obsessive for my entire life," he says grimly. "Everything that I absorbed culturally was spewed out through my distorted lens, but at the same time I was living in London, so I was going to see bands like Throbbing Gristle, This Heat, The Pop Group and Cabaret Voltaire... it was a very exciting time for music and all these things went into the mix. The secret sauce was not necessarily knowing what I was doing but having the audacity to do it anyway."

It would take a few years and several synapse-frazzling records for James George Thirlwell's new persona to truly emerge, but a taste for surrealism and intuitive art rock sensibilities were clearly present from the start. "On that first single, the first thing I did was create a mythology around Foetus, where I didn't want to be a personality up front," he says.

"That was kind of influenced by The Residents and that kind of myth-making. I quickly discovered that if you write a press release, and you put whatever you want into it, often that gets reprinted by the press. So I said that Foetus Under Glass were two Brazilian statistics collectors and their pen pal from Athens, Georgia, and that got reprinted!"

By the mid 80s, Foetus had mutated into an interminably terrifying entity, with Thirlwell delivering his Grindhouse-cum-gothic lyrics in a rasping, Deep South drawl over musical landscapes of increasing complexity. Although still ostensibly connected to the industrial scene, Foetus records existed in their own self-contained universe, with Thirlwell playing every single instrument on every record. With no restrictions imposed on how he should realise his vision, he admits that he cheerfully allowed his alter-ego to run riot, which probably explains songs like 1987's sleazy jazz epic Bedrock (performed by The Foetus All Nude Revue) and unforgettable lyrics like "I'm a two-fisted fucker gettin' hard in my pants!"
Foetus (is on his mind); the adaptive JG Thirlwell.
"I was exploring my dark side and exploring the dark side. That's just what I was inspired to write about, that viewpoint. Often I was taking the opposite viewpoint from the character that I was portraying, and often that was misinterpreted! [Laughs] Sometimes I was singing in first person, but there was a blur between the two. Of course, I was putting out records under the name Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel. I don't deny that one of the early impetuses for that was that there was a shock element to it, but also an almost Dadaist element to it, a sort of absurdity to the juxtapositions of things I was putting together."

After a decade of terrorising the indie rock underground, Thirlwell decided to ditch all the complicated, confrontational identities and entered the 90s simply as Foetus. He even briefly ended up on a major label, subsequently releasing the magnificent Gush via Columbia Records in 1995. He also enjoyed a brief period of work as a producer and remixe for a variety of alternative rock and indie bands. Meanwhile, the Australian's own creative urges were leading him in a new direction. With too many ideas for one project to manage, he formed a new instrumental entity called Steroid Maximus, wherein all his jazz, exotica and soundtrack music fantasies were brought to life.

"The Foetus records were becoming increasingly instrumental, to the point where they were 50 per cent instrumental," Thirlwell recalls. "But I felt that the perception of Foetus was still of this misanthropic maniac making a lot of noise. So with Steroid Maximus I wanted to take that instrumental aspect and explore it more, let it breathe and let it have its own playground. It was a blank slate, so having done Foetus for 10 years at that point, I'd built an identity and a certain set of expectations about what it was gonna be. But if you start something new, none of those rules exist yet."

With both Foetus and Steroid Maximus releasing multiple albums during the 90s, it was hardly a barren period for Thirlwell, but it's the last two decades that have really seen him blossom as an authentically groundbreaking artist. A decade after Steroid Maximus, he created another blank slate in the form of Manorexia: another instrumental project, but one that stripped back the intricacies of Foetus and Steroid Maximus in favour of atmosphere, ambience and a more sound.

"Manorexia started with a drone piece I wrote, but it took on a life of its own," says Thirlwell. "I wanted to create something more spacious with Manorexia. The music I'd been making with Foetus and Steroid Maximus was becoming so intricately arranged and dense; I wanted an environment where I could let the sounds breathe. And then it took on other characteristics and was more informed by the avant-garde and 20th century classical music and soundtracks, and it had a different atmosphere for my other work."

With his reputation in the experimental music world growing, Thirlwell's next move may have
surprised some of his more ardent admirers. Since 2003, he’s been creating music for Adult Swim cartoon series The Venture Bros. The perfect vehicle for Thirlwell’s instinctively visual sounds, not to mention his self-proclaimed predilection for cartoon music, The Venture Bros project eventually led to him picking up the same role at FX’s animated sitcom Archer. Thirlwell’s intense enthusiasm for both is plain.

“When I approach these shows it’s like I’m scoring an action film or a drama, but the stakes are lot higher because they can draw whatever they want,” he enthuses. “They can draw some horrible android holocaust and then, in the next scene, everyone’s sitting in a room together again. So it means that I can ramp up the emotional stakes on the music and make it super-dramatic, which I enjoy doing. The Venture Bros stuff is kind of like Steroid Maximus on steroids!”

Despite an absurdly busy schedule, JG Thirlwell is determined to cram in as much music-making and creativity into his life as possible. This year, he’s hoping to perform some rare solo shows with a chamber group, playing new interpretations of Foetus classics alongside new material. There’ll be a new album from Xordox, his latest “blank slate” and an immersive exploration of synthesiser minimalism.

He’s also just released one of the most astonishingly adventurous and absorbing albums of the year, Oscillosvia: a collaboration with Swedish avant-prog/classical guru Simon Steensland, which will send fans of Art Zoyd, Univers Zero and Magma into a state of delighted froth. Zappa alumni Morgan Ågren plays drums on it, too. It’s extraordinary.

Meanwhile – and there’s always a Meanwhile with JG Thirlwell – the NYC resident has numerous other projects in the pipeline. Deep breath! “Right now, I’m working on a new season of Archer. I’m recording an album of my string quartets this year, which will probably come out next year. I’ve started writing some stuff with [goals of] a new Foetus album. There’s probably gonna be some connective tissue to what I’ve done before, but I want it to totally shatter the glass ceiling as well, because I feel I owe it to the Foetus legacy to do that. It could be the last Foetus album too. There’s an arc to Foetus and this is the end of the arc. Oh, and I’ve got some other big commissions coming up this year, too.”

At the heart of Thirlwell’s brain-spinning 40 years of active service lies a wide-eyed fascination with music and its endless possibilities. As a result, he feels pretty comfortable with the possibility of being embraced by the prog world. Frankly, he’s been neck-deep in it for decades.

“One of the first albums I owned was Jethro Tull’s Thick As A Brick. Hearing stuff like that, which threw out the rulebook by having one 40-minute song with many, many different movements, you think, ‘This is what music can be!’ For me, prog was more like classical, and I was introduced to that by cartoons, you know? You follow the dots and the next thing you know, you’re listening to Ligeti!”

JG Thirlwell and Simon Steensland’s Oscillosvia is out now via Lpcoc. See www.foetus.org for more.