

READERS: THERE IS NOTHING WRONG WITH YOUR PROG MAGAZINE. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO ADJUST THE PICTURES OR THE WORDS. WE ARE CONTROLLING WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ.



JG Thirlwell

He's the experimental mastermind behind post-punk project Foetus, and has collaborated with Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds, 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

If 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 band 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. "Funnily, 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

"There's definitely Yes and Genesis and ELP in my DNA, and particularly King Crimson."



Spite Your Face: the single that started it all.

JG Thirlwell performs at the Paradiso, Amsterdam in September 1988.

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 *Spite 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 grinning. "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, Joy Division, 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!"

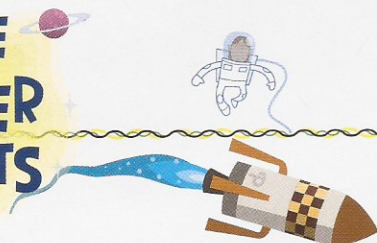
By the mid 80s, Foetus had mutated into an intermittently terrifying entity, with Thirlwell delivering his Grindhouse-cum-gothic lyrics in a rasping, Deep South drawl over musical landscapes of increasing complexity. Although still ostensibly connected to the industrial scene, Foetus records existed 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!'



FRANS SCHELLEKENS/REDPERNS/GETTY IMAGES

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 *Gash* via Columbia Records in 1995. He also enjoyed a brief period of work as a producer and remixer, 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 use, he formed a new instrumental entity called Steroid Maximus, wherein all his jazz, exotic 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



CATHERINE MCGANN/GETTY IMAGES

JG Thirlwell performs with Lydia Lunch at the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage in 1996.

Hole by Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel, 1984.



“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 long 40-minute song with many, many different movements, you think, ‘This is what music can be!’”



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."

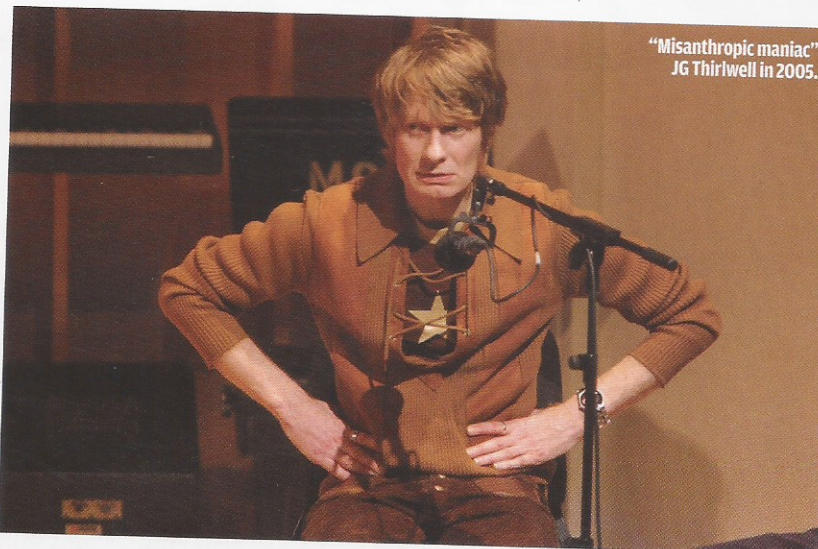
With both Foetus and Steroid Maximus releasing multiple albums during the 90s, it was hardly a barren period for Thirlwell, but it's the last two decades that have really seen him blossom as an authentically groundbreaking artist. A decade after Steroid Maximus, he created another blank slate in the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

With his reputation in the experimental music world growing, Thirlwell's next move may have



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"Misanthropic maniac"
JG Thirlwell in 2005.



Steroid Maximus' debut
i*Quilombo*, 1991. An
edited version of
Fighteous is the theme
tune of *The Venture
Bros* cartoon.

Thirlwell's latest
album, *Oscillospira*.



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, *Oscillospira*: 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 alumnus Morgan Ägren 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 [maverick sludge crew] Melvins, which I hope will turn into *something*, and hopefully there'll be an *Archer* soundtrack album. I've also started 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 *Oscillospira* is out now via Ipecac. See www.foetus.org for more.

YOUR SHOUT!

He's the zany one-man powerhouse of unbridled experimentalism. But the big question is: how prog is JG Thirlwell?

"Very arty in his output but more industrial and goth in style than progressive."

David Preston

"Foetus are amazing. *Nail and Hole* were both great albums as were all those wonderful early singles. Collaboration wise then you obviously have *Flesh Volcano*, the excellent *Wiseblood* album and the 12-inch with Lydia Lunch. His soundtracks have been great and his latest electronica project is very much worth getting."

Rob Hurst

"It's quite common for you to name people I've never heard. I think this is the first one I've never heard of."

David Meadows

"Oh aye, old JG Thirlwell... Nope, haven't a clue."

Laurie Laughland

"While not really prog, Thirlwell's body of work definitely deserves mentioning, at least from a pioneer/visionary standpoint. Interesting *Prog* would discuss the man who is Foetus and basically pioneered the industrial-punk-classical-blues-big band jazz-end-of-times-you-all-suck music. Fave tunes: *Bedrock*, *Theme From Pigdom Come*, *The Throne Of Agony*, *Stop Trying To Tie Me* (Wiseblood). *Steroid Maximus* is kinda neat too."

Dave McClelland

"Just listened to a couple of bits on YouTube. No, not prog. A noise, nothing more."

Paul Swanton

"Well he's definitely progressive in the literal sense of the word but your average stuck in the 70s prog rock fan would run a mile. If Throbbing Gristle and Tomahawk are progressive then Foetus hits the same sweet spot. Like Atari Teenage Riot jamming with Stockhausen at a free jazz tribute to Zappa. The man's a f***king genius!"

Chris Alexander

"*The Overture From Pigdom Come* - definitely."

Risotto Drake

"Did a great remix of *Reverence* by the Jesus And Mary Chain. Firmly in the goth/alternative camp [but] not really progressive rock in my view."

Matthew North

"Not a clue who this is. Off to Google. Still no idea even after checking him out."

Steve Harrison

"Er, who's that again?"

Mike Sexton

"Given that your average *Prog* reader would run a mile from krautrock I'd be amazed if they've ever heard of Jim. He's got a brilliantly progressive musical mind as far as I'm concerned."

Rick Spence

"Not certain about the Foetus stuff, but his soundtracky later stuff definitely fits the bill."

Mary Drake

"Love the *Nail* album and his *Wiseblood* stuff"

Andrew Prestidge

"Who?"

Chris Watkins