FLYING OFF TO GONDWANALAND

WITH JIM FOETUS
I sleep during the day. I like to work all night. That's how it ends up, usually. It's more practical for my working situation, too. I usually start to get vibed up around eleven."

James G. Thirlwell—a.k.a. Jim Foetus, a.k.a. You've Got Foetus On Your Breath, a.k.a. Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel, a.k.a. Foetus Inc., a.k.a. Clint Ruin, a.k.a. Steroid Maximus, a.k.a. Whatever Pseudonym He's Dreamed Up For The Moment—is soft-spoken in the extreme. So soft-spoken, my recording Walkman's condenser microphone can barely pick up his mutterings over the roaring traffic yards away. Which is bizarre, taken in the context of the slithering reptilian madman he becomes when he takes the stage hours later, roaring above his touring band's art/thrash/metal blizzkrieg. "I love the way you fill your clothes! I wanna stick your head under mah hose!"

"I've done tons of tours and minitours backed by tapes. Or with Wisegood, we had tapes and trumpets and live sampler keyboard. But this is like my third tour with an actual band. It'd gone as far as I could with the tape thing, and I wanted to be able to have much more of an element of chance involved and be able to rearrange all the songs in a band format: Songs that were never intended to be played or were never conceived as having a band be able to play them, because the instrumentation is so diverse and it would be physically impossible to play. So, it gave me a chance to rearrange songs a lot and put them into a different format and stick them into a totally new sound, new life."

A certain sleazebag NYC 'zine editor who's too cool to live likes to note a supposed resemblance 'twixt Foetus and Abraham Lincoln. However, I don't think Abe had a fringed biker jacket and Harley shirt nearly as cool as Jim's. Nor do I believe The Great Emancipator had a gaze "that seemed like it went back for miles but also had a brick wall about a quarter of the way back."

Lydia Lunch once said that of Thirlwell. She should know, having spent the better part of the '80s in the Foetal orbit.

One of the ten trillion Foetus releases which justify this feature is yet another collaboration with Ms. Lunch, under the Clint Ruin/Lydia Lunch nameplate, the Don't Fear The Reaper EP. The title track's the Blue Oyster Cult goldie; the final track's the Beatles' mouldie, "Why Don't We Do It In The Road." Foetus owns two Beatles LPs: The White Album and Magical Mystery Tour.

"I've really never released a cover version before, and 'Don't Fear The Reaper' is a song I've liked for a long time. It was pretty much timely right now, since a lot of people we know are dying left and right. It was just something that I wanted to do."

"The Beatles things came about strictly by accident. It just sorta happened one evening, just a real quick thing that happened. And it turned out real well. It wasn't originally gonna be on that record, but I decided to put it on there."

Foetus Inc.'s live set also includes a fairly faithful "I Am The Walrus." I say "fairly," 'cuz the Beatles never ate as much scrap metal and finely powdered glass as the Foetal "Walrus" contains. Should you ever attend a live Foetus poubestad, make sure to yell for "Love Me Do" once "Walrus" ends and the cheers die away. And stand real close to the stage as you do so.

Foetus Inc. is one of the best all-star casts by whom you'll ever have the misfortune of being aurally sodomized. Amongst its membership are numbered either current or expatries of Swans (guitarist Norman Westerberg), Of Cabbages And Kings (bassist Al Kitzys), and Cop Shoot Cop (sampler-basher Dave Oiumet). Thirlwell should take them into his Brooklyn loft/studio sometime for an LP or two. Seriously.

"There's a triple live album coming out from the last US tour. But record with them? No, not immediately. Although we have all worked with each other in various forms. It just happens that way. Like I worked on Dave's project, Motherhead Bug. Of Cabbages And Kings, I've sung with them a lot. I did a song on their new record. It all kinda crossfertilizes."

Sounds like one big, incestuous family.

"Uh, well, we're all second cousins."

Thirlwell must own the most insane record collection in existence. In the course of any one of his projects, he's liable to careen through stabs at heavy metal, Big Band swing, or cocktail jazz, while still leaving his unmistakable stench clinging to it all.

"Well, it's not necessarily reflecting what I listen to. I mean, lately, I seem to be doing a lotta Big Band stuff, but I don't necessarily listen to that. It's just the medium through which I'm trying to say at one point in time is best expressed. I mean, the influence is mainly coming from within me, as opposed to listening to a bunch of records and regurgitating them. So, the genres that I may seem to be exploiting, I don't necessarily know anything about."

How many instruments can you play, Jim?

"I'll play anything that I'll pick up, but I'll play it badly. The studio is my main instrument, and I know how to mutate things to make 'em sound the way I want 'em to sound. But when I started off picking up instruments, it would be because I'm writing a song where I envisioned, say, a sax part here. So, I'd pick up a sax and teach myself the rudiments of that, how to play that part. And it sorta went on from there, depending on what instrument I needed at any one point in time."

It makes one wonder—armed with the knowledge that Foetus multi-tracks as many instruments as possible on his lonesome—when you hear a massive, swingin' horn section dropped in the midst of the screams and cacophony and metallic clangs and madness.

"Well, I play sax, and I've brought in horn players on Steroid Maximus stuff. Sometimes, I use a combination of the two: Sampled horns and real horns. A lot of it is sorta mixed in there to get the large illusion-type of thing."

Back track a second or two: "The studio is my main instrument," he says. "Is this why there exists Foetus remixes of lyeberg Limey dance records?"

"Which one? The EMF thing? Well, they're managed by the same guy.
who's putting out my next five records, and he suggested me for their second UK single, 'I Believe.' And they were real happy with how those two mixes came out. So, when it came time for 'Lies' to be remixed, they came to me and insisted I do it. So, I did three twelve-inch mixes, and they liked them so much, they wanted me to do the seven-inch, as well. I ended up doing about five mixes for them. The rest is on the Billboard charts, I guess.

"I really like their songs. I think they're really good. That's one of the few things I actually do like. But I also had a chance to put a lot of my personality in there and make it my own and make it how it would be if I did something like that, which I'm not. So, it also gives me a chance to use ideas which don't necessarily fit into the context of what I am doing."

Ever wonder what a Foetus film
score would sound like? You have the chance to discover the sheer terror of it all on the Thirlwell-led instrumental project called Steroid Maximus. "There's two albums actually. One, Quilombo, was originally intended as two 12-inch EPs. I decided to put 'em together. It's like a 45-minute mini-album.

"The other Steroid Maximus album, Gondwanaland, which is the proper one, is almost a couple of hours worth of listening. It's a lot of different collaborations with people: Don Fleming, Raymond Watts, Lucy Hamilton, Mark Cunningham, [noted skateboard artiste] Pizz, Roli [Mosimann, Thirlwell's partner in Wiseblood], and some other people.

"It was a chance to work with those people whom I've wanted to collaborate with and a framework in which to work with them. And it was also a chance to get those instrumental jags outta my system. It was funny: Foetus albums were getting increasingly more 50/50 instrumental, and I decided for the next project, I wanted to split them up. So, I ended up working on the instrumentals first. The next Foetus album will probably be predominantly vocal."

So, what does it take for an artist to be worthy of a collaboration with J.G. Thirlwell?

"I don't have any formula about that, and I'm certainly not gonna work on music which I can't stand listening to. If I get offered a remix, I look at the music first before I look at the zeroes after the number. I'm not gonna sit in the studio for five days and not listen to music that I hate, and I'm not gonna have my name on something that I don't feel proud of. That's my main criteria. If it's working one-on-one with people, I have to be able to stand them."

Are there any artists you would like to work with in the future whom you haven't worked with?

"No one really springs to mind, actually. But there's such a long waiting line as it is that I can't even think of the people that I'd want to work with. There are people I want to work with whom I might be working with. That's certainly enough for right now. I mean, I'd like to work with less people, really. It's just too much. I don't have that much time.

"Lately, I've been spending an inordinate amount of time in the studio. The last eighteen months has been absolutely hilarious. And a lot of that has been working with other people. Consequently, a lot of my own projects have been sitting on the backburner. I'm hoping to trim down the amount of collaborations I do. I'll pretty much concentrate on remixing when I work with other people, and have more time to work on my own stuff. 'Cuz by the time the next Foetus studio record comes out, it will be four years since I've had a full Foetus studio record out. Also, all the projects like Steroid Maximus and the Lydia collaboration and Wiseblood and touring have sorta eaten big holes into the Foetus tapestry."

Thirlwell stubs out one of at least 55 cigarettes he's smoked in the last twenty minutes. "Look," he says concludingly, "they need me inside for soundcheck. Got anymore questions? Talk to me later."

Later never comes. Foetus seems more concerned with: A) high scores on a video game; B) liquor; and C) girls. He's also concerned with a number of items missing from his rider. Understandable: How do you work a coffermaker when parts of it are missing? How do you operate a fuzzbox when no batteries are provided? How do you avoid remaining sober when Jägermeister is not provided? Thankfully, Foetus Inc. also never plays the cover of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" rehearsed backstage. Let's hope it remains unrecorded.