GUYS

named Foetus are often misunderstood.
It could be the name, which is

guaranteed to scare away the

squeamish, or it could be the clamoring din that character-
izes some of Foetus’ music. For Jim Thirwell, the man

behind the Foetus persona, it’s frustrating that preconcep-
tions about his art make him out to be a hard-to-acquire
taste, or worse, a purveyor of unlistenable angry noise.

Checking Foetus’ back catalog reveals that he is both

and neither of those things. Since 1981, Thirwell has

released no fewer than 32 completely bizarre and challeng-
ing recordings under at least 20 pseudonyms — You’ve Got
Foetus on your Breath, Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel,

Foetus Interruptus, Foetus Art Terrorism, Clint Ruin,
Wisbeach, Steroid Maximus, et al. These multiple personal-

ities act as a cloaking device and make Foetus nearly
impossible to pin down. Each incarnation is different,

a reinvention of Thirwell’s image and sound. The most com-

mon tag for the area Thirwell inhabits is usually industrial.

But Thirwell begs to differ.

“I hate people using the ‘I word,” he grows. “I don’t

want to be ghettoized like that. People say that I’m the

‘gothfather of industrial music’ but I don’t know whether to

embrace that or reject it. It’s a lot more complicated.

He’s often mentioned as a precursor to the likes of
Nina Hertzel’s Trent Reznor or Ministry’s Al Jourgensen

(whose records he has produced),

but he does not pledge allegiance to their cause.

“My music is not industrial,” he insists. “I don’t have

any contemporaries. I’m in the Foetus universe. It’s Foetus

music.”

Thirwell has a point. Iconicotic to the bone, there’s

a little his music has in common with anything most

people have ever heard before. Heled by ferocious sonic

intensity, much of his material is guaranteed to clear rooms

quickly. His music is not industrial in the black-clad horror-flick

drum-machine sense; it’s more akin to the choking effluent of

a toxic dumpster, or to vanguardists like Throbbing

Gristle or SPK. But there’s another side to his music, too

—an aspect that he feels is overlooked.

“I think if people heard my music they’d really be into

it,” he says. “But no one’s heard it. I go from world music
to power pop to jackhammers to power chords to hip-hop

—all within one song. And that’s not out of perversion. But

I think my stuff is very accessible.”

Indeed, some of Thirwell’s projects have involved

excursions into big band music, complete with full-on

horn sections. He’s crossed paths several times with misan-

throprist/punk goddess/actress Lydia Lunch (he did the

soundtrack for her infamous porno/muff flick Fingered),

and he’s up with odd interpretations of others’ mate-

rial — “Don’t Fear the Reaper” and “Why Don’t We Do It

in the Road” graced a Clint Ruin/Lydia Lunch release. He

mentions influences like Glenn Branca and Karleheinz

Stockhausen, though he says he can’t hear any of their

music in his.

“I don’t see the parallels my music has with anything

else. I create in a vacuum. But when I’m not, I listen to

everything, every genre of music. I even listen to stuff

I don’t like, just to decide why I don’t like it.”

Perusing previous Foetical platters is not a task for

the timid, though Thirwell truly believes that his music is “not

just noise and angst. I don’t try to, but for fuck’s sake, I

write some not that catchy songs! Still, the media’s concep-
tions of me is still this awful monster persona. I hate that.”

If Foetus is a monster, it’s only because of the sew-

dogether collection of extremities and vital organs that he’s

made of. There’s an underlying black humor through most

of his work — if he’s a Frankenstein, it’s closer to Mel

Brooks’ than Mary Shelley’s. Even through the sturm und

drang and chaotic noise of his most abrasive moments,

there’s a filmic atmosphere to the

Foetal disposition

work, suggesting the overarching of a

stunning composer. Just when the

melancholy seems
to be nothing
more than a con-
taminated night-

mare filled with

horribly distorted

vocals and chain-
saw guitars, it can

change direction
on a dime, becoming
delightful and

athematic.

“My music is

so personal,”

Thirwell rhaps-

odizes. “It’s pure

passion. Every

record I’ve ever

made has been a

living diary.”

If that’s true, it may

explain some of the jour-

nal entries he’s compiled.

Nothing can really prepare one

for the blistering

tensity of his new album

and major-label debut Gash

(Columbia), unless they’ve been down the Foetus road

before. It’s been almost seven years since the last Foetus

release. “Now, where Thirwell interspersed some of the

most dangerous armed warfare ever committed to tape

with moments of quiet clarity, Gash compiles similar

adventures between both ends of the sonic spectrum.

And like his other records, its liner notes inform that Gash was

“composed, performed, arranged and recorded” entirely by

himself. Being on a major label, he says, will not alter his

personal vision or the complete control he has over the

music.

“All my other records were put out under my own com-

pany (Self-immolation),” he says. That’s why I’m on this

label, because I never had adequate distribution before. But

it doesn’t mean I’ve made any concessions to anyone.

I still oversee the whole thing.”

Thirwell even designed the record’s artwork, a skewed

nighttime Central Park scene with the Foetus logo project-

ed on the enormous Sony jumbotron. The same image

crops up (briefly) in the new Foetus video, the adrenaline-

fueled "Verklemt," which sounds like Mötorhead listen-

ing to Wagner on Skinny Puppy’s tour bus.

“The whole record is soaked in New York,” explains

Thirwell. “Both the record and the video are just soaked

in New York imagery.” He describes the clip as “an

epileptic fit waiting to happen. There’s something like

2,500 edits in under four

minutes. It reflects my inten-

sity.”

Of course, Gash isn’t all a relentless barrage. “Slung” is

11 minutes of pure swing with a slightly sinister twist —

like a Foetized hijacking of the Glen Miller Orchestra.

Other songs may start out

with an innocuous violin or

soft-spoken piano, but they’re

usually just the yellow

warning lights of an

impending core breach. The

scathingly militaristic

onslaught of “Downfall,”

with a horrific, shrieking

voice, is about the dissolu-

tion of a relationship

Thirwell was in that ended

up with a restraining order

being placed on him.

“When I had finished

the vocals, I listened to them

and thought, ‘Man! I don’t ever

want to meet that guy!’” he

recalls.

The Foetus machine is

gearing up now for a series

of live shows to promote

Gash — Thirwell’s first road

trip in three years. If he’s not

as excited as he should be, maybe it’s

because he can be excited on himself. He rou-

tinely lists the members of his backing band, mostly

alumni of New York’s art-core scene, including

drummer Jim Kimball, formerly of Mule, and

guitarist/violinist Halin Rowe from

Hugo Largo.

“And then there’s this total fuckin’ loser

always at the front of the stage,” he mutters. “The weakest

link in the chain. The singer. His name escapes me right

now.”

If one of Thirwell’s personalities suffers from low self-

esteem, some others don’t.

“My shows are ... the most irresistible music that

sucks you in and absorbs you, with someone up there

giving you his all and having a nervous breakdown on

stage,” he says, adding, “but in a feel-good way.”

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