



Foetus' "Flustered Bliss" tour hits the Mercury Cafe, 2199 California St. in Denver on Wednesday, July 26. The show starts at 9 p.m. and tickets are \$8. Call 830-TDCS or 294-9281 for tickets.

By Jeff Stratton

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 characterizes some of Foetus' music. For Jim Thirwell, the man behind the Foetus persona, it's frustrating that preconceptions 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 challenging 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, Wiseblood, Steroid Maximus, et al. These multiple personalities act as a cloaking device and make Foetus nearly

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 Foetus 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 really catchy songs! Still, the media's conception of me is still this awful monster persona. I hate that."

If Foetus is a monster, it's only because of the sewn-together collection of extremities and vital organs that he's made of. There's an underlying black humor through most of his work — if he is 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

personal vision or the complete control he has over the music.

"All my other records were put out under my own company (Self-Immolation)," he says. "That's why I'm on this label, because I never had adequate distribution before. But it does not 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 projected on the enormous Sony Jumbotron. The same image crops up (briefly) in the new Foetus video, the adrenaline-fueled "Verklemt," which sounds like Mötörhead listening 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 intensity."

Of course, *Gash* isn't all a relentless barrage. "Slung" is 11 minutes of pure swing with a slightly sinister twist — like a Foetusized 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 dissolution 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 hard on himself. He routinely 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 Hahn 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."

Foetal disposition

impossible to pin down. Each incarnation is different, a reinvention of Thirwell's image and sound. The most common tag for the area Thirwell inhabits is usually industrial. But Thirwell begs to differ.

"I hate people using the 'I' word," he growls. "I don't want to be ghettoized like that. People say that I'm the 'godfather of industrial music.' I don't know whether to embrace that or reject it." He's often mentioned as a predecessor to the likes of Nine Inch Nails' 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. Iconoclastic to the bone, there's little his music has in common with anything most people have ever heard before. Heralded 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 dumpsite, 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 perversity. 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 misanthropic/punk goddess/actress Lydia Lunch (he did the soundtrack for her infamous porno/snuff flick *Fingered*), and he's come up with odd interpretations of others' material — "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 Karlheinz Stockhausen, though he says he can't hear any of their music in his.

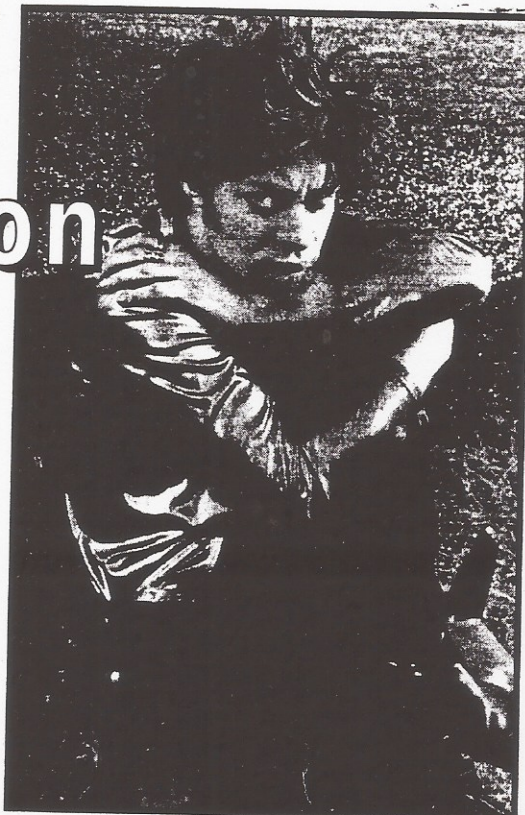
"I don't see the parallels my music has with anything

work, suggesting the overseeing of a studious composer. Just when the maelstrom seems to be nothing more than a contaminated nightmare filled with horribly distorted vocals and chain-saw guitars, it can change direction on a dime, becoming delicate and thoughtful.

"My music is so personal," Thirwell rhapsodizes. "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 journal entries he's compiled. Nothing can really prepare one for the blistering intensity 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, *Thaw*, where Thirwell interspersed some of the most dangerous armed audio 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



Although he insists his work is accessible, Jim Thirwell, a.k.a. Foetus, makes music that'll drive lesser mortals to seek extensive psychotherapy. Foetus' challenging smelterful of big band industrial jackhammer jazzcore will boil over at Denver's Mercury Cafe next week.