

FOETUS

SCRAPING FOETUS OFF YOUR TURNTABLE

By Scott Mehno

JIM FOETUS HAS BEEN SHARING his anguish with the world for over five years. With songs like "Lust for Death" and EP's like *Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel*, you'd think he had his lips firmly planted to 1979. Now, six years later, when tastelessness has again become bankable, Foetus is still doing his best to remain controversial. The press kit that Ze records sent out pushing Foetus's latest release, *Hole*, includes a poster of Jim Thierwell (his real name) nailed to a cross. The inscription at his feet reads, "If you have to get down, get down and pray." Susan Martin, his publicist, attached a note to the poster informing me that Clint Ruin (that's what he calls himself now) would be the next Elvis.

If it all sounds confusing, then it's working. Part of the attraction of Ruin's music (everything he releases falls under the Foetus banner) is chaos. The most intriguing aspect of his sound, a mesh of phrases both vaguely familiar and unbearable, is that it all ends up sounding new, and that is very hard to accomplish in 1985. It is difficult to describe the Foetus repertoire without using Ruin's own catchphrases. Images of death, pain and self-destruction (his first label was called *Self Immolation*) keep creeping up among more familiar lines pulled from other pop recordings.

Ruin lives in England, where most of his releases usually hover around the top of the independent charts. His success in England has helped add to his mystique here. Originally from Australia, he has

been praised by the British press, but not pinned down, which is a credit to his taste in the constantly fluctuating aesthetic of the bizarre. His music is disco, then hardcore, then Tom Waits, then Third Reich circa 1945. Ruin has helped the press get a clearer picture of his intent by coining a handy phrase to describe his musical process. He calls it aesthetic terrorism.

I recently interviewed him in a cramped press office on 42nd Street. He arrived pale, slightly twitchy, but with an extremely agreeable disposition. It was refreshing to find that the man who scrapes foetus off the wheel for a living is so polite when talking about his obsessions. "I'm making a terrorist attack on music," Ruin says. "I'm re-working the element of surprise so that it may be a pounding rock song or all of a sudden a Bill Haley riff."

He says the same aesthetic carries over to other aspects of his career. "It's the same type of thing with the crucifixion photograph; juxtaposing the crucifixion with the slogan was a bit much for some people to take." His refusal to let go of the Foetus banner, which he uses as the alter-ego for all his releases, is one of the reasons for a more negative reaction to his music here in the States. Ruin has spent plenty of time in New York, however; he wrote and performed in the East Village for most of '83. But, he says, "I've gotten a much better reaction in England. There's a bit of breaking down there due to the fact I've done radio and TV interviews and have gotten favorable press

reaction."

Ruin moved from Australia to England when he was eighteen. He is hesitant to talk about his origins, preferring, he says, to create a mythology about that part of his life. "I don't remember much about growing up there at all," he says. "I sat in my room and listened to the Ramones." He plays down any musical influences, but is quick to point out those records he still holds in high esteem. "Most of the stuff I listen to is ten years old: The Alex Harvey band, Roxy Music, Tom Waits. I like Alice Cooper a lot."

The mention of Cooper makes more sense after seeing Ruin live. With nothing on stage but a standup mike and Leveler blinds, he mesmerized a packed house at a recent Danceteria gig. Dressed in Harley-Davidson T-shirt and black trousers, his sense of absurdity was more subtle on stage than on vinyl. With mock reverence, he waved around a bottle of Perrier as he sang about Heaven, Hell, and all the agony in between. Ruin used no musicians, utilizing a slew of backup tapes that mixed near heavy metal, crucifixion dirges and cowboy songs. His Davy Crockett haircut and biker/Pope stance seemed to hypnotize his more cultist fans, and genuinely amuse those who knew nothing about the Foetus or the Wheel. I actually heard girls screaming between a couple of numbers. I asked Clint if he were ready for popularity in this country now.

"I don't care if people like my music or hate it," he says. "I'm not influenced by public opinion or anything else." Ruin has associated with artists who share a similar outlook on music. He has worked with Nick Cave of the Birthday Party, Matt Johnson of The The, Stevo, mastermind of Some Bizzare records—and Lydia Lunch, his now-constant companion.

We start to talk about his relationship with Lydia, when she walks into the room, bearing gifts for Clint in the form of a Gyro and a Mountain Dew. He smiles and takes the food. She tells him he has twenty minutes until another appointment and exits as quickly as she entered. Slightly embarrassed by the little domestic scene, Clint cracks open the soda and talks about his relationship with Stevo instead.

"When I first met Stevo I thought he was a ratty sort of guy, but now we get along very well. By the time I started getting together with him I was emotionally bankrupt. I had released six records, all self-financed. He came along and made me an offer I couldn't refuse. After a lot of deliberation and pacing I said yes."

Stevo, known for his brilliant publicity campaigns and scathing contempt for the current Brit-pop trends, has given Ruin a free hand in the making of his music. "It's pretty straightforward. A lot of people have been pretty receptive. Some can't get past the name. I'm creating music within the industry but without the usual mechanics the industry uses to get the message across."

What is his message? Is subverting pop the sole premise of his work? Not according to Ruin. In one of his most powerful songs, a cut from "Hole" titled "Meet You in Poland, Baby," the Foetus philosophy is best brought to light. The song is designed as a conversation between Hitler and Stalin, who are cast as lovers. Newsreel tapes flood the background as sound effects of war float in and out of the dialogue. The piece, ends of course, with the usual human catastrophe.

"I've always been fascinated by history," Ruin says. "The song uses the Nazi invasion as a love story allegory. I mean that was virtually the breaking point of our times, the Second World War. It was an incredible event. I have great respect for Hitler in terms of the fact that he motivated so many people and had such a powerful personality. I don't condone what he did, I think it was absolutely appalling, but it is an incredible thing to have happened in our century."

It should also be pointed out that the irresponsibility of such a statement is consistent with another Foetus theory (he has more theories than records albums). One

of the first *Self Immolation* primers (the first label that Foetus started) declared "It's okay to be irresponsible, as long as you know you're being irresponsible." As Clint calmly bites into the remaining half of his Gyro, I get the feeling that he knows. "Reagan, Hitler, and Manson all use the same control tactics," he says. "I have a very begrudging respect for Reagan in that sense." By using exaggerated themes, Ruin feels he can best purge himself of the agony and desperation that plague everyone.

Coming from a man who hung himself on a cross for a publicity photo, it all begins to make sense; Ruin is a thinking man's nihilist with a Christ complex. No wonder the Brits love him. There is more far to chew on in one Foetus utterance than all the words of Wham! or Frankie ever thought of writing. But what of their worth? Ruin's spouting often comes out sounding like a man who has read only the Cliff notes on existentialism. What I liked about Alice Cooper is that he golfed with George Burns; somehow I can't see Ruin swinging a nine iron.

I ask him if all this misery might not become a bit stifling. Will Foetus end up like a lot of other "purgers," preaching to the converted? "I don't think that's what I'm doing. I'm not preaching for conversion, I'm preaching for myself," he says. "I use my music as a cathartic experience for myself. It just so happens that there are a lot of people who like to hear it." But what of all this talk of death and dying? "The idea of death doesn't make me happy; I'm not obsessed with death. I use hell and death as analogies." And Ozzy Osbourne bites the heads off bats. Maybe that's all Foetus is saying—Death and Hell are his schtick.

Almost on cue, Lydia pokes her head in to tell us the time is up. Ruin smiles. As he does with his music, he searches for a phrase that might augment the seriousness of his comments. "What's that old corny line?" he asks. "When I die I'll go to Heaven 'cause I spent my time in Hell." Satisfied with that, he takes a final gulp of Mountain Dew, apparently unconcerned with any hanging questions.

Judging from those old newsreels, he's right in step with the public on that one.

Jim Thierwell/Jim Foetus/Frank Want/Clint Ruin

