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Do you want to write for *Ink 19*?

J.G. Thirlwell

"A ruthless will to survive"

by drew West

I have a secret list that I don't like to share with others. It's kind of like a diary, but it's not one that I can write down. Well, in reality, I can write it down. Fortunately for me, I typically burn it shortly after studying it. It's a list of people that in some way make my life tolerable. I don't live a horrible life; rather, I just don't want those



Johanna St. Michaels

people to directly know exactly how much they could get away with if they asked. Some of the names on that list I've never met. If you pry open my skull, I bet you'll find that at some point someone began branding all the names across the assorted "parts." I think that's what causes the itching that I

just can't "scratch." I really wish it would stop, but at least I know when I wake up exactly why I'm getting out of bed. It's to find a way to stop the itching, one spot at a time.

Ever since I was in high school, I've had that one person in my life that would swear to the grave that God was among us. I'd pry them for details. I'd ask for a name, but the answer didn't make sense until years later.

"I'm not telling them to stop doing it."

That was Jim's response when I asked him how he felt on the response. You would never catch me ever stating that Jim is surrounded by a lot of hype, but frankly, on some level, I was rather terrified initially to call and interview him. The stories I've heard have ranged from being the hardest interview someone had attempted to being simply just a quiet and reserved guy that took a little bit to warm up. I promised myself that I would do everything in my power to make my "phoner" as positive an experience as I could for Jim.

"I think I'm pretty shy. It's weird to dissect your own music. In interviews, you tend to have to say the same thing over and over again. You tend to come up with standard responses. I don't particularly enjoy doing them. Some people just seem to be better at them than others."

And thus, the interview began? Felt more like a conversation to me, though.

I never admitted to Jim one small detail: I don't think I can really respect someone's musical tastes, let alone listen to their recommendations, if they don't like "Thirlwell." It's in quotes because Jim releases such a diverse range of music under an ever-changing list of monikers that "we've" just come to refer to it as "Thirlwell."

"I'm not interested in doing the same style. I pour all my ideas into a track for whatever style I'm working on. I tend to cram a lot of ideas into a track."

I think it was Jim's diversity that made it so hard for me to be "bitten" for so long. At some point, it had to happen, as more and more the people I kept finding myself surrounded by seemed to issue forth the same answer to my ongoing quest to find God among us. I know it's sad, but it took me over a year to really digest *Gash* to the point of always enjoying it. I don't know how it happened, either. I got up one day, started my coffee, and put *Gash* in the CD player. I smelled something burning, and my head began to have a faint feeling of itching in a place I'm not allowed to scratch. Every time I pick up a release from Jim, the itch gets a little worse. The music is an infection, but a holy infection meant to rid you of your intolerable (and inexcusable) musical tastes. Jim doesn't fit a mold. He breaks molds. Under the name Foetus (and all its derivations) alone, Jim has covered everything from soundtrack scores to "kick-your-teeth-in" rock. It isn't music for the faint of heart. It certainly won't be for your grandmother. Most importantly, half your record collection will instantly turn to crap. The biggest disservice I could do is attempt to label Jim "Foetus" Thirlwell's music. He'd simply "break the mold" without ever trying. "Why am I so paralyzed?"

"*Gash* was the encapsulation of where Foetus went. The ultimate in the concept of the conclusion before the big drop. I feel satiated from *Gash*. *Flow*, rather, suggests part of a continuum instead of a finale."

I asked Jim what his favorite released album to date has been, or which album he felt best showcased his skills. I'm still unsure if I actually got a direct answer, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't a fair question in the beginning. It's like asking Picasso which painting was his favorite, or a parent which child is theirs. I'm sorry Jim. I shouldn't have put you on the spot so brutally. I just wanted to be reassured that I wasn't the only one that couldn't answer that question easily, if at all, if asked.

Recorded material is only one side of music. In the studio, what was previously thought to be impossible, becomes a reality if the right equipment is at your disposal. It's the art of translating those studio ideas into something that packs a proverbial punch to the gut on stage that really makes me respect a musician. Jim recently took Foetus out on a short stint of dates. If you've ever taken a look at the ever-revolving line-up that is Foetus live, you can start to see a trend. I made the mistake of suggesting a rather incestuous New York music scene to Jim. Now don't get me wrong, this "revolving tour line-up" is filled with some of the most talented musicians I've come to discover. Jim knows better, and he does live in New York City: "I have a pool of musicians from which I draw and I get different experiences with different people. I get along with them. I've never been anchored to a band, as I work alone. Sometimes it feels like it's all over the place and then it starts



Wibke Reimann

I'd love to be a fly on the wall during one of Jim's recording sessions, but given the nature of the music, I'd imagine it's probably most like watching a great composer creating a masterpiece. So since I don't think I'm likely to be a fly, the best alternative was to ask Jim how it happens.

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I'm in the process of transitioning from ADAT to hard disk recording. It flip-flops as I use whatever facilitates what I'm doing.

Surely there is an "easiest" method, right?

"Easiest" isn't in my vocabulary. I tend to make things more difficult for myself.

What about those vocals? And key signature?

"I really like to mess with keys, micro-tuning, and putting things in the wrong key. I might know the fifth line has to be such and such, then down the line I might find out that

it's about "this," so I'll go back and tweak. There is no one method of working. Sometimes it's all in my head. Other times it starts just by messing with sound, and I just let the song go.

Do you think about the live "version" when recording in the studio?

I don't take into account the live aspect until later.

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Foetus live is like listening to completely new material, and from talking with Jim, I can understand why now. Songs that you know, love, and can instantly recite every line upon questioning, become so new you don't even recognize them until Jim starts preaching through the microphone. So how do you do it, Jim?

"I do know what I want. But what seems natural to me might not be quite as natural for the other musicians."

Foetus "utilizes" all the tools of the trade, and by this I'm specifically referencing the use of samples. I've had many a heated debate with individuals that seem to think these tools negate the "musical abilities" of a musician. I have a finger I like to use to help point them in the "right" direction. So I asked Jim about it.

"We have samples that are triggered by the drummer. Because we are reliant on equipment, you have to have A and B plans. If you lost a member, you wouldn't do a show. If you loose a sampler, it's the same thing."

That's the difference in being professional, and just doing it half-assed. I can't remember ever, to date, being disappointed in something that has "The Thirlwell Thumbprint." It's like the Midas Touch for me. There have been times that someone has

hit play on a CD and instantly I jump up, and grab the case searching for one of the known monikers Jim has used. I'm not always right in my assumptions, but I run a fairly high success rate. Jim is one of the few people that seems to have a "distinct" sound, regardless of the musical style he is doing/using. That is why I admire him and his skills so damn much. There aren't many people that have attempted to mimic him. If they do, chances are they just can't do it right and their failure is as evident as a gun wound.

I wondered if Jim felt he has any failures or regrets from his past. Most of us seem to carry with us a level of regret, but they typically hinder us in some way until we deal with the "demons" causing the regret.

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"I don't think it's good to have regrets. It makes you who you are. Million[s] of times I've regretted something but... Certain times I've felt I made huge miscalculations in judgment in where Foetus could go, but [regret] is a waste of time.

So what makes you get up in the morning?

Whether I like it or not, I have a ruthless drive to survive that's stronger than my will to die. If I have to be on this earth, then I want to use every second, because I've wasted so much time.

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Flow, the forthcoming album from Foetus, should be out sometime this spring. "When I get a European distributor" was the exact response I got when I asked Jim back in November. However, I recently contacted him to find out if more concrete

dates had been set. "*Flow* will be released in April 2001 by Thirsty Ear (USA) and Vielklang (Europe)," said Jim. He plans to follow the release with live dates in both places, so keep your Web browser pointed at <http://www.foetus.org> for all the latest details and dealings. If you've never been there, go now, as by the time the album is release you might have been able to absorb everything on the Web site. That, and since I initially interviewed Jim, he's even managed to record a new album, *volvox turbo*, which he plans to release exclusively on the Web site under the name Manorexia. I think Jim can explain this one best:

"Its an album that's been swimming around in my head for some time, but it seemed to blurt and pour out between Thanksgiving and New Year's in reaction to my disgust with 'The Biz.' Originally conceived as an ambient album, it's a 64-minute suite of movements that crossfade over each other. It is both contemplative and psychotic/sociopathic; often quite sparse and repetitive. It leads the ear and brain into turning the sounds around. Well suited for deep listening, like drugs without the chemicals and exactly where I was at when I recorded it (i.e. it's terrifying). It was done quite quickly and intuitively, for a change, and is something I needed to get out of my system."

If that wasn't enough Thirlwell this year, perhaps I should also mention that following in the fall will be *Blow*, an album of remixes from *Flow* by the likes of Franz Treichler (The Young Gods), Amon Tobin, DJ Food, Kid 606, Phylr, Pan Sonic and others. Then, next year, the next Steroid Maximus album, *Ectopia*, will be released. Hard to imagine Jim can sit still long enough to be photographed, or even seen with the naked eye. Well, you can see him out and about as DJ Otefsu.

Feels like just too much Thirlwell to keep up with, doesn't it? Well shame on you! There is NEVER enough Thirlwell! Make sure to sign up for the mailing list. It'll keep you more than informed.

I decided before I got off the phone with Jim I needed to find out if there was any question that he'd always wanted to be asked, but never had. "Not unless it's from a beautiful girl," said Jim. Words to live by from a man that knows that regret is best left to the weak willed. So Jim, I hope you didn't mind my boring questions. Thanks for letting me attempt to scratch another of my "unreachable" itches. Take care, and if you ever start to lose that "will to survive," give me a ring. I'll give you a list of individuals that will be more than happy to tell you that you are a God to them. I know I'd say it, and frequently, if it helps to keep you providing the world with such brilliant music. ■