



FOETUS

B-B-Q

By: Dom Salemi

It's close to midnight, the witching hour, and Jim Thirlwell aka Foetus is pacing the sweltering confines of his basement dressing room like a caged animal. Dressed in a powder blue tux and ruffled shirt open at the collar, he's barely broken a sweat. Even though it's about one hundred and twenty degrees in the cramped airless den and Jim hasn't stopped moving since I arrived some seventy-five minutes earlier.

Thirlwell wasn't pacing then. But he never stopped moving. Even when he was sitting down. The man, I was to learn over the course of the next forty-eight hours, never stops. Never shuts down.

What surprised me, however, was how charming and considerate this enfant terrible of the rock underground was.

I'd heard all the stories. Thirlwell was mad. A raging alcoholic. A manic-depressive who brooked no argument and had little use for critics. A mean-spirited genius who would as soon kick your teeth in as look twice at you.

Hell, there were times when he became so angry he would even beat up himself.

So imagine my surprise when Mr.

Thirlwell greeted me like a long lost brother and asked me what I was drinking. "Do you want some Stolli's?" he inquired holding aloft a half empty bottle. "Mark," he motioned to his tour manager, "this is Dom, who publishes *Brutarian*. It's one of the best magazines out there. And one of my favorites." Mark came over. Then Jim left to salute another friend. Two minutes later he came back over. "Did you see Halcion? Weren't they great? Did you get your drink?" Then off again. Semaphoring the bottle of vodka as a means of capturing another entrants attention. Then back, "I know this is madness right now. But we'll talk, really talk, later. Have you met Olga? She's, well, talk to her." And so it went.

Until it got dangerously close to showtime. Then Jim put his game face on and everybody started to clear the room. Leaving Thirlwell alone to walk. Back and forth. Back and forth. Occasionally punching the air. He was working himself up to something. And it wasn't good. Maybe that was the point. *Friend or foe. You think you know me. But you don't want to. Ever feel. The way I do.* No I had little doubt that I did..

The bottle of vodka now empty; Jim began to gracefully weave toward the door. "Dom, have you ever seen me live?" I had to confess I hadn't. "Well," Jim grimaced slapping me heavily on the back, "then welcome to hell motherfucker!" With that, he slowly and awkwardly mounted the few stairs to the fog shrouded stage.

And proceeded to perform as if the Abyss was slowly opening beneath him. One thing that had always drawn me to Thirlwell's music was it's strong undercurrent of humor. There was, however, nothing funny about what was going on onstage. Shamed, naked, miserable. Of honor void. Innocence, faith and purity, the wonted ornaments now soiled and stained. In damned solitude savage and obscured. *That deceit that I feel. Makes Me cross myself and kneel. I don't pray to the lord. Just self flagellate some more.* This guy did this every night in total seriousness? My God, my God, look not so fierce on him. Ugly Hell gape not. I must away and soul be quickly changed to the little water drops plying about my bourbon and soda.

The show was controlled pandemo-



nium and passed quickly like a feverish dream. The crowd in a dionysian frenzy is stomping and screaming for more more more. Thirlwell has given them a fifteen minute encore and he's clearly spent. The suburban black garbed twenty-somethings crowding the tiny stage could care less. They smell blood. They sniff breakdown. And they want to see it. Jim ain't gonna give it to them. "They got it last night in Philly," he later confides to me as we're walking back to the bus.

"I was in the middle of 'They Are Not So True' and the tears just started to fall." The jangling of chains is ringing in my ears. Their ignorance ain't gonna wash away my fears. "And it just wouldn't stop. I had to turn my back on the crowd and put my hands to my face. Then I turned around to start again and I started to convulse. Big racking sobs. A combination of tension, fear, horror and anger. It was unbearable." But if that presence coming. Makes you feel too tense. Don't let the anger boil. Keep keepin' up your fence. "I finished the show. Somehow it's all a kind of distant memory."

We're in the bus now and it must be about forty degrees. Jim likes it cold. Very cold. The band and all involved are already on board and are either heavily dressed or wrapped in blankets. Tour manager Mark always on the alert for my discomfort, winks and hands me a Heineken, "Drink up my friend. You'll warm up soon enough. Jim will see to it if this doesn't."

Thirlwell sprawls in a bench seat to the left of me. Another bottle of Stoli has miraculously appeared in his hand and he's moving it slowly to the slightly allegroish big band noir someone has popped into the stereo system. The band is in a good mood and everyone is talking at once. Jim grins slyly and turns on my mini-recorder. "Hey, we're going to make you work for your interview. All of us. And all of us have something to say."

"Great," I interject amidst the laughter, "because I'm gonna make it all up anyway."

More laughs. Wine is poured and bottles are opened. The music is turned

up. Four or five conversations are going on at once and I'm trying to soak it all up. Jim has a knife out and he's aimlessly cutting up limes for the beer. But he's not stopping. As I've already mentioned, Jim never stops. The green fruit is cut in half. Halves become quarters. Quarters become what might charitably be described as eighths. And suddenly there's Thirlwell desultory slashing at this mess of rind and pulp.

"What I have trouble with is having my music called industrial. What did the press releases have me called? The godfather of industrial? Ridiculous. I make 'Foetus' music. And I don't even listen to what most people would call industrial. It's a paint by numbers genre now with so many bands following each other's lead. The irony is it all comes out sounding the same."

Someone puts on some industrial thrash. Thirlwell perks up. "I started that whole industrial remix scene. The idea of adding abrasive elements and what have you to a track. The stuff that's being done in that style I take as a parody of what I do. That's okay. To each his own. What I have trouble with is having my music called industrial. What did the press releases have me called? The godfather of industrial? Ridiculous. I make 'Foetus' music. And I don't even listen to what most people would call industrial. It's a paint by numbers genre now with so many bands following each other's lead. The irony is it all comes out sounding the same."

Trying to make myself heard over the

din I lean in. But surely he would have to admit he's profoundly influenced combos like Nine Inch Nails and Ministry?

Jim waves his hand dismissively, "That's the critics talking. The same ones who would have me be a godfather. It's easier for so many of them to pigeon-hole things so they can write more quickly. Laziness. The most extreme example I can remember had a guy from *Your Flesh* reviewing a record of mine a

few years ago. This is exactly what he said: 'The last time I saw Jim Thirlwell he was coming out of the bathroom at a club where he was playing and he had a piece of toilet paper stuck to the bottom of one of his shoes.' Irresponsible just like saying I "founded" industrial. What about Neubauten, Throbbing Gristle and SPK? Now if you talk to Trent or Al [NIN & Ministry] I'm sure they would admit to listening to me.

"But 'profoundly influenced'? I would never make that claim."

The bottle of vodka done, Jim moves on to wine. Or is that beer? The critical faculties may be damaged beyond repair after all this imbibing. It's very late now and the members of the band begin to drift to the back of the bus. To sleep. Perchance to dream. Thirlwell shows no signs of flagging. Although he is slightly reclining. "Also I'm always asked what my formula is

for writing songs. But of course there's no formula. Musical inspiration, you can't put a finger on it. I sit down and it comes. There's so much floating around in my head. Sometimes it starts with a rhythm. Or me just banging on the table. Would it surprise you to find that I listen to classical music? Probably not. But that's the reason for the diversity in my compositions. That and the fact that I'm not tied to a band. I also don't try to repeat myself. I focus on, let's say a big band thing like "Slung" and that done, I'm free for the next inspiration."

The wine drained to the dregs, Jim opens a beer for me and takes one himself. "But when I sit down to write, to compose, I'm alone. I'm not listening to



anything. I don't need the immediate influence. I've got a lifetime of influence both musical and otherwise that comes pouring out."

And the comic strain?

"There's farce and humor mixed in with the anger but it's black humor. I don't view what I do as ha-ha funny. It's an undercurrent but basically I find it all incredibly depressing. There's so much hatred, a lot of it self-directed. And a lot of what I do is designed as catharsis. A purge." *My dreams overflow. With heights and malt liquor. Elastic forms of escape.*

I'm almost incoherent now but I try to lighten things up a bit volunteering that most people I know still think the humor is what makes it all so palatable. This is greeted with dead silence. The one remaining member of the band shakes his head at me and moves quickly to the rear of the bus, pulling the curtain after him. *Well you can leave a message. But I ain't gonna hear it. Well I can see right thru you.*

Fuck it. In for a penny in for a pound, I think as I watch Jim's eyes narrow and he tightens his grip on the bottle. And so I ask him if he's worried if people are going to think his signing to Columbia, home of Michael Jackson, is a sell-out. Surprisingly this calms him down. Or maybe he was already calm. Hard to tell with a man this intense.

"A label's a label. I've always thought my music was accessible now more people will be getting a chance to hear it thanks to the greater distribution channels and the more people pushing it. Also I've got great artistic freedom. There's going to be a Foetus CD-Rom out at the end of the year. Vol 2 of Mesomorph Enduros is going to be released with tracks by Boss Hog & Pavement among others. A soundtrack to Ballard's Atrocity Exhibition is coming out. There are numerous remixes and a whole disc of big band live material. I've got support and higher visibility now. An artist wants to get his art seen or in this case heard. And it looks like in my case, it will. So sell out? How can that be?"

Even though we're parked in a blasted section of town with nary a tree in sight, I hear birds chirping. Could it be morning? In any case, I take whatever this odd sound is as my cue to go. Jim jumps up. "Hey, where are you going. I want you to

hear something."

He pops in a tape and turns a knob way up. Stun volume. The whole bus starts to vibrate. Thirlwell sprawls blissfully, "It's the remixes from the last NIN album," he says. At least that's what I think I hear. It's hard to hear yourself think amidst the din. Robbie the engineer comes from the back and nudges me, "Not bad, eh?" "No," I scream over the marvelous pandemonium, "it's terrific. But shouldn't we be keeping it down for the guys who are trying to sleep?" Robbie just shrugs and settles into a seat opposite Jim. Thirlwell smiles, nods his head and both of them start to surreptitiously move the upper half of their bodies in time to the music.

An hour later, my ears ringing but my brain cleared of alcohol, the tape runs out. Jim looks over, "Anything funny about that, Dom?" He gives a sly grin. Robbie laughs. The birds are singing to me. Telling me it's time to go. The shades have been pulled down in the bus so it's still night inside. But I know better. I stagger to the front of the bus and pull open the door. And am greeted with a miasmatic blast of humid air and blinding sunlight. I fall to the pavement screaming, my hands in front of my eyes. "I can't see. My God. I can't see." It's the Jim Backus routine from *It's A Mad Mad Mad World*. I look back to see if I've gotten a laugh. The bus door is closed and it's just me and the birds.

Amazingly, even though I've parked my car overnight in one of the worst sections of town, it's still where I left it, unscathed. A bum comes up to me. "Yah, yah, yah, I knows you surprise but when Willie watches it all night no harm be comin' to it." The derelict looks familiar. "Hey, didn't you have a funeral to go to this morning?" The wino gives a sheepish grin and holds up both his hands like King Tut, palms upward. I laugh and give him a few dollars anyway.

I get in the car and start it up. The dashboard clock tells me it's eight o'clock. God I haven't pulled an all nighter like this since my sophomore year at Notre Dame. Fug it. I can spend the day floating in the pool working on my tan and catching up on my sleep. Something is nagging at me though. What is it that I'm forgetting. Think

Dom. It's pretty damn important . . . Then it hits me. Thirlwell and his entourage plan to hit Casa Brutarian for a barbecue. Start time noon. And the larder is empty. The bar seriously depleted. Lordy, lordy what is I gonna do.

Spend what little time I have left running all over the place obviously. Thank God, it's just going to be Jim and the band. I can handle that. A few people. A small, intimate gathering. Maybe I'll actually have time to sit down and talk to Thirlwell alone. Get the interview I originally came for. No problem . . .

The tour bus pulls up shortly after three and I'm still running around. Let's see I've got the sausages and hamburger patties, the bread, baked beans, corn. Three cases of beer should do it for this crowd. A bottle of Stolits for Jim. Jim Beam for me and Mark. What else?

Nothing else. But who are all these people getting off the bus? And these cars pulling up what's the story with this? Did I chat up all these women in a desperate attempt to get laid after the show? Must have. God I've got to stop drinking in public.

There's about thirty people milling about including several loathsome looking women. One rude misshapen thing dressed in a sparkly black and gold ensemble and sporting a surreal beehive has spotted Jim and has buttonholed him before he can get to me. She's waving a copy of Brutarian in front of his nose and pontificating, "This, this is bathroom scribbles. You really must talk to me. I'm from Scene magazine, Washington's only real entertainment guide. That's the only reason I came here. Certainly not to be part of the infantile Brutarian crowd."

Jim fixes her with a malevolent stare, "What a beautiful thing it must be to be free of the ravages of intelligence. Almost everyone here is a friend of mine." Then he walks away.

I wave a hello as I start up the grill. All these people. So little time. I'll never get any kind of interview.

Another car pulls up. It's Halcion. The opening act on the tour. The lead singer is an impossibly beautiful blonde. Her name is Dorit. She's Austrian. She's also Jim's girlfriend. That means hands off. As if she'd deign to let me touch her.

Couples are jumping into the pool.



Total strangers are streaming in and out of the house. The misshapen thing gets between Jim and Dorit and tries to interview the latter. Jim shakes his head in disgust and walks inside to change. A woman built like a linebacker comes over to the grill. "This is sheer chaos," she says in an affected English accent, "who's the idiot throwing this disaster masquerading as a barbecue." I resist the urge to roundkick her in the stomach and instead silently hand her a beer from the cooler next to the grill.

A few members of Thirlwell's band take pity on me and assume the cooking chores. This leaves me free for damage control. Jim comes out of the house dressed all in white. Tuxedo coat, white ruffled shirt and white jeans. He's found the vodka. A number of my redneck neighbors, curiosity aroused, have ambled over. Jim greets them as if he's lived here all his life asking them if any of them want some Stolis. "Hell no, son," a squat unshaven humunculus garbles through his Red Man, "We jes came for the beer and the women." He cracks his broken mouth into a revolting grin, sees me, waves and with a cherry, "Hey, neighbor" leads a group of large, poorly dressed endomorphs over to the pool. I turn back to the grill. I can't look. I just wait for the screams of terror. Thirlwell hits me on the back on his way past to the terrace overlooking the cement pond. There are band members and several fans anxious to talk to him.

Throughout the afternoon and into the early evening Thirlwell holds court. I don't think I've ever seen any one so feverishly alive as this pale maudit with his darting eyes, unkempt carrot-colored hair, his bitter and subtle mouth, and, above all, his expressive hands, never at rest. And his voice, with its strange accent, part Australian, part Loisada, part tuned to the key of his wit, was not less personal or significant. There was hardly a mannerism which he did not adopt, always at least half in caricature of itself. He had a whole language of pauses, in the middle of an anecdote or sentence, he would stop, a dramatic interregnum emphasizing the ridiculousness of his being the center of attention. It was almost as if he had deliberately adopted a means of filling up gaps where there were no

gaps, for effect, purely to prepare what was coming. A harsh croak of laughter, came when it was needed; it was meant to engage and engage it did. All in all, a brilliant performance. Fully the equal of what I had witnessed the previous evening.

Dorit was not amused. Jim knew it and as dusk lengthened into night, he often broke off his monologue to move to the front of the house to speak with her. Then he would return and pick up where he left off. With less enthusiasm. Finally, he walked to the front of the house and began to trace the path in front of the chain link fence moving his hands and occasionally pulling at his hair.

Me! I had my own problems. My redneck friends had not only found the beer, they had discovered the bar and with that the bourbon. This was not a fortuitous development because things began to get ugly poolside. The gas tank was disengaged from the grill and two of the more potbellied intruders decided it would be fun to play a game of pitch and toss. I was praying that the tank was empty and if it wasn't that it would explode near the pool. Better chance of containing the blast near water. Jon Spencer's Blues Explosion was going at stun volume and small fires were being set about the property. I began to worry about my dog whom come to think of it I hadn't seen in quite awhile. It was a noisy little bitch and the silence did not bode too well for her.

A washed-out blonde had taken to the roof with one of the good ole boys and a large plastic raft. They could easily be viewed from the ground but they didn't seem to mind. In fact the couple appeared to draw strength from the rebel yells that would erupt whenever they changed positions. I had to admire their pressing on despite the odds. They were drunk, had fallen twice and badly skinned their knees trying to climb out the window onto the landing and the section of the roof where they had pitched the flotation device was not terribly sound. In fact, it sagged rather badly. After what seemed an eternity they finished with a thud and several moronic groans to cries of "Yeeeee-Haaaaaaah!" from their compatriots. The couple acknowledged the applause by launching a fusillade of empty bottles

of Zima in the general direction of the pool. The crowd acknowledged their acknowledgment by throwing whatever they could get their hands on into the water as well. Chairs, bottles, the tank, a few of the skinnier girls. There was no way to stop any of it. Certainly, Thirlwell's band and the knot of cognoscenti around them on the terrace knew better than to try. They began to retreat to the house. It was a nice house. There were lots of things to play with inside. They'd be safe in there. I decided to join Jim on his walk. Hell, misery loves company doesn't it?

Thirlwell was pacing, head down, as I approached, he stopped, "You know Dom, ever since I was very young I can remember feeling odd. Like I didn't belong. There was one day, that confirmed it for me, I was eight years old and out of nowhere I just started crying and couldn't stop; I felt so alone. Even though I was the kind of kid who really enjoyed being by himself. Staying with a book instead. And it's never really changed. I know I've got problems. Being an alcoholic and a manic depressive but I try to get around that by being generous. But you know, you do things for people, put money behind them and . . . and . . ." Here, he stopped to compose himself then continued. "They resent it. They actually resent you for trying to help. For caring. And sometimes it just gets overwhelming." *Fill your own void - I'm empty. Through with charades and empty shells.* Jim paused again and looked up for a moment. Looked at me and then looked up again.

I'm thinking Thirlwell, if he had his wish, would have liked to have been that mythical bird that spends all its life on the wing. It doesn't have any legs you see so it can never land. It sleeps on the wind. At night. It just spreads its wings and floats on the ether. Never lighting on earth till it dies. And always alone. Jim is a lonely man surrounded by friends.

We went inside. The white trash neighbors had gotten bored and had begun to troop out the front gate. I'd worry about clean up and repair tomorrow. Members of Halcion were at the computer in the dining room, Jim joined them and I went into the living room to chat with Mark and the rest of the band.



12-inch and the initial two lps were all self-financed, self-promoted and self-released. I was working in the retail record industry at the time, full time and I had to work in the studio on my free time. I was a wreck but I got it done. And from there I learned as I went along."

Jim stopped his perusal of the discs and turned to Rob and me, "Did you hear that? There's, it sounds like somebody's getting very sick right above us."

Rob and I stopped to listen. Now that you mention it... I ran to the door leading to the basement and flung it open. There was the lighting man forcing himself to vomit. "Jesus Christ, what the fuck are you doing," was all I could sputter as I danced away from a technicolor stream spattering the wall next to me.

The lighting man wiped his mouth and grinned weakly at me. "I got sick of listening to Amy. Hell, we all did. She drove everyone back to the bus and so I took her friend out behind the pool, what's left of it, to make out. In the middle of it I sobered up and just couldn't believe what I was kissing. I mean I don't mind ugly but I do insist on human."

Thirlwell seeing his friend was all right, cackled and returned to the basement. Rob gave me a manly handshake and said he was going to leave me with the boss. "Good luck with the interview, I know we haven't made it easy for you." Ain't that the truth I thought as I turned on the garden hose to clean off the vomit caked wall.

After washing away the mess, I returned to the basement. Amy and her hideous looking friend had found Jim. Somehow he had become the interlocutor in a debate over whether the pair should stay or take a cab home.

Jim was being quite reasonable, though he was clearly agitated. "Look go home if you want to. Or one of you go and the other stay. You're grown-ups make up your own minds."

"But I want my friend to stay and have fun with me," Amy whined like a petulant child. "I want her to stay and talk with you Mr. Foetus. I know you have so much to say being famous and all. Famous people have a lot more to say than us ordinary people. That's because they get to do so much more and meet so

many more people and..."

The loathsome one laughed, showing an almost full set of teeth. "Oh Amy, you're so volatile. Ain't she volatile" she asked no one in particular. "Mr. Foetus it was nice meetin' ya but I have to mosey. Amy you all be careful."

Amy wasn't listening. She was too busy talking. Ostensibly to Jim but he had returned to the record collection leaving Amy to talk to the empty space in front of her. She hadn't heard her friend. Didn't even notice her trundling up the basement steps to leave the house.

Rosy fingered dawn had begun to make Her appearance at the basement window. It was time to go to bed. God all this money spent and nothing to show for it. No wonder magazines like *Hypno* and *Bikini* outsold *Brutarian*. What a loser I was.

"Jim, it's close to six, I'm going to crash," I told him as I too made my way to the basement stairs.

"No wait," Jim grabbed me by the collar. "Get me some fine tipped black pens and some white paper. I'm going to draw the cover of the next *Brutarian*."

I started to laugh like an idiot. I couldn't help it. I loved this guy. He reminded me of my closest friend Jarrett Huddleston. Jarrett too was insane. "Jim, it's almost six o'clock. You're drunk. At least you should be. And you haven't slept in two days. How are you going to draw? You probably couldn't draw a check even if you're life depended on it. Go to bed. You want to help *Brutarian*. Tomorrow you can help me dredge the backyard for landmines."

"Oh there ain't no landmines. You're just joshing Mr. Foetus. Mr. Foetus don't be scared I'll protect you. Not that a big strong man like yourself needs protection from the likes of little ole me..."

"Shut the fuck up," Jim and I said almost in unison although we both knew that nothing short of a bullet to the brain would stop Amy from talking.

Thirlwell turned to me, his eyes boring into mine. "You must have some pens. I saw the paper in the loader by the computer. So I just need some pens."

I tried another tact. "Jim. You're good? Most of our covers are done by professionals. People with degrees from reputable, highly reputable art schools.

I'm not trying to insult you. Oh hell, yes I am but it's because we both need to go to bed. There's just no way you're going to be able to pen the cover in the next couple of hours. Go to bed."

Thirlwell continued to look at me. Like I was a lab animal. I flattered myself into thinking it was a Mexican standoff. I got him the pens and sat him down at the marble dining room table. Amy had followed us and quickly plopped herself down next to Mr. Foetus. Jesus, maybe I should hide the knives before I took my leave. The hell with it, I was too tired. I mumbled my goodnights and stumbled off to bed.

I fell heavily onto the mattress, my clothes on. There was a familiar thumping from underneath. Hobbes, my faithful companion, deciding discretion was the better part of valor, had hied to the bedroom. Probably been waiting for me for hours. Couldn't be helped; daddy was a semi-professional journalist hot on the heels of hot story concerning a hot rock star. Which he didn't get. Ah well, best call it sleep and let flights of angels sing me to my rest. The dog jumped on the bed and curled up by my side. Finally, sleep. After almost forty-eight hours. As I drifted off the last thing I heard was Thirlwell. "Look I'm trying to draw. And I don't know how many times and how many ways I can tell you this but shut the fuck up. No don't speak. Don't speak. Just shut up. Just shut the fuck up. I mean it. Shut the fuck up..."

A great man. One I wished I'd gotten to know. Maybe next time.

