

THE DRUM MEDIA



j.g.thirlwell

READY TO TRANSMIT AT REVELATION

SCREAMFEEDER



ABBE MAY



THE BLOODY BEETROOTS
members only



RICHARD HATCH
interval



INSIDE: JAIMI FAULKNER • KODE9 • DANIEL MERRIWEATHER • PHOENIX

ALBANY • BUNBURY • BUSSELTON • DUNSBOROUGH • GERALDTON • MANDURAH • MARGARET RIVER • PERTH

BIG APPLE BITER

J.G. THIRLWELL IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT EXPERIMENTAL AUSTRALIAN MUSICIANS TO HAVE EVER LIVED. SO HOW COME MOST SKIPPIES DON'T SEEM TO KNOW WHO HE IS? AARON WILSON ATTEMPTS TO PREPARE YOU FOR NYC FOETUS, A DOCO ON THIS INCREDIBLE ARTIST.

"I hope you have enough background because there would be certain people reading this who'll have no idea who I am," says J.G. Thirlwell with genuine concern. A fair concern it is too, with J.G. Thirlwell, despite being obsessively worshipped by so many around the world, still a name that many would never have come across before. Furthermore, it's a difficult task to convey the significance of such a legendary figure of the underground and experimental music world, and Thirlwell's the kind of intellectual detail hound that's all too worried by such a problem. Yet there's nothing better than a documentary to enlighten people to an unknown subject, and *NYC Foetus* is the perfect tonic for those with a thirst for knowledge.

Screening as part of the Revelation International Film Festival 2009 program, *NYC Foetus* investigates the music, life and times of J.G. Thirlwell. Born James George Thirlwell on 29 January 1960 in Melbourne, Thirlwell left Australia in 1978 and began carving an overseas career that's seen him recognised as a groundbreaking figure in musical scenes such as no-wave, performance punk, experimental electronica and cutting-edge classical. From Thirlwell's own projects such as *Manorexia*, *Foetus* (including different line-ups and style variations such as *Foetus Art Terrorism*, *Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel*, *Foetus Under Glass*, *Foetus Interruptus*, *The Foetus Symphony Orchestra* and *You've Got Foetus On Your Breath*) and *Steroid Maximus* to collaborative projects *The Immaculate Consumptive* (with Nick Cave, Marc Almond and Lydia Lunch, whom Thirlwell dated), *Flesh Volcano* (with Marc Almond) and *Wiseblood* (with Swans' Roli Mosimann), and from composing music for *Kronos Quartet*, *League Of Electronic Musical Urban Robots*, *Bang On A Can* and the soundtrack to cult Adult Swim cartoon *Venture Bros* to producing and remixing artists as diverse as Nine Inch Nails, The The, Marilyn Manson and Red Hot Chili Peppers, Thirlwell has had a career so prolific you may be starting to feel just a tad guilty for wondering who that was on this week's cover of *Drum*.

In fact, there's so much to cover when tackling such an insanely creative and incredibly diverse artist that it must have been quite strange for Thirlwell to see his life condensed into only 78 minutes or so, not to mention quite an intimidating task for the director Clement Tuffreau to take on – if not suicidal. "I don't think he really touched on everything I've done, or fully attempted to," responds Thirlwell honestly in his now Brooklyn sounding accent. "It's really Clement's portrait of me given the people he could contact to interview, his resources and his patience. He used New York as a frame for it. I don't think he means it to be definitive. Anyway, the story continues to add new chapters every week and I'm not retiring any time soon."

It's this capturing of New York and its history that creates a whole new dimension to the documentary's narrative. After having lived in London since leaving Australia, it was on tour with *The Immaculate Consumptive* that he took a bite of the Big Apple and fell in love with the city. New York's vibrancy has of course fed many vivid imaginations before him in history changing ways. Yet the last decade has seen many potentially threatening changes, and one wonders whether the city is still as powerful a creative aphrodisiac as once it was. "It has lost the character of urban blight and decay in its centre that I admittedly found very compelling," admits Thirlwell. "The bohemians, freaks and homeless have been displaced by frat boys, NYU students and models. It still has a lot of character and, as a resident, you seem to concentrate

on the new developments instead of what still remains, which is actually a lot of character."

"I live in an area of Brooklyn called Dumbo, and have been in the same loft for 22 years. The first ten years I was here, the hood was pretty undiscovered. Cabs didn't want to go here. The area is mainly factory buildings where the industry had moved out and artists moved into the raw spaces and converted them, much like Soho and Tribeca before. In the last ten years it has become rapidly gentrified and high-rise condos have sprung up. Artists have been evicted and the buildings converted to luxury condos. There was no retail here before and a lot of useless shops have sprung up. Having evicted many of the artists, 'culture' has been drafted into the neighborhood and where there was once packs of roaming wild dogs there are now Wall Street types pushing baby strollers... The thing about New York is that it is where a lot of culture converges. There is so much going on here it is hard to take in all at once. But it also has a nervous energy and drive, which nourishes and fortifies me. I don't get that from a city like, say, Berlin, which I love very much – but the energy is relatively sleepy; there's easiness there. It might have something to do with the fact that now it is a little more difficult to live here. NY is driven."

Thirlwell's apparent disdain for complacency and love of going against the grain are themes that shine strongly in *NYC Foetus*, and ones interestingly elaborated upon when The The's Matt Johnson argues that it's perhaps a good thing Thirlwell hasn't had greater commercial success because he wouldn't have been as creative and prolific. Thirlwell agrees to disagree, "I don't think success would have ruined me. But I have shot myself in the foot a lot of times, unconsciously and not. I made a lot of perverse decisions. Self-destructive urges got in the way for many years. It's always been a bit of a struggle."

Despite being able to potentially gain greater success by following the momentum created by successful projects, Thirlwell instead often abruptly drops them in the pursuit of new ideas. "Yeah, I kind of start to recognise things that I start to fall back into with my music and I sort of feel as if, when those patterns start to happen I tend to move away from them. I felt like in the mid-'90s I made this album *Gash* and it was a real pinnacle in what I'd been trying to do. I was very intense, in an almost psychotic rock type phase, and I'd wanted to make an apocalyptic album like that. But once I'd made an album like that, I didn't think I could repeat it."

Whatever his motivations, thank Apollo (the god of music) that Thirlwell's "voracious appetite" for creating new projects continues; it's responsible for feeding his ever-expansive fascinating discography. And really, isn't that how some of the best art is created? These days, though, he's not the crazed rock demon he appears to us in *NYC Foetus*: footage showing his earlier *Foetus* days, or the strange performance prop to Lydia Lunch's rather controversial projects. Thirlwell reminisces, "When I performed live in a rock band format, there were times that I found it quite sublime and transportative. That could have been an 'enhanced' experience though. But that had lost its allure by the last time I toured that way, in 2001. I always felt that I had to dumb down my music to play it in a rock band format. When I first conducted the 18-piece ensemble, I got those shivers in my spine again. I can't turn back from that. Unfortunately it is quite expensive to rehearse 18 top-notch musicians so I don't do it often."

What might come as perhaps the most surprising revelation about Thirlwell's life is that, despite having



spent his first 18 years living in Australia, he hasn't been back in over 30 years. Although bringing over his 18-piece *Manorexia* ensemble might be a steep ask, it seems ludicrous to think one of Australia's most enigmatic and influential native musicians has in fact never performed here before. The reason? "I haven't been invited," JG says bluntly. So, what would it take? "I've always said that I wouldn't perform unless I was invited to the Opera House, and then last month the Kronos Quartet played my piece at the Sydney Opera House, but that still didn't get me out there. If I was to go there I would want to do something right. You know, I would love to bring my 18-piece band thing there." With the Australian dollar still not looking so flash, seeing *NYC Foetus* is about as close as you're going to get for now to discovering this intriguing character's ongoing genius.

WHO: J.G. Thirlwell

WHAT: *NYC Foetus*

WHEN & WHERE: Saturday 4 July (2.30pm) and Saturday 11 July (7pm), Astor Theatre, Mount Lawley (Screening as part of Revelation Film Festival with documentary short on Nick Cave, *Do You Love Me Like I Love You*)

MUSICAL REVELATIONS

Featuring in a documentary as part of Revelation, a festival that reveals many hidden gems previously unheard of (or even played!) from across the world, we thought we'd ask J.G. Thirlwell for his own greatest Revelations. Musical that is...

"I would say that one of the biggest revelatory, even transcendental, musical experiences I've had was when I was in London, hearing Steve Reich performing drumming in about 1980. Hearing the performance and the whole live phasing process and it was very celestial and uplifting – and was a musical moment unlike anything I'd had before."

"More recently, in the last decade, I think when I heard the *Ethiopian* was one. It's a series of Ethiopian albums, music from the '60s and '70s, and there was this album I had by Alemayehu Eshete and I'd never heard anything like it before... Really strange Arabic scales and very impassioned vocals, and it was this combination of music I'd never heard before and the exhilaration. He actually played here last year outside Lincoln centre and it was absolutely amazing."

As for more recent music: "There has always been disposable and vacuous music. The thing is now it is so omnipresent. It saturates everything. The democratising process of the Internet has meant that quality is swamped by tedium mediocrity and crap. How many spoons of shit can you put in your drinking water before it is undrinkable? That said there is a lot of great music out there as well... Currently I'd say... Scott Walker, So Percussion, Steve Reich, Boredoms, Magma."