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J.G. Thirlwell A.K.A. Clint Ruin/Steroid Maximus/Foetus Inc.

The Faces And Moods of J. G. Thirlwell

By Anne Heller

Jim Thirlwell is a man of vision with the talents to back it up. Originally coming to America from London in the mid-'80's with Lydia Lunch, Nick Cave, and Marc Almond for their Immaculate Consumptive tour, Thirlwell decided to stay in New York City.

He has created some of the most mind-bending music of our time, using such pseudonyms as Foetus and Clint Ruin (among others). His latest projects are Steroid Maximus (a disc called *Gondwanaland*) and the compilation *Mesomorph Enduros*, both released on Big Cat Records of England. Thirlwell also has produced remixes for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Pantera, EMF, Prong, and a host of others. And he does all of the cover artwork for his solo project Foetus. Quite a lot for one mortal to accomplish in a lifetime, and his has barely begun.

Indie File: So Much of your music sounds like movie soundtracks. Do you plan this or is this just in your head or...

Thirlwell: No, I don't particularly plan it. May be it just has a kind of cinematic scope to it. But, Steroid Maximus material being all instrumental, I guess, leads to that sort of thing a lot more.

Indie File: Also, the Foetus stuff that you did I felt could easily be used as a soundtrack. Of course, I know about your work with Richard Kern, and I've seen a couple of films that you've collaborated with him on. So, is it just a manifestation of the movies that run through your head?

Thirlwell: I don't know where the movie quality might come to it. I'm kind of too close to it to really say. I take each song as a separate entity and create it as such. I don't really have a formula. Each piece is an entity unto itself. I use a lot of high peaks and valleys to create drama (in my music).

Indie File: Do you have any favourite movie soundtracks in particular?

Thirlwell: I like *A Touch of Evil* (directed by Orson Welles in 1958). The soundtrack to that, I think, is great. It's also one of my favourite songs. And I've got a great soundtrack which has music from the M-Squad. It's pretty cool. But, you know, divorced from a movie, I just listen to it as a piece of music. A soundtrack is a piece of music and because of the exaggerated emotions that (the characters) are going through, makes it a more intense listening experience.

Indie File: Who did the soundtrack for *Touch of Evil*?

Thirlwell: I think it was Mancini.

Indie File: I know that you collaborate with a lot of different people, not only on your own work but on remixes. Do you feel that different energies are created when you collaborate with these different people? How do these energies affect you and your work's outcome?

Thirlwell: Each collaboration is kind of different. Some might be collaborations (where) the people who I'm collaborating with may not actually play anything on the whole (recording) at all. It's a collaboration whereby if that person wasn't there and giving me input, it wouldn't have turned out the way it did or it may not have been created in the first place whereas other collaborations have been more directing co-composing and I'm sort of steering it and others and starting with their own ideas and molding it and I'm engineering and producing. Like with remixing, I'm pretty much given free rein. The band is not there and they've already made their final decision and they turn it over to me to put my input on, which is what I enjoy most. It's kind of no-hold-barred. I can do what I want. The further I can push the envelope, the more they seem to like it. So, I have a lot of creative input with that.

Indie File: Could you name some people you've enjoyed working with more than others?

Thirlwell: Not particularly. I mean, they all have their own qualities and often the collaborations are only for one song or something and each thing has its own identity, so I can't really pinpoint anything specific. If I've released it, I wholeheartedly believe in it so I dig them all for different reasons.

Indie File: Do you think you might do any more Steroid Maximus



projects?

Thirlwell: Yeah. Pretty much, I'm honing down just now. I'm writing a new Foetus album and that'll be where all my energies are going to be going for the next year or two. The only constants are going to be Steroid Maximus and Foetus for quite some time now. I want to keep the Steroid thing going as another outlet of different feelings and there are certain people I want to collaborate with on future Steroid material. But it's just going to be Foetus and Steroid material.

I've used so many different names that it's been really difficult to promote and educate people that this is me and now that kind of seems to be filtering into people's brains. I'll stick to those two.

Indie File: But you have such a distinctive sound. Even when I heard Wiseblood (another project of Thirlwell) for the first time, I had no idea it was you, but I thought, 'God, this sounds like Foetus. This really sounds like Foetus. It's got to be Thirlwell.'

Thirlwell: I'm kind of too close to it. I see Wiseblood as different musically in that it's more blues-based and, in some ways, a more American sound and has a different intention to it. I can't see another Wiseblood record in the near future. My and Roli's (Mosimann), schedules are so hectic. The making, five years from beginning to actual realization.

Indie File: That's a long time to work on one project.

Thirlwell: Bits of it were conceived and then put on ice for a few years and we came back to them and revitalized them and threw a bunch of stuff out. It finally came around to what it was.

Indie File: When you recorded Steroid Maximus, did you ever have all the guest musicians, guest collaborators together at once to record or did you just do it in bits and pieces?

Thirlwell: No, it was all done in my studio so I was engineering everything and my studio is customized in the way that I can work. It's pretty much impossible for me to record two things at once unless they're going straight into the deck. So, it was more of - taking people one by one and feeling out what I felt needed to be put on and then bringing in the specific musicians for the specific parts that I felt like - the violin part needed to go down on or the flute part or whatever. Those people would come in separately and pretty much I'd piece it together after that.

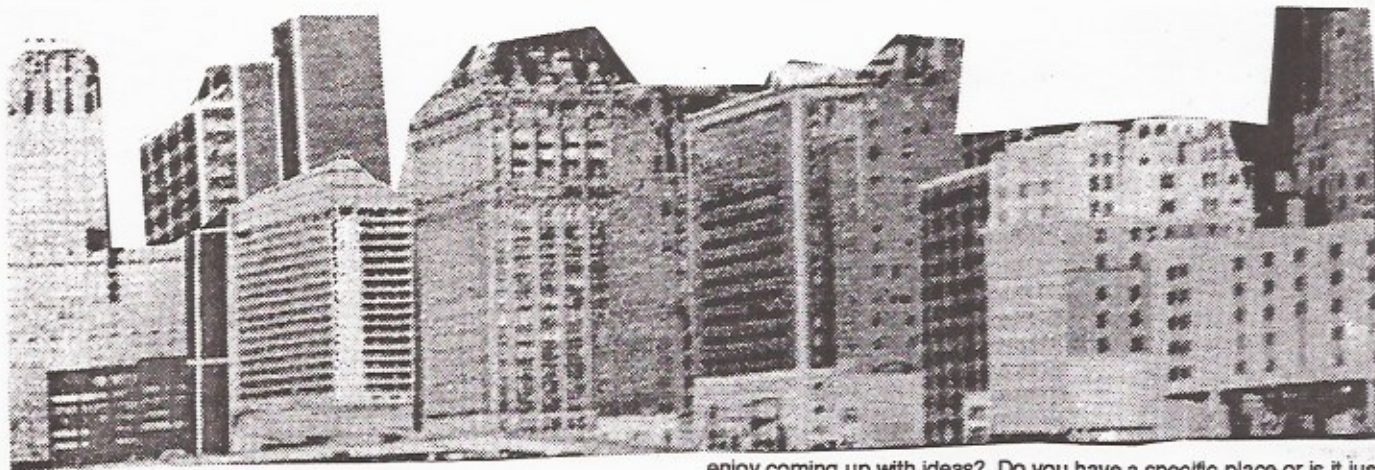
It was a pretty long process. I didn't even know I had finished it until I got out of New York for a while. I had been so close to it, I didn't even know I had finished the album.

Indie File: So, it took you about five years?

Thirlwell: No, it took me a lot less than that - the Steroid stuff. Probably about two or maybe even less. Not necessarily two years nonstop, I was working on a bunch of other projects in between.

Indie File: What inspired you to create the Wiseblood--Clint Ruin persona?

Thirlwell: Initially I wanted to, when I first came here, I wanted to create a live performance situation. The idea was to work with three drummers or four drummers. The first drummer I approached was Roli



Mosimann, who was in the Swans at the time. He was into it. He had been setting up a studio and we sort of got together at his place to knock out ideas. As time went by, it sort of... the actual lineup sort of honed down to us two and various guests. So it swung in that direction. But the lyrical intention and persona remained constant. It kind of came together initially really quickly and then took a long time to refine.

Indie File: How would you separate the Foetus and Wiseblood personas for someone who is not as familiar with your work as I am?

Thirwell: Basically, the easiest way is Foetus is just myself on all the studio recordings and Wiseblood is a collaboration with Roli and we bring in other people. Like I said, it had a specific intention from the outset whereas Foetus is usually, musically it's pretty much coming from whatever direction I feel it takes me at that time which might mirror or just finally be juxtaposed in their own way with whatever I'm saying lyrically and usually lyrically it's coming from a pretty personal place. Lyrically, it's (Foetus) a lot more personal, a lot more intense.

Indie File: Do you feel that the Wiseblood projects were more sexual or was that just going along with the more blues-based...

Thirwell: Yeah, that was definitely an intention, the sexual element. The sort of violent sexuality and leering sexuality.

Indie File: I read in some of your press information about a Foetus album where you collaborated with some other artists. I think it was some kind of anarchistic Foetus project, I can't remember the name right offhand... was that live?

Thirwell: That must have been *Foetus In Excelsus Corruptus*. That's double live, not the last tour we did but the one before. That was a 6-piece band.

Indie File: Who was in the band?

Thirwell: Hahn Rowe on violin, who used to be in Hugo Largo, Al Kigzys on bass, Vinnie Signorelli on drums, Norman Westburg on guitar, and Dave Ouimet on samples and trombone.

There's a video companion to that coming out, I think, in June, which will be released by Atavistic.

Indie File: Do you ever feel that the place you conceive of a work affects the mood and the energy of the piece?

Thirwell: Yeah, definitely. I can pinpoint it myself very easily but I think it would be very hard for anyone else to tell because I can just remember the mood I was in at that time and that mood is obviously reflected by my environment. Like, a specific record I can say, 'yeah, that really reminds me of this point in time in London or another one really reminds me of Brooklyn or another one really reminds me of Spanish Harlem or something like that.

It's reflective of what was going on in my life, where I was living and what I was doing and what my state of mind was. In that way, it's like a kind of audio diary.

Indie File: Where does Steroid Maximus remind you of?

Thirwell: That reminds me of a lot of places, a lot of places that I've invented, too, because it's not quite as literal as something that has lyrical content.

Indie File: What about Wiseblood material?

Thirwell: Well, it definitely reminds me of New York a lot.

Indie File: It's very harsh, just like New York can be. Where do you

enjoy coming up with ideas? Do you have a specific place or is it just wherever you happen to be when you happen to get an idea?

Thirwell: Any time, I don't have my little idea period of the day. They'll sneak up on me at any time. I'll be inspired by literally anything, something a bum might say to me on the street or a TV commercial or a conversation or an event in my life or maybe just a sample I come up with or the sound of a stick hitting a piece of furniture. It could just be anything.

Indie File: What's the most unusual place or situation that has brought about an idea for one of your projects?

Thirwell: I can't point anything in particular. Each one has its own little story. I guess they're all fairly weird places.

Indie File: Let's talk a little about *Mesomorph Enduros*. You were the one who basically decided what bands were going to be on this and what songs, etc., etc. Are you pleased with the outcome?

Thirwell: Oh, yes, very.

Indie File: I think it's one of the best compilations I've heard in a while. Thirwell: I'm working on Volume II right now. It's almost done.

Volume III I hope to be all Japanese bands. Volume I & II are all American bands.

Indie File: What are some of the bands on Volume II?

Thirwell: Rocket from the Crypt, Tribe Like Jehu, Glowworm, Boss Hogg, Neurosis and a host of others. There are 15 bands.

Indie File: When do you think that might be released?

Thirwell: It'll be out in the fall.

Indie File: So, you're basically finished with it now.

Thirwell: I'm 85 to 90% finished. I haven't got the tapes in my hands but I've contacted everyone pretty much and I've got the artwork rolling. It's a matter of co-ordinating the whole thing, putting it together. It's quite a big job. Actually, sequencing it is a big job. What I really strove to do with the first one and what I obviously want to do with the second one is make it flow, not like a disparate collection of tracks but flow with the dynamic of a real album and not just a bunch of stuff thrown together with no rhyme or reason. So it's a listening experience you can put on and it works dynamically like that.

Indie File: When do you think the third one will be through?

Thirwell: Whenever I start it. That's like an ongoing thing. Right now my priority is writing the Foetus album and the Mesomorph thing I want to finish as quickly as possible so I can put all my energies into the Foetus thing. The Japanese thing is going to take a lot of research which I am only chipping away at right now. I think next year sometime.

Indie File: With your next Foetus project, have you recorded any of that?

Thirwell: I've demo'd a lot of stuff for it and hope to be taking it to another studio in the next couple of months. It might be out this year or it might have to be early next year. It depends on how quickly I can get this all together.

Indie File: Does it have a tentative title?

Thirwell: No, I'm just really assembling the songs right now. I've got

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