

# F O E T U S

## IN JIM THIRWELL'S WORLD, MORE IS MORE

**D**own a cracked Brooklyn sidewalk, across the street from a housing project and within spitting distance of the East River, Jim Thirwell is fidgeting with a lock. He's having a hell of a time getting in and out of his home these days because his right arm is broken and bound in a sling. "I feel like a fuckin' gimp," he grumbles, fumbling with his huge cache of keys. Moreover, Thirwell has to deal with several locks: one on the street-level gate that opens into the yard; another on the building's thick main door; and then, up a few flights, still another on the door leading into his loft.

"It's kind of illegal," he says of the loft, compulsively twisting his pointy red goatee. From a distance, the gesture makes him look like a parody of the devil himself, yet up close, it's a different story. The man who variously calls himself Foetus, Clint Ruin, Frank Want, Steroid Maximus, Wiseblood, and Self Immolation Productions, is actually quite soft-spoken and serious. I wonder what lurks in the belly of this beast.

Thirwell clicks the lock open. Time to

enter the womb.

The bowels of Foetus Inc. include two levels of space festooned with prints that Thirwell made himself (Escher-like patterns with odds-and-ends thrown in almost subliminally), little garish trolls, brightly colored Japanese candy wrappers, graphically stylized drawings, Eastern masks, a poster of vintage cars autographed by illustrator Robert Williams, a stuffed iguana,

animal heads hanging from a beam, books, magazines, underground comics, a mixing board, computer, tape decks and all sorts of audio equipment, small robots, voodoo dolls and — my favorite — a jar containing preserved reptiles, fish, flotsam and a foetus.

The main floor consists of Thirwell's art and music studios, a living room, a kitchen, two bathrooms and his book and periodicals collections. The bedrooms are on the top level. Off in a corner — but visible as hell — is an old Teenage Jesus & the Jerks guitar case, a vestige from his years with Lydia Lunch, who once lived here with him. "Could you imagine if I ever moved out?" he asks, a tuft of red hair dangling over his brow.



BY MARISA FOX

M A X I M U S



P H O T O S B Y C H R I S B U C K

**T**hirwell's a prisoner to his pad. He doesn't only live here; now that he's set up shop in this mad house, he can swim in his placental palace 24 hours a day. You get the feeling he does.

That Thirwell lives in such spacious clutter makes perfect sense, for his music mirrors the lifestyle. Whether the demented genius of the Foetus releases (fierce, thick, pre-grunge, pre-sample, tribal-beat-driven, industrial-strength music) or Wiseblood (eerie instrumentals that set an all-invasive atmosphere), Thirwell's music is dense with layers of reference and cross-reference. His tall bookshelves and an overstuffed trunk spill forth books and publications ranging from the autobiography of *Gong Show*-host Chuck Barris to true crime stories and political propaganda (*Mein Kampf* included). On one shelf is Diane Arbus's photography and books by Arthur Miller; on another, comics from Charles Burns to underground Japanese *manga*. A J.G. Ballard book lying on the floor appears to be recently flipped-through. The house builds upon itself bit by bit, like a Kurt Schwitters collage. Art and life intertwined, built from the rubble up, it's a collection of found objects, compressed and transformed into something visceral and organic.

At the center of all this tumult is the red-headed devil himself — Jim Thirwell — who, like Captain Beefheart, one of his mentors, is a Renaissance man with a wry, irreverent bent. A wildly prolific composer, writer, musician, arranger, artist, producer and remixer, Thirwell is almost impossible to pin down. In the early to middle '80s — before samplers were commonplace and grunge guitars the trend du jour; before muted, muffled, mocking vocal ranting was considered commercially viable — Foetus albums such as *Hole* stood out like sore, blistered thumbs.

"The important thing to me is not to lay claim to any one genre in particular," he says. "I can't say I paved the way for sampling or industrial grunge... it just irritates me when people blindly copy without taking it to the next level. That's why when I do a remix for someone, I always try to push them to the brink."

Thirwell's aesthetic is influenced simultaneously by the eerie black humor of the synthesizer-drenched Residents, a group that poked fun at corporate rock culture; by Beefheart, whose brilliantly deranged forays extended into that blues-jazz-rock-noise danger zone where rhythm, reason, structure and tonality are tossed to the wind; by the frenzied, dirge/disaster, thumping punk sound of fellow Australian iconoclasts, the Birthday Party; and, of course, by the soul-baring, fright-night-noise-meets-big-band-boom shriek of Lydia Lunch, who sucks on the bones of urban despair and then laughs real hard at it. Dive into Thirwell's sonic soup and you won't come out baptized.

He has dipped his hands in an exhausting variety of pots through the years, working with groups as different from each other as the London-based jazz/post-punk

band Pravec to the Birthday Party. Along the way, he's collaborated with The The's Matt Johnson, Coil, Nurse With Wound, Marc Almond, the Swans, Einstürzende Neubaten and Nick Cave. All the while, he was forging his Foetus sound and vision, and making music and setting up house with Lydia Lunch. He's worked on films by the '80s New York grit director Richard Kern and designed covers for *Exit* magazine. Now that the Foetus sound has paved the way for what *Billboard* calls "modern rock," Thirwell has found a more commercial niche, producing and remixing songs for EMF, the Beyond, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Silverfish, Prong, Murder, Inc., White Zombie, and putting together *Mesomorph Enduros*, a compilation of his favorite underground American bands,

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including Cop Shoot Cop, Motherhead Bug, Barkmarket and the Pain Teens.

Whether creating or producing, Thirwell is forever shedding layers of skin and growing new ones. When he dabbles with a mix, he has a way of making even squeaky-clean pop stars sound at once profound and profane. On EMF's song "Lies," a thick, throbbing symphonic clash sets in over a persistent pounding drum, with a strangely catchy old jazz beat sifting through; just when you think it never will, the recognizable beginning of a pop song chimes in. The Foetus aesthetic is chaos and order boxed up tight; it's compression just before release, executed with flamboyance and a devil-may-care twist. Surreal and real, the Foetus experience might be akin to going to hell in a flaming, rocket-fueled Japanese flying saucer. There it is: Godzilla vs. Foetus.

**T**ime finally caught up with Thirwell. Today, record company executives who have never even heard Foetus, let alone know of Thirwell's decade-long musical experiments, are calling him up. What they do know is there's a buzz among the so-called alternative rock set.

"How do you think it feels?" Thirwell asks, barely hiding some of his pent-up bitterness. "I never take on any work I don't like; I like all the bands I'm producing and remixing, otherwise I wouldn't do them." He's so busy now that he's even turning away some projects. "Unfortunately, last year I had to turn away a Queen remix project because Hollywood Records called me in the last minute and expected me to turn it around in no time. I mean, what do they think? That I'm just sitting here waiting for them to call me? These people never heard of Foetus, or know what that's about. They maybe just heard EMF's 'Lies' and figured, 'yeah, he'll do.'"

When he first started experimenting with sounds, Thirwell had a definite idea, a manifesto of sorts. "It all seems kind of puerile now," he says. "I was influenced greatly by Stockhausen and John Cage — randomness in terms of compositional tools. Part of that was because I had a limited budget and limited time, and I couldn't just sit in a studio for hours experimenting with structure and rhythm." So he created a method to his madness. Thirwell would come up with random numbers and count out his rhythms that way. He would plan out breaks and find places to insert tape loops ahead of time, so the tracks sounded like tight orchestrations gone haywire.

Under various Foetus monikers (Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel, Foetus Ufer Frisco, You've Got Foetus On Your Breath), Thirwell produced various albums with one-word titles, such as *Sink*, *Deaf*, the aforementioned *Hole*, *Thaw* and others. The music was full of guts and glory, with eclectic, sound-clash, experimental tracks like "High Horse," a thumping, beat-driven bit of cowbilly noise. "I'll Meet You In

Poland Baby" is a twisted Holocaust-era romance, while "Get Out of My House" begins with tape loops of Tallulah Bankhead repeating the title (it was aimed at Jah Wobble, who once showed up drunk at Thirwell's London home and assaulted him), and the surf-crazed "Satan Plan" features, much to Thirwell's wonder, Beach Boys-type harmonies.

"I was drawn to the name Foetus 'cause I liked the way it sounded," he says. "I was asked constantly what it stood for, so I came up with reasons later: that a foetus is the lowest common denominator; that it was something we all had in common, we all started off as fetuses. It was kind of self-deprecating. Then I came up with names like Clint Ruin to create this illusion that there was more to it than just me. I decided to come up with my own corporate image so I wouldn't come off as some cheezy kid walking into record companies going, 'Hey, listen to my demo.' That's how Self Immolation Records came about. Then came things like Steroid Maximus, which is more collaborative. Also, if other people appeared on Foetus records, I added 'Corruptus,' 'cause it wasn't pure Foetus, it was tainted by others. Wiseblood is me and Roli [Mosimann, of Swans]."

Thirwell's music is also marked by its black humor and structural deviations. Though rarely overtly political, it carries all the subtleties of personal politics. Thirwell calls his early works "personal diaries." The track "Wash It All Up," for instance, refers to the downside of relationships; "333" was inspired by John Cage's "4:33" and features excerpts from *The Marquis de Sade*; "New York Or Bust" is his mad, fantasy-inspired foray into New York show-biz. "Before I moved here, I had pictured New York as this mysterious Garden of Eden," he says. "I had these fantasies about coming here and writing films. The song was also very tongue-in-cheek; I had a line about wanting to find out where David Byrne buys his shoes."

Other tracks are purer foetal matter. He wrote "Today I Started Slogging You Again" in honor of the George Jones country classic "Today I Started Loving You Again." "I was in this bar and that song came on the jukebox and that's what I thought they were saying. So I took it a step further, added tape loops, rapped on top of it — inspired by Grandmaster Flash and the Wheels of Steel, who had just come out at that time. But nobody got it. My engineer couldn't come to terms with the idea of rap. He kept on wanting to edit it. I threw all these things together — like Steve Reich minimalism, John Cage and Grandmaster Flash — and nobody knew what to do with it. It was very frustrating."

As a result, the early albums reek of intensity, but also of harshness. "Personally, I was driving myself into the ground, working a full-time job at the Virgin megastore on Oxford Street, then at a record warehouse in Acton, and trying to make my own music at the same time. I was very reclusive. I had always been the kind of kid

who holes himself up for hours, reading, drawing, painting and listening to music. I was an adequate bass player but I didn't want to play in a band. When I did, it turned out to be a ridiculous, and finally a miserable, experience. I wasn't into the whole democratic, group thing of having to work out all my creative ideas with others. When I get an idea, I just like to go with it freely.

"When I started putting together those early Foetus records, it just poured out of me. Years of frustration and misery, and the violent reaction to that misery. In that sense, it was very different than, say, the Residents, because it wasn't so much about concepts and notions, but about my life and incidents that hurt me, shook me, and left their mark on me."

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The seamy side of life and those harsher daily realities became an integral part of the Foetus esthetic. Meanwhile, in New York, the notorious No Wave scene was shaking up familiar notions of rock'n'roll, jazz and punk rock. Downtown avant-garde bands like Teenage Jesus & the Jerks were taking the harmonies of Ornette Coleman and smashing it together with the loud-and-fast sound of early New York punk. After the initial No Wave rush, which culminated with the Brian Eno-produced compilation *No New York*, Teenage Jesus' singer Lydia Lunch started hanging out in London. Thirwell's vision crystallized when he met Lunch through the Birthday Party.

"I had been writing the press releases for the Birthday Party and living with Mick [Harvey]," Thirwell recalls of the time. "Lydia liked them and she had no idea that I was making music at all. One night she invited me over to interview her so I could write her press releases, too. I had been a longtime fan of hers, and really of that whole *No New York* scene. Even when I was living back in Sydney, it was hearing Mars, DNA, early Television and, of course, Teenage Jesus & the Jerks that really touched me. I even had a *Queen of Siam* poster up on my wall. So I knew a lot about her. She told me all her music secrets, which was great because I didn't tell her any of mine. I just kept quiet about my music and let her do all the talking about hers."

Eventually the two became lovers and moved to New York. They lived and worked together for seven years, at one point starring together in Richard Kern's *Submit To Me Now*, aka *Manhattan Loves Suicide*, which graphically shows Lunch giving Thirwell a blow-job in an elevator shaft. Thirwell blushes at the memory. "I was real embarrassed when they showed that film at the Building (a now-defunct New York club) a few years ago. It was on this huge screen, blown up so big for everyone to see."

You get the impression that without Lunch's fiercely extroverted persona, Thirwell would have led a much lower-profile life. "Of course, she influenced me," he says. "I mean, she was an integral part of my life for so many years." The two parted ways about two years ago, but Thirwell says they're still good friends. "She's as fast as a whip, so quick with the comebacks," he says. "She's almost too fast. The moment she gets something artistically, she's on to the next thing."

"People have a hard time keeping up with Lydia," he continues. "She influenced all these grunge girl groups" — he pauses, cocking his head to the side — "What do they call themselves? Foxcore? I hate that term, but think it's great, too. Anyway, she lead the way for them."

Just as Lunch led the way for bands like Babes In Toyland and Hole (though Mrs. Cobain would probably be the last to admit it), Thirwell led the way for groups like Cop Shoot Cop, Soundgarden, Pigface, the

new-and-improved '90s version of Ministry, and so many others. What Thirwell unleashed in the early '80s was hardcore grit and fanfare all wrapped in a head-spin of a package. And it's that mind-bending dualism that's getting over today.

"Grit is good," he says. "We all need grit, grit's a part of life." He looks out the window at the gray, crumbling New York sky. "All I've done is respond to that grit in my life. As for those big-band beats that I use, I don't know where they come from. I don't exactly sit here listening to '40s jazz. It's high drama and comes off as twisted dementia when I juxtapose it with throbbing, strident sounds."

**T**he difference between Foetus and the long list of people who imitate him is that Thirwell creates something larger — something throbbingly, fantastically larger than life. His music doesn't only seethe with grunge and grit, it also blasts off with high-frequency horns and marching-band precision. The Foetus vision is stamped out in 3-D. It's not just a sonic blast, it's a visual swirling mindfuck, influenced in great part by a host of underground illustrators and comic artists, like Robert Williams (Thirwell proudly shows Williams's rendition of Lydia Lunch), Pizz (who designed the sleeve and sculpted vinyl for Thirwell's "Garage Monsters" seven-inch), Charles Burns, Gary Panter and Alex Gray.

A proud culture vulture, Thirwell opens an Alex Gray book and points to an illustration of a red-hot, festering womb with foetal limbs and membranes bursting, preformed, mutated, but rendered with anatomical precision. The illustration reels with that painful, joyful stuff called life energy. "This is what I want to do sonically," he says. "I wouldn't call it a low-brow aesthetic, though some do, and I understand why. To me, it's brilliant. It's vital."

Thirwell's gestalt-like art is beyond labeling. He always breaks new barriers ("I'm surprised what I get away with, especially with EMF," he says. "I enjoy imposing my sickness over the pop charts"), and his own music continues to metamorphose. Right now, after so much remixing and collaborating, Thirwell is trying to figure out what he can do all by himself.

"I'm taking a long road-trip through California and to Las Vegas to clear my head," he says. "Now that I have my studio set up at home, I don't even have to worry about working out structures ahead of time. I can just do it here and the process is a lot more intuitive and fun as a result. If I have a dream about music, I can just get up and try to work it out. I get a lot of ideas in my dreams, even complex arrangements. It's still too early for me to figure out what exactly I want to do, but I do have an idea."