Down 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.
Thirwell’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 plasticant 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 demen-tal genius of the Foetus releases (Horse, thick, pro-gungy pre-sample, tribal-beat- driven, industrial-strength music) or Wire-blood (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 over-stuffed trunk spill forth books and publications ranging from the autobiography of George-Show host Chuck Barris to true crime stories and political propaganda (Main Kamp 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 way, intertwining 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 mashed, muddied, 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 dapped 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 Pragvee 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, Prog, Murder, Inc., White Zombie, and putting together Meemorph Enudos, a compilation of his favorite underground American bands, 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, thrashing symphonic clash set in over a persistent pounding drum, with a strangely catchy old jazz beat sitting through: just when you think it will never, the recognizable beginning of a pop song chimes in. The Foetus aesthetic is chaos and order boxed up tight: its 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.

Time 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. 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’s just sitting here waiting for them to call me!’ These people never heard of Foetus, or know what’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 puérile 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 Uber Frisco, You’ve Got Foetus On Your Breaths), 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
“Lydia told me all her music secrets, which was great because I didn’t tell her any of mine.”
The difference between Foetus and the long list of people who imitate him is that Thirwell creates something larger — something throbbing, fantastical, 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.”

Marisa Fox wrote about body art in Issue 46.