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MARC JOSEPHIS

Unsung cult hero Jim Thirlwell

★ BEST OF MUSIC ★

Cracking The Whip

Meet the metal mind behind J.G. Thirlwell, Clint Ruin, Foetus, et al. By Carlo McCormick

Jim Thirlwell — aka J.G. Thirlwell, Clint Ruin, Foetus — is a musician's musician who has influenced almost as many rock groups as he's invented in an ever-expanding inventory of assumed aliases, assorted collaborative projects, and constantly changing guises that collectively construct only a partial picture of the epic Foetus mythos. His discography is as prolific as it is profound, and includes a host of collaborative projects with the likes of ex-Swans producer-extraordinaire Roli Mosimann (Wiseblood), Soft Cell frontman Marc Almond (Flesh Volcano), Lydia Lunch, Nick Cave, Thurston Moore (of Sonic Youth fame), Arto Lindsay, The The and Coil, as well as an impressive list of re-mixing and production studio credits with Sonic Youth, Mars, Bewitched, Prong, White Zombie, EMF, Swans, Boss Hog, Unsane, Cop Shoot Cop, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Silverfish, Nine Inch Nails and Motherhead Bug. However significant such a superstar list may be, the real importance of Thirlwell's contribution to our musical history is his far more obscure status as an unsung cult hero known for his pioneering studio work under a constantly changing facade of fabricated band projects. Thirlwell began churning out his own peculiar, outsider band of private, personal and brutally mutant sonic manipulations in the early 80's. At first putting out his own limited editions and his subsequent uneasy, often volatile arrangements with a slew of indie-rock labels, it is his oeuvre as Foetus — which included seminal recordings made under such unforgettably offensive titles as *You've Got Foetus on Your Breath*, *Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel*, *Foetus in Your Bed* and *Foetus Inc.* — that Thirlwell has charted an individual universe of psychosexual violence taken to cartoonish extremes. These blistering assaults on the senses have preceded and ultimately procreated much of the techno, industrial and hard rock genres that have come to dominate contemporary sensibilities and have launched the fame, and fortunes, of everyone but this original master. With a spate of recent releases available on Big Cat Records, including his latest project, Steroid Maximus' *Gondwanaland*, it's now up to you: accept no imitators. Foetus is the real thing.

Carlo McCormick: When you came to New York in '83, it seemed that there couldn't be a worse place to end up if one wanted to be a rock star. A few bands had made it out of this town, but statistically it's been something like the kiss of death, career-wise.

Jim Thirlwell: You're presupposing that I'm trying to be a rock star, and I didn't come here for the scene. I lived in London for five years and I'd done my time. I came here with Lydia [Lunch], Nick [Cave] and Marc [Almond] to do the Immaculate Consumptive tour, and I just loved the place. It was perfect for me, especially after London, which had become pretty torturous for me by then.

CM: But your timing has proven impeccable. You were in England during the late 70's and early 80's, which was an amazing time, musically speaking. Subsequently, in New York, you entered in what may historically prove to be a truly seminal rock scene.

JT: Again, that assumes that I'm having a good time bonding with what's going on musically around me, which just isn't so. I exist in a vacuum as far as what I create. Do I give a shit? I'm making what I make. London, when I moved there, was right for what I wanted to do. I couldn't have created what I did, in terms of the mechanisms, if I had stayed in Australia. London is the most drab, gray, inconvenient place to be, so eventually the time was right for me to come here.

CM: Your live shows, at places like the old Danceteria and the Ritz, were awesome as grotesque spectacles, but performing to backing tapes was a bit problematic for the New York rock crowd, who generally prefers a real band.

JT: I never really intended to do the tape thing for that long, if at all. It just sort of happened that way. There's so far you can go with it, and I took it as far as I could. I could never do that again, but it was a good money-maker — blow into town with a couple of quarter-inch tapes. But now, with a lot of these supposed live shows, everybody's doing it, so what's the point?

CM: There's something very personal, idiosyncratic and introspective about your solitary creative process.

JT: I just want to hone it down to a purity so that I have no one else to blame — in terms of my fault or theirs. It's a solitary vision with its own linear quality. It's like a personal diary that collectively delineates certain periods of my life and what I was going

CM: In putting together a touring band, or assembling your collaborators for Steroid Maximus, the resulting lineups are often something of a who's who of the underground, but in fact it's probably more like a circle of peers, or Jim's drinking buddies.

JT: Basically, it's people who can play good, who are locked into my vision and can take orders when I crack the whip.

CM: You're still a control freak?

JT: To a certain extent, in terms of the arrangement, but there's still a lot of flexibility within that. I think each player has a lot of personality. Because it's a live setup, I like the fact that it's different every night, we can stretch it or compress it.

CM: You still intend on doing your epic monumental shows?

JT: Yeah, but I like to think of them as action packed. I don't think of them as boring or jerking off. Not to use the word self-indulgent, however, because self-indulgence is basically what art is all about; that's self-expression. To not indulge yourself is to do formulaic pop.

CM: What led you to create Steroid Maximus?

JT: I'd been wanting to do an instrumental record for some time, as well as exorcise some of my collaborative demons. The Foetus records were becoming more and more instrumental, so I decided to split up the vocal and instrumental work for a while, and I used it as an excuse to import some of the people I wanted to work with into the studio.

CM: What exactly is the concept behind *Gondwanaland*?

JT: That's the name given to the single land mass that existed before the continental drift. The idea is bringing together all those musics and all those people — it being a world music for a world that doesn't exist, except in my mind. It's ethnic music for a future generation. I create my own ethnicity — a Foetusnicity. I create my own womb/tomb, my own Gondwanaland, the belly that I snuggle up to. It's an expression of my own universe. It takes you on a trip around Gondwanaland. The whole thing is sequenced in such a way as to take you on a voyage, a total mind-trip, a mind-fuck, a brain-weaving thing that's like a mini-movie without the images. You create your own images and the CD sleeves have been dosed with acid to help you do that. Just lick it. ★