

# PROPAGANDA

# FOETUS

Interview  
by  
Scott Crawford



Jim "Foetus" Thirlwell

Michele Taylor

In order to keep one step ahead of the authorities, criminals and terrorists have been known to frequently change their aliases. With this tactic as a cover, they can blend in with any given setting or situation. Thus is the case with musical terrorist Jim Thirlwell, 33. For years he's been making guerilla-style, hit-and-run attacks on an unsuspecting record-buying public, only to quickly submerge again into the cultural underground using a different moniker. A definite pattern, however, has been developing to Mr. Thirlwell's frequent name changes and musical incarnations. Using some good old-fashioned, detective footwork, we were able to fol-

low his trail of musical misdeeds and track him down.

Most commonly, he goes under the pseudonym Foetus Inc. This is the name he uses when he records as a solo artist and produces some of his most diabolical releases. Early incarnations of this Foetus trademark included the names You've Got Foetus On Your Breath and Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel. During this time, he lived in London — having made the trans-global trek from his native Australia at the tender age of 18 — and released his first assault on the public with the "OKFM / Spite In Your Face" single. Later came the DEAF Lp, where he juxtaposed sampled African

tribal chanting against the Popeye theme song. A musical terrorist with a sardonic sense of humor was born.

"You can imbue a sense of dread and horror to anything if you juxtapose it to something that is associated with such an orientation," explains Jim, the man of a thousand musical faces. "A lot of my early work relied heavily on that technique. Even today I make heavy use of playing on people's sense of association."

An effective terrorist knows the value of being able to terrorize and toy with people on a rational and irrational level. As Jim Thirlwell developed and honed his craft, he was able to apply his tool of juxtaposition more effectively using more advanced electronic and recording techniques. On the **NAIL** Lp, he drops Greig's "Hall Of The Mountain King" into the middle of "Throne Of Agony," a song about mercy killing. Jim's instrumentation and studio effects also became much more proficient with each successive release, including the **BEDROCK** and **RAMROD** Eps, which he recorded after having made the move to New York City. Terrorists also have to keep changing their location. His musical style was now at its most dangerous, some would even say demonic. How could one man create so much anarchy and mass confusion. Foetus Inc. recordings became incredibly complex and instrumentally diverse. Was Jim Thirlwell really the only one behind the myriad of instruments used on his records?

"Actually, the instrument I'm most adept at is the studio itself," says Jim. "I'll pick up a saxophone or a violin or whatever, and I'll only learn to play the rudimentary parts I need for that specific piece. Other than that, it's all studio manipulation and illusion. It's amazing what you can do with sampling these days. However, I have become somewhat proficient with certain instruments just out of necessity."

One man was thus able to become a veritable orchestra, and nowhere is this talent demonstrated more acutely than on the 1988 Lp, **THAW**, which contains his most recognized song to that date, "English Faggot," about a series of prank phone calls he had received. Probably the best chronicle of the progression of the Foetus sound is the **SINK** compilation Lp of 1990. It contains a collection of previously released singles, B-sides and unreleased gems, including "Lilith" — a foreboding instrumental masterpiece that ultimately proves an evil genius is at work.

Because Jim is such a master at studio techniques, his services have been sought after by many other recording artists — whether it be as a producer or as a collaborator in a side project. It is here where Jim not only makes the most varied use of his talents, but also makes the most functional use of his aliases.

"Even with the name Foetus itself, I've always seen fit to vary it as the content of my music changed," says Jim referring to the early variants of Foetus. "In fact, the first single, 'OKFM' was credited to Phillip And His Foetus Vibrations. When I started working on other projects and collaborations, however, I felt that any use of the name Foetus at all was inappropriate. Foetus had its own identity and I didn't want to corrupt it. Foetus became an entity unto itself, and I wanted it to represent my work as a solo artist only."

Jim "Foetus" Thirlwell saw collaboration with like-minded others as the perfect opportunity to express his many musical personalities. One such personality manifested itself as the pseudonym Clint Ruin, which he used in his projects with Lydia Lunch — the infamous **STINKFIST** Ep and the more recent **DON'T FEAR THE REAPER** Ep. As Clint Ruin, he also produced her latest album, **SHOTGUN WEDDING**. Jim and Lydia used to be romantically involved, and this torrid affair was documented in the N.Y.C. underground film classic, "Right Side Of My Brain" by Richard Kern.

"Lydia and I have always had a great working relationship," says Jim. "**DON'T FEAR THE REAPER** [a cover of the old Blue Oyster Cult classic] was something we both felt needed to be done because of all the people who were dying around us. It was very relevant. We basically have the same world view and tastes, which is something I look for in people I work with. Whatever project I'm involved with, I have to find it interesting."

Jim has also worked with singer Marc Almond on a one time project called **Flesh Volcano**. Along with Swiss super-producer Roli Mosimann (Swans, Young Gods), he created the



Fred Berger

### Jim recreates the Foetus sound in concert.

entity known as **Wiseblood**, which produced two Lps, **DIRT-DISH** and **PEDAL TO THE METAL** — and two singles.

"The premise of **Wiseblood** was to express Roli's and my impressions of life in New York City," explains Jim. "Both of us came from other places, so we had unique perspectives on it. Roli worked on the engineering and I did the instrumentation. It took us so long to complete because we both had so many other projects going."

Another totally separate entity that Jim became involved with was **Steroid Maximus**. This collaboration with the likes of Don Fleming and Raymond Watts became the perfect outlet for Jim's increasing interest in epic instrumental pieces. He had been doing quite a bit of instrumental work with Foetus, but saw **Steroid Maximus** as a more appropriate vehicle to go all out on that type of music.

"First of all, because it was a collaborative effort, I didn't want to involve the Foetus name. Anyway, Foetus albums were getting increasingly instrumental, and I felt it was losing its identity. So in the future, I want to keep Foetus more vocal oriented, and use most of my instrumental material for **Steroid Maximus**."

The result so far has been two monstrosly powerful S.M. Lps — **QUILOMBO** and **GONDWANALAND** — the latter being almost two hours of soul-stomping, industrial thunder.

"By splitting my work up in that fashion between Foetus and **Steroid Maximus**," adds Jim, "I could concentrate on one musical identity at a time — and people wouldn't be prone to having preconceptions about either."

Being involved with all these collaborations does have a down side, however. Jim has had to put a lot of his own projects on hold. This modern-day renaissance man is an ardent workaholic, so despite his involvement with so many joint efforts, he's amassed a huge backlog of his own material that he'd like to get out. Recently, he released a colossal triple-set live Lp with his band **Foetus In Excelsius Corruptus Deluxe** — the live incarnation of the Foetus recordings. Members include former Swans Norm Westerberg and Al Kizys, and keyboardist Dave Ouimet from **Cop Shoot Cop**.

"I want to concentrate more on Foetus for the foreseeable future," reveals Jim. "The last couple of years have been absolutely ridiculous. I haven't been able to get anything done concerning Foetus until very recently. I'd like to trim down on all the collaborations and name changes for awhile."

Could this long-time musical chameleon / terrorist be going straight? For the first time in four years, Foetus will be putting out a full studio Lp, to be released at the end of '92. But don't count on Mr. Thirlwell mellowing out, he says the new release will "rear its ugly head and take a bit out of the blasé music scene."

THE END