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Jim G. Thirlwell: The Man of a Thousand Skins

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HAVING THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PUTTING OUT A 'ZINE EVERY month sometimes makes me feel like somebody stuffed me inside a clothes dryer. After awhile, everything starts sounding too much the same. Then suddenly I stumble across an artist like Jim Thirlwell, whose musical creations challenge my ears and crisscross the lines of magic and madness. THEN I find out that he's been at it for almost a decade... and I begin to wonder where the hell I've been. Jim Thirlwell has perhaps influenced a whole generation of alternative rock artists, take for example Soundgarden, Nine Inch Nails or Cop Shoot Cop, bands who have found their way to the surface.

It's understandable why I wasn't familiar with Jim Thirlwell. He exists in an invisible world known as 'the underground', where thousands of bands and artists work their creative genius, yet only to be heard by a small minority of individuals (who try their best to keep this stuff a secret). Now Jim is finding his way to the surface with over 50 recordings (he told me to go to Tower Records and just look under every letter of the alphabet) under different aliases; FOETUS INC.- where Jim is the sole writer and performer; CLINT RUIN- one title he uses when he collaborates as a co-writer, producer, compiler; STERIOD MAXIMUS- Jim collaborates with various artists, creating an all-music collage; and WISEBLOOD, to name a few. He has also written soundtracks for several videos directed by Richard Kern.

But it doesn't end there. More recently, Jim Thirlwell has worked on remix projects, has produced and compiled other artists' material. In brief: EMF, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Nine Inch Nails, Prong, Silverfish, Cop Shoot Cop, White Zombie, Lydia Lunch, and the list goes on and on.

I was glad to have the opportunity to talk with Jim and he was a really nice guy, considering the enormous catalogue he has. So take my hand and jump into the world of the legendary Jim G. Thirlwell.

U.S.R.: So what have you been up to lately?

JIM: I'm writing material for a new Foetus album. It's coming along slowly but surely.

U.S.R.: Is this 'strictly' Foetus, or is this going to be a 'collaborated' Foetus? [Note: As a solo artist, Jim goes under the pseudonym of Foetus, Inc., and some Foetus creations such as FOETUS INTERRUPTUS or FOETUS ART TERRORISM involved other artists.]

JIM: It's going to be strictly Foetus.

U.S.R.: Your own insanity.

JIM: Yes, it's sort of a slow process, I'm doing a lot of weeding out and reassessing my writing techniques.

U.S.R.: I understand that you do a lot of your work out of your own home (in New York City).

JIM: Yeah, I'm doing all the composing and pre-production here. Some of it will come out of here, some I might bump up. I did all the STERIOD MAXIMUS stuff here and the last Foetus single ("Butterfly Potion") was done here.

U.S.R.: How is the Foetus material constructed? Do you mainly use computer sequencing?

JIM: Lately I've been structuring things with computer, but it's not strictly samples, it's whatever inspires me at that moment. I've got some things going on acoustically. I try to stay away from any formula. With me, every song starts differently; not every song will start with a beat. A song might start with a looped sampled sound or might start with an idea I have for a beat, or start with something sonically which I would lay down on a couple of tracks acoustically and build up around that, or manipulate sounds. It really depends on its preconceived notion and other times it's fishing around with sounds.

U.S.R.: I recently discovered that you play a multitude of instruments, and if you're not particularly adept at a certain instrument, you use your studio knowledge....

JIM: ...to make it sound like I can play.

U.S.R.: Yeah! (laughing). Probably one of the most unusual and complex instruments I've come across is the sitar. Have you ever played one of those?

JIM: The only time I ever played a sitar, was once while I was in an Indian restaurant when the sitar player just handed it to me and I plunked around on it a bit. For some reason he just handed it to me, and I was sitting at a table with about ten people, so I just went plunk, plunk, plunk! It's an interesting instrument, because it employs a different kind of music scale, as opposed to Western music. Tonally, it's a great instrument and it's also what they do with it; the bending of notes. I like a lot of classical Indian music, but I like a lot of cheesy Indian pop music. I went through a period of time where I couldn't listen to contemporary Western music, so I listened to a lot of ethnic music and classical music, because it was coming from a deeper place and the aim behind it was religious or celebratory, and it wasn't mired down in the concept of the personality or ego gratification, like having a hit on the charts and fitting somewhere in the contemporary framework. I found that liberating.

U.S.R.: *Getting to your most current projects, I was interested in the compilation that you helped with; MESOMORPH ENDUROS (features a very nice collection of indie rock bands). I noticed that it is doing very well on the college radio charts.*

JIM: I'm putting together Volume Two.

U.S.R.: *When putting together a compilation such as this, it's like a dream. It's like, wow, you can put all your favorite bands together on a compact disc. What was the criteria as far as deciding which groups would end up on*

MESOMORPH ENDUROS?

JIM: Big Cat Records had been talking for some time about putting together a compilation of American bands, and I kept saying to them 'you gotta get this band, you gotta get that band' and a lot of them they hadn't heard of or didn't know how to contact. They eventually said to me, 'well why don't you just put it together?' and I said 'fine'. So I made a list of about 40 bands and then whittled that down, then I contacted all the people.

U.S.R.: *One thing that is very striking about the disc is the way it flows; the order and styles of the bands.*

JIM: That was very important to me and it took a long time. It took about nine months to put it together; from sifting through all the bands, sifting through all the tracks I wanted to use, or seeing if they had unreleased stuff. A couple of the tracks were specifically recorded for this; the Cop Shoot Cop and the Motherhead Bug tracks were recorded just for that. About another five or six tracks were unreleased and some of them were very limited releases.

U.S.R.: *It's the perfect way to initiate yourself to the underground rock scene, like people can hear this and if they like one of the bands, they can go out and pick up a full-length record.*

JIM: Yeah, that's the idea, of putting some lesser-known bands in. Someone might know Cop Shoot Cop, so they will hear Pain Teens, Thinking Fellers or something, and also it's priced very cheaply. It's a good way to introduce these bands. While I'm not particularly a big fan of compilations, I always feel that they're usually a bunch of tracks thrown together and there's a bunch of losers; filler in there. So that was also a big factor as far as criteria was concerned- that each of the tracks complimented each other and dynamically fit together and felt like an album, instead of a patchwork of a bunch of stuff thrown together.

U.S.R.: *You have put out your own stuff on your own label.*

JIM: When I started, I formed a label and the first six releases were totally self-released, promoted and distributed. After awhile I hooked up with Some Bizarre, which put out a bunch of my stuff. Then I moved on to Big Cat in Europe, who is distributed by Cargo here. I've kept the Self Immolation label, which is the label I started myself as kind of a corporate identity for Foetus records. There is another wing of it called Ectopic Enterprises, which is the corporate identity for non-Foetus stuff like Steroid Maximus, Wiseblood, stuff like that.

U.S.R.: *Your repertoire is quite extensive, and you've worked very hard for many years. Where is it all leading, and where do you go from here?*

JIM: I'm trying to consolidate because I work in so many different areas. Also, of course, it's like an uphill battle when I start a new project, say Steroid Maximus, for example. You've got to educate people that it's me, and it's pretty much commercial suicide because I've done every record as Foetus. The name changes are for a different concept and a different permutation of people and a different intent I have for each thing. So it's hard to knock down the reasoning behind the name changes. There is boredom with keeping the same name. With Wiseblood, it's specifically myself and Roli Mosimann. With Steroid, I had a few impetuses behind it, being that I wanted to do some all-instrumental records because the Foetus stuff had increasingly become more instrumental, to the point of where it was pretty much 50/50. The vocal aspect seemed to detract from the musical disparity. Another intention of Steroid was to make music that was non-literal. By the addition of lyrics, you are giving people some sort of reference point and I wanted the listener to create their own story.

U.S.R.: *Now, GONDWANALAND is your second Steroid Maximus release. I noticed that the first cut on it is actually the title of your first Steroid release.*

JIM: Yeah, the previous one was ¡QUILOMBO!, which was originally two twelve inch Eps. Each Ep was one track remixed and re-edited from GONDWANALAND, with four non-album tracks on it. It got to be so expensive that I decided to combine the two Eps into one album. It was ten tracks, so it was album length. GONDWANALAND has got more of a concise song structure to it, and ¡QUILOMBO! has some floating pieces in there, which didn't necessarily fit in to the GONDWANALAND concept. I ended up coming up with so much material and I worked on it for so long that I didn't realize that I had finished it. I didn't realize the amount of material that I had until I left town for awhile and took tapes with me, and listened to them without the pressure of working. I realized, 'god, I've finished it.'

U.S.R.: *I noticed that you worked with Away from VoiVod on Steroid Maximus. Is he still in VoiVod? They've done an awful lot of changing around that I've lost touch.*

JIM: Yes, he's still there. Their bass player left and they did an album without the bass player. I think they just finished a new album.

U.S.R.: *What was Away's role on the Steroid project?*

JIM: We've known each other and talked about collaborating for quite awhile, and when it finally came time to working on GONDWANALAND, I imported some people specifically. I flew people in from various places and had them stay with me, with the intention of just working. I got Away to come down and we did four tracks. Three of them emerged; one on ¡QUILOMBO! and two on GONDWANALAND. I imported Raymond Watts as well, who was living in Berlin at the time. The Pizz, who was an artist from Long Beach, came in, who I had known for some time through Rough Winds. He had this concept of covering "Powerhouse" by the Raymond Scott Orchestra for a single. I said, 'yeah, if you fly in, we'll do it on the proviso that I can put it on the Steroid album', which was cool. It came out as a limited edition 7" on Sympathy For The Record Industry, with the one song as a single, and the other side as an etching which he did. We also just completed the second Garage Monsters single, which will come out as a colored vinyl 10" on Sympathy, in the next month or two.

U.S.R.: *When I listen to Steroid Maximus, it gives me the impression of real drama, as if you had intended it to be for a movie soundtrack. Have you ever considered taking it that far?*

JIM: Well, it was kind of a semi-intention, to take it to directors that I like. But it took awhile to come out and it seems, as it usually happens, that my releases tend to come out a year or so after I've completed them and whatever my mindset was when I completed them has changed during that year or two into something totally different, so now that it's finally out, I don't really feel like sitting down and working on a soundtrack at this point in time because now I want to work on the Foetus stuff and do a world tour. I've done some dabbings into soundtrack work and have had a few offers. Some of my finished stuff has been worked into films. I've had little cameos here and there. I've been working on this show for MTV; MTV Sports- I did some music for that; some stings and lead-ins, also some voice-overs.

U.S.R.: Now that you've had your hands in a lot of major projects, do you feel that your career is moving forward at a different pace? How do you view that?

JIM: If I just concentrated on that and decided not to do my own music, I'd be a very rich man. I've produced a couple of albums in the last year; for the Silverfish and The Beyond. I've pretty much given up production, mainly because it's too time consuming. I can't put my own work on the back-boiler for that long. I much prefer remixing because with remixes, the band has made their definitive statement for that song, and when they turn it over to me for a remix, they're asking me to pervert it and put my input into it, which I get a lot more creative input and do a lot of my own writing in there. A lot of remixes I've done sound, to me, very Foetus-y, and that is a lot more creative than sitting down with a band and trying to eek out their best performance. I'd rather they do that work then turn over their multi-tracks, once they have come up with their definitive vision. Then I impose my vision upon that. I can stretch a lot more, and there's not the pressure of trying to please the band. I'm just pleasing myself. I can take free reign, and it seems the more I push the envelope, the more they seem to like it.

U.S.R.: It appears as if remixing has become quite a big hit among the industry and an awful lot of people are doing it. Do you see it as some sort of corporate trend thing that is capitalizing on an art form, or what?

JIM: I think there's really a lot of different sides to that. I think that remixing is an art and I think it's a relatively new art. It has only been since the start of the 80's since it has become a prevalent thing. This is probably bullshit, but I see a certain parallel, certainly with my remixes, with somebody like Warhol. There's an element of re-appropriation and integrating different things. I see one of my roles as a perverter. The more I pervert, the more they seem to like it. And the more I pervert, the more I like it. I don't feel any pressure. I take the wackiest idea that I have and put it in there. I don't have anyone looking over my shoulder. People pretty much tell me to fuck it up as much as I like. It's great, I really enjoy that.

U.S.R.: So what you're really doing is embracing this as your 'own' art.

JIM: I feel like it's one of my babies. I can take something where I might not particularly be into the artist or into the song, and part of the criteria is listening to it and saying, 'oh I know what I can do with this,' then I'm going to be happy with it and really like it. But then from the record company viewpoint; you take an artist. You have the core audience of any one artist. Say they release five versions of the one single. Say the first week they'll put out the regular single with a remix, then the next week they'll put out two 12", each of which will have a remix by me and a remix by, who knows, Black Sheep or 808 State. Then you have all these different formats. I think in England they have a limit to the actual number of formats you can have. The hardcore fan will buy every version, which pushes it higher onto the charts. That's the concept behind that. Also it gives more longevity to the consciousness of the album. Say somebody didn't like the first single but they hear a radical version of the song and like it, so it sustains the album for a lot longer. There's a lot of different reasonings within it.

U.S.R.: Have you ever turned the tables and had someone else do a remix of some Foetus stuff? (Man, would that be a rush!) Would you ever consider it?

JIM: Um... well I say 'no' now, but it's not totally out of the question. With my stuff, production and composition are heavily linked when I come to composing the sounds and the nature of sounds. It won't really make sense. I personally couldn't stand the idea of turning over my masters to someone and having them come up with it, considering that you're paying them a fee and studio time. It's too costly to risk. And I don't really know anyone that I would trust. With many of the people that I have done they are so entrenched in the biz and so used to this happening to them; I've come across people that haven't listened to the remixes that I have done.

U.S.R.: Oh no! That is sad.

JIM: I don't really want to name 'names', but fuck them. If I spent five days, and they can't take five minutes to listen to what I've bled my artistic soul on to and come up with something that I'm proud of. I took a long time in selecting what I thought was aesthetically right and taking their song to a much better plane... well fuck 'em, 'cause I'm really proud of every remix that I have done.

U.S.R.: After everything is said and done, and there's so many things going on in your life, there must definitely be a need for 'release', obviously now that you are concentrating on Foetus. I mean, after you just said that some artists are 'too busy' to listen to their own remix, that has to generate a bit of anger inside.

JIM: Only when they say that. Everything I do, I'm doing it for myself. I'm not doing it for an audience, the A & R man or particularly for the band, I'm doing it for myself. People are hiring me because they want my vision in there. So if they don't listen to it or they do listen to it, at least I've got my copy. I've got the satisfaction of playing for myself or my friends. That's another piece of music that I've created that I'm proud of, and that's bottom line. I don't care if it's not a hit or if it's not released. I've got a lot of stuff that I have done that hasn't been released.

U.S.R.: Getting back to the Foetus stuff; when the record is finished and you are gearing up for a tour, who actually goes out on the road with you as a band?

JIM: It depends on the people I've worked with on the past few tours. They're all in other bands as well. It's not like I can have a band on a payroll to go out whenever I want to. On the last tour, it was Al Kizys on bass, Norman Westerburg on guitar, Eric Hubal on guitar, Dave Ouimet from Motherhead Bug on keyboards and Vinnie Seniorelli on drums, and I'd like to take that band out again. This band was on the double live thing, except I had Hon Roe, who plays violin and guitar. That was great because so many of my pieces use strings and I could rearrange some of the songs which were never intended to be played live. So it really depends on what I can afford at the time because I don't really have label support or tour support. The last tour I did of the States I lost a shitload of money and it came straight out of my pocket. I'm still trying to recover from that. It's a matter of restructuring the way I'm working so everything's not coming out of my pocket and I got a deal worked out where I have labels in each country bear the brunt of that. I need to know that my records are out and in the stores. I'm not going to blow into a town and the show hasn't been promoted, no one knows that we're there and the record isn't in the stores, stuff like that.

U.S.R.: So what's on the burner that hasn't been released yet?

JIM: There's a bunch of remixes that I've done; the last few remixes I did were Pantera, Curve and The The- I think that just sneaked out. I did one for The Cult, The Garage Monsters thing, then this Foetus thing.

U.S.R.: Any tentative date for Foetus?

JIM: Well, I got to write the goddamn thing, but... well I wrote six songs and by the time I got to the sixth song, it made me want to throw out songs two, three, four and five. I've a very rigorous self-critic; I'm sure there's germs there but I'm doing a lot of self-flagellation at the moment. I'm trying to dig deeper. I'll be focusing in such a way that I'll have a video budget and singles coming off the album. Oh yeah, there will be a live video coming out; it's pretty much based on the live album [FOETUS IN EXCELSIUS CORRUPTUS DELUXE]. It will have a full hologram cover. It will be a total eye-fuck.

U.S.R.: *Now you have done all the art-work for your album covers and stuff.*

JIM: In the distance... well I did this thing called THE FOETUS OF EXCELLENCE back in '84 when I first got together with Some Bizarre, and one of the provisos was

that I wanted to do an album, then four 12"s, then the next release was going to be an empty box to put those records in. That was THE FOETUS OF EXCELLENCE and we did a thousand copies. I put in a t-shirt to defray the costs. So there will be THE FOETUS OF EXCELLENCE TWO, which will be a box and inside will be an 11 x 11 book with reproductions of all my art-work, lyrics and philosophical writings. That's a couple years in the future.

U.S.R.: *That was actually another question I forgot to ask; whether or not you were dabbling with books.*

JIM: There is a comic book that just came out that I did a cameo in, Savage Henry. It's me and Savage Henry getting up to mischief, drinking a crate full of Tequila.

U.S.R.: *Which are your favorite comic books?*

JIM: I'm not into super-hero shit, totally underground. Hate and Eightball are totally awesome.

U.S.R.: *Do you think by doing all this stuff will keep you young or make you old?*

JIM: I think I get more juvenile the older I get. ★