

US ROCKER

April 1993

Issue No. 6

Jim G. Thirlwell: The Man of a Thousand Skins

By BRENDA MULLEN
EDITOR

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?*

