

Foetus Maximus

Jim Thirlwell, a demon for all seasons
BY SKYLAIRE ALFVEGREN

"I CAN'T WAIT TO SLIP INTO MY NANO-TECHNOLOGY body," remarks J.G. Thirlwell, pioneer of the musical genre sloppily referred to as "industrial." He's just finished the Ray Kurzweil tome *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, and is discussing the coming advances in mechanical physiology: miniature, self-replicating robots deployed internally to repair damaged organs. Slate-gray eyes sparkling, he enthuses, "I can't wait to become a robot."

Thirlwell left his native Melbourne, Australia, for London in the late '70s, where he flirted with the likes of extreme-noise kings Whitehouse and avant-catastrophist David Tibet of Current 93. Yet his dictatorial tendencies soon compelled him to forge his own personal swath of carnage. He rebirthed himself as Foetus, whose gift for sonic apocalypse has been apparent since he self-released *Deaf* in 1981.

The red-white-and-black graphics and four-letter titles (*Nail, Hole, Ache*) of Thirlwell's sick-pun signatures (Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel, Foetus Interruptus, Foetus Inc.) represent a proto-Columbine world-view, best captured on the 1990 live double album *Male*. If Foetus hits you, it's a simultaneous slash to the heart and the head. Greased with misanthropy, vile and bile, his lyrics are a crazy, manic tonic, pistol-whipping your subconscious. Eyes-rolling-back-in-the-head possessed, Thirlwell knows that sometimes it's a triumph to simply maintain a pulse.

Sure, Foetus is a big bludgeoning rock machine, but listen closely: To short-change Foetus by calling it "industrial music" is like saying Frank Lloyd Wright built stuff. Every epic crescendo, every blaring horn, every whip of the synth is transcendent, operating on a level deeper and more visceral than most Western music is capable of. It's as if the demon in *The Exorcist* had been cast into the body of Brian Setzer instead of Linda Blair. Jim Thirlwell, your toxic troubadour, understands music's true purpose: to stir the soul.

The mind-numbing textural depth Thirlwell has become known for is plastered all over the recent *Flow*, which he produced, arranged, composed, recorded and performed, with the exception of a nibble of guitar and violin. Invoking car chases, curdled love affairs and a "particular Hollywood-jazz-crime-scene," *Flow* is the most fully realized Foetus disc to date, and, like Chinese finger torture, it becomes more complex with each listen. For this project, Thirlwell went "back to the old school," constructing the music at his own Self Immolation Studios in New York (where he's lived since the early '80s).

But Foetus, he says, is "only one part of the franchise." Thirlwell's ripples in popular music have resulted in hurricanes. He's largely worked alone, but there have been collaborations: Wiseblood, a whiskey-soaked, blood-on-the-ivories tent revival with Swans' Roli Mosimann; percussive poetry with Lydia Lunch as Stinkfish; and Steroid Maximus, something altogether indescribable. In the studio, he's been the wizard behind the curtain for such acts as Coil, Nine Inch Nails, Prong, Voivod, Marilyn Manson and the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

This year, in between the release of three entirely separate but equally ambitious albums — *Flow*, *Blow* (the *Flow* remix album) and *Vohvox Turbo*, with new side project Manorexia — Thirlwell has just completed a U.S. tour and will be leaving for Europe next month (where he hopes to lug his laptop studio along on the road, "to keep the perpetual motion machine going"). He still manages to slot in the random remix, and is working on a new Steroid Maximus album, due sometime in 2002.



Nice day for an exorcism

WIKKE REIMANN

Show" at the Exit Gallery in Soho. Scheduled to hit stores September 16, *Blow*, the companion to *Flow*, features celebrity remixes by Kid 606, Panacea, DJ Food, PanSonic, Franz Treichler (the Young Gods) and Phylr, among others. Thirlwell is finalizing plans for a *Blow* extravaganza to be held in L.A. sometime in January.

Most exciting is Thirlwell's newest incarnation as Manorexia, whose all-instrumental "monsterpiece" *Vohvox Turbo* (available only through www.foetus.org or at shows) is a creepy crawl through a global village that's equal parts Valhalla, Hades and Tatooine; he'll be bringing it to UCLA in spring. With Manorexia, "I'm the action man," he says. "One of the criteria was that I trust my first instinct, and that created a freedom I don't remember ever having."

LIKE MOST GREAT THINGS, THIRLWELL'S MUSIC IS timeless, but one can also trace the evolution of recording technology through his work. "When I started out, I was using tape machines. Sampling technology didn't exist. When sampling came along, it offered a different way of organizing things. Now the technology that once cost \$1 million can be taken home in a box. I'm certainly not a Luddite, but I have kept one foot in the Stone Age. Definitely, production and engineering have always in-

pumpled religion and history in his work. "Some things that I find screamingly hilarious, other people find offensive, and sometimes people gloss over what I think is deadly serious." (You need only glance at Manorexia titles like "The Hardened Artery" and "Tubercular Bells" to know it's pure Thirlwell.)

He won't cop to multiple personalities (although yet another long-lost alter-ego, Clint Ruin, performed at the Fetish Ball in February), but Thirlwell says he's practiced in the art of "plate-spinning." "My whole life is about having armor," he says. "I view those characters as a way to interface with the world." He spent 12 years in an all-boys Baptist school, and even back then, "I remember the chaplain telling me I needed to have more faith."

This year's burst of activity results from the fact that Thirlwell has laid low for the last few years. He used to drink — constantly and so much that while on tour in Europe in 1997, he tripped and fell offstage, breaking both hands. "I got to the point where I was vacillating between abject terror and blackouts," he says. "It was like that death wish I'd been expressing for myself for so many years started to become real, and I sort of put the brakes on and thought, 'Is this the way I want to go out?'"

It's not surprising that the act of creating music has become even more cathartic since he's become sober.

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