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SCRAPING FOETUS OFF THE VINYL

Many names hath Jim Thirlwell. One of them is Jim Foetus, accorded him for the string of brilliant, frequently disturbing, sometimes hilarious records he started releasing in 1980, under cognomens like *Foetus Under Glass*, *You've Got Foetus On Your Breath*, *Foetus Uber Frisco*, *Foetus-Art-Terrorism* and *Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel*.

These sound like band names, but the records were performed and produced entirely by Jim—originally a native of Melbourne, Australia, who emigrated to England in 1978—and released on his own Self-Immolation label.

Thirlwell is no monomaniacal recluse, though. He also has a gift for collaboration, and has done so copiously, with artists such as Mark Almond, Nick Cave, Coil, Arto Lindsay and Lydia Lunch. On the entrepreneurial side, he's responsible for bringing the formidable German industrial/noise group Einstürzende Neubauten to the English-speaking world.

In 1986, Thirlwell shifted his base of operations to New York, taking on another name and persona: Clint Ruin. Mr. Ruin's first public act was to start the group Wiseblood with musician/producer Roli Mosimann (Swans, *That Petrol Emotion*). The open-ended, almost folk-blues, orientation of much Wiseblood material seemed a reaction against the precision craftsmanship of the Foetus records. But now, Thirlwell has returned to the Foetus format once again with a brand-new album: *Thaw*.

Q: What sort of considerations went into the new Foetus album?

A: Well, it's something that's been brewing for a long time. It's the most spontaneous, the most honest, and the most noisy and abrasive Foetus record in some ways. And in other ways, it's the most irresistible. Definitely it's the most undeniable.

Q: It's all you once again?

A: Yes, it's all me.

Q: How was the album constructed?

A: It was just something I had to nurture. I was

approaching the sound a lot more sculpturally. And as such, the sound itself is often the be all and end all: It's not the sort of music that you could necessarily score or anything like that. It's very textural at times. I think some people will find it unbearably intense. I think other people will find it sort of a revelation. It's definitely my most important record. I'm really proud of it. I like to say Side One is the side to kill your parents by and Side Two is the side to kill yourself by.

Q: The earlier Foetus records were a revelation because they were so tight. Every sound had maximum impact because it was so carefully placed in the mix.

A: For me, the production and structure are as intrinsic to the song as the music. I don't really draw a line between composition and production. So, therefore, there is an obvious placement of ideas and trying to distill structure into getting across as much power as possible. And of course, the marriage between the lyrics and the music has always been very important. The two are really inextricable.

Q: The first Foetus records came at the dawn of the MIDI era. What kind of gear did you use to put them together?

A: On the very first one, the "Foetus Under Glass" single, I was using a Wasp, a Korg MS20, guitar, drums and vocals. Both sides were re-



Jim 'Foetus' Thirlwell and his Art Terrorist tactics

corded and mixed in one day. I was really experimenting in public on those early records. I didn't really reconcile myself with my voice until at least the next record. That first one was really going straight from brain to tape without much standing back and reassessing or anything like that. Those first six records I did were all eight-track stuff.

Q: Did you have a home studio?

A: No. I was renting studio time. I had a fulltime job and I'd save up and go in the studio on my weeks off. Hence the total nervous condition of the entire project. When I look back on those records now, I kind of cringe a little. But I'm glad I had the balls to do it. I'd never really been able to play those instruments. But it was a direct reaction to being in a group for 10 months and realizing that I had to deal with other people with assholeish or puerile ideas, which I had no time for whatsoever. So I felt that, even though I couldn't play a given instrument in a technically accomplished manner, that's not what I wanted to come across. What I wanted to get across was my pure, undiluted personal vision. It took me a few records to find my grounding in that way.

I see the first Foetus era as being from '80 to '83, which were my eight-track days. Then I moved on to 24 track, which was a liberation.

Q: On that record, it sounds as though you were fairly deep into whatever sequencers were available at the time.

A: No, not at all, actually. There's no sequencing on that record at all. Apart from some snare drums sampled on an AMS, there's not even any sampling on that record. At that point, I was still using things like delay lock-ins, and weird convoluted stuff where I would create tape loops and put them down in multiples, maybe on eight different tracks, and then play the mixing desk and construct pieces by bounces or stuff like that. It was a lot more weird than plain old sequencing.

For the song on there called "I'll Meet You In Poland, Baby," it took about five days to construct the basic track, which started off with my vocal. I put down this one phrase, "suck on this, squarehead" and locked [a repeating digital delay pattern] in on the word "head." And that formed the basis for the rhythms of the song. And then I put down the first verse and put a lock-in on the last word of each line. And then I went through a painstaking, agonizing process of using a cheezy digital delay and trying to keep it in time with these lock-ins by tweaking the speed knobs, which was absolutely ridiculous, compared to what I can do now. I'm kind of glad I went through it, though, because it wouldn't have sounded the same way if it had all been perfectly sequenced.

Q: So when you say the entire production is locked into the lyrics, it's in a very real sense.

A: Very much so. I very often get down to some crass, almost illustrative approaches to the lyrics, depending on what the song is. But it's always built around that. Accenting key moments and stuff like that.

Q: By the time you got to, say, the Nail record, it seems that sampling had become a major part of your music.

A: Pretty much, yeah. For that record, certainly. Since then, my ideas have gone off in lots of different directions. I now know how much to use and how much not to use. But sampling, when it came in, was kind of what I had been doing all along anyway, which was always organization of taped sounds. From my very first single, there's a lot of tape collage and stuff like that. Sampling just provided a tool which let me shape these collages a lot more easily.

I'm always astounded that people use that tool so crassly and with such limited imagination. The most creative sound manipulation seems to be going down in rap now. And no one's thinking of using it in a non-dance kind of format, which is pretty necessary, I think.... Really, a lot of my initial ideas are more out of the John Cage school of tape manipulation as opposed to some schmuck who might come up in England and sample Public Enemy and [derisively] get hailed as a new groundbreaking force or whatever.

Q: Are there any samplers you find particularly suited to your work?

A: Right now I'm using the Akai S900 a lot. On the last LP, I was using two of them and the Performer [Mark of the Unicorn's Mac sequencing program]. And some secondary stuff with a Mirage. And then a lot of guitar. A lot of live percussion, live violin, voices, tape—whatever is appropriate at any one time.

Q: What led you to put down the Foetus projects circa '86 and get into Wiseblood and the other projects you've done as Clint Ruin?

A: The Wiseblood project was something that I specifically wanted to do when I first became based in New York. It was initially going to be an all percussion and vocal thing. I wanted to have three drummers and a vocalist, and the third drummer that I approached was Roli Mosimann, who I knew from being in Swans at that

time; and who I thought was just an incredible drummer. He was setting up his programming studio at that point, and we got together as the nucleus of that. It just ended up going in a more electronic direction than I had wanted. That was around the time I was finishing off Nail.

Q: Tell me about the record you made with Lydia Lunch.

A: That actually started in 1983. We wrote a piece called "Stinkfist." We initially conceived it as one long piece, which we were going to do to support Einstürzende Neubauten in London, but that fell through. We performed it a few times, in New York with Normon Westerberg of Swans, and in L.A. with Chris Martinez who used to be in the Red Hot Chili Peppers and was also in Lydia's band, 1313. I always wanted to document the thing, but we never got around to it.

Then, when Lydia was in L.A. in '85 or '86, I put together this session with Chris, who had this drum ensemble which consisted of himself, D.J. Bonebrake from X, Spit from Fear and this guy called Neil. I brought the tape back to New York and took it to Roli Mosimann, my partner in grime in Wiseblood, and we stripped it down, restructured it, re-edited it and just came up with this mutant monster called "Stinkfist." Then I recorded another piece called "The Meltdown Oratorio," which starts off with a spoken word piece by Lydia and then goes into this disgusting, frantic, post-apocalyptic surf instrumental, which then turns into this monstrous avalanche of sound towards the end. Yeah, I'm really happy with that record.

Q: Is your programming studio in New York?

A: Yeah.

Q: What kind of stuff do you have there?

A: Just a small mixing desk. I've got an Atari 1040 and I'm working with the Creator software [C-Lab's sequencing program, distributed in the U.S. by Digidesign]. I've got the S900, Yamaha SPX-90 [digital effects processor] Kawai K1 keyboard, Roland JX3P, my invaluable Electro Harmonix four-second sampler and Digi-tech 7.6 delay sampler. Hey man, I'm giving away all my secrets. Violins, guitars, amps, African choirs, dancing girls....



"Suck on this, squarehead"