

David Grad MUSIC



Mighty Whitey: Scraping Foetus Off the Disc

TO HEAR JIM THIRLWELL TELL IT, HE'S almost mainstream. "My music appeals to everybody from three to 70 years old. I think that Bruce Springsteen or Frank Sinatra could sing my songs, and I would love it if they did."

You hesitate to contradict—you don't want to break the spell of his distant growl drawing you into the warm vortex of whatever his high is. Whether he's on a mainline connection to his muse or has recourse to more mundane means of intoxication doesn't seem important; as Thirlwell's voice envelopes you, the power of the contact buzz loosens the spine and makes the tips of your fingers tingle.

I'm surprised. I hadn't expected talking to a man who's released a significant amount of his work under the names Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel and You Have Foetus On Your Breath to be such a relaxing experience. But Thirlwell is charming, if in a touchy sort of way, and after setting the ground rules ("I hate repeating myself. I hate putting too much interpretation on my work.") he undergoes interrogation with reasonably good humor.

Australian by birth, Thirlwell arrived in the U.S. via England in the early 80s, ready to expand on the work of Throbbing Gristle and other European pioneers who had harnessed technology to the cause of aggressive alienation. He gave most Americans their first extended education in the disturbing potential of mixing rock's traditional tools with electronics. It was a lesson that took almost a decade to sink in; today he holds the dubious honor of having both NIN's Trent Reznor and Ministry's Al Jourgenson claim him as inspiration for their tepid "industrial" explorations.

Though he has benefited some from the popularity of sequenced angst, having done extensive remixes of Reznor's work, for instance, the only time an edge creeps into his voice is when he's asked what he considers "the inevitable question." The one about the relative crumbs awarded to pop culture's real innovators.

"What can I say? For a while I felt bitter about a lot of bands. I've learned my lesson about naming names. What am I fucking supposed to say? My new work is so far ahead of anybody else it's going to take five years to rip off."

Thirlwell describes his work as confrontational yet irresistible. This could be extended to the "Foetus" moniker itself, which ties with the Dead Kennedys as my favorite band name of all time. Asked about it, he responds somewhat enigmatically. "Names like that, you can't deny them. One can be offended by them, but you can't deny them. Everybody has been a foetus. What's offensive about a foetus is the context you put it in. Dead Kennedys? There are Dead Kennedys. You do scrape foetus off the wheel. You do have foetus on your breath."

It's the confrontational side of his work that has gained him notoriety. Working with filmmaker Richard Kern in the 80s, he and Lydia Lunch created some, well, sphincter-tightening portrayals of sexual violence and fist-fucking. He chuckles now at what were also clearly private jokes. "I don't think they were the greatest things in the world. I was into a little transgression thing, and I've got to admit I enjoyed it at that point. I'm really glad I did it. I think they're as funny as hell. I just did it to be perverse. I was just being a bad boy."

The Kern films and songs like "English Faggot" cemented an image of Foetus in certain censorious circles as a rabid homophobe and misogynist. Ironically, that song was based on a telephone message on his machine: "You English faggot, I know where you live. I'm going to wait for you and fuck you up." He says the song was written in part as an exorcism and in part to expose "the stupidity of that kind

of violence." He learned that not all the consumers of pop culture are sophisticated enough to appreciate parody delivered in the first person: he received one letter inviting him on a gay-bashing expedition, and was banned from Dutch radio.

The error was understandable; when Thirlwell plays out his scenarios, he can be horrifyingly convincing. He seems to have easy access to that snarling id most people need a liter of tequila or a mob context to unleash. What keeps him from spiraling off into actual sputtering rage?

"I try to create in a vacuum. When I write, I impose upon myself a total boycott of other people's music, just so I can create from inside myself as much as possible. One of the ironic things is how many quotes from tv commercials come through during this process, like 'I can't believe it ain't butter' or 'Be all that you can be.' I assimilate so much—trash culture, Stockhausen, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the New Bomb Turks—it's all in the mix, and it's all filtered through me."

A new Foetus release, *Gash* (Columbia), is due in stores April 18. It's the latest product of a creative process in which Thirlwell channels his manic energy and sends his muse bodysurfing on a wave of aural violence. His ability to appropriate and then embody his sources was heightened by the ethereal urban atmosphere in which he recorded the CD.

"The studio that I was working in was on 47th and 7th, and had a view of that 50-foot bottle of Coke with the hydraulic cap that comes off and the very phallic straw going down. That was my view for three months. Then the sun would set. I would be looking out the window and the lights in Times Square would go on and I would be blasting out a mix. The whole thing totally bled onto the album."

In the past he's spread his fascination for rock, big band and thunderfuck sequencing over separate releases, but it all comes together on *Gash*—often in the same song. Thirlwell gladly admits to advancing culture here. "A lot of electronics is cut and paste, and

I am to a certain extent a sound sculptor, but first and foremost I am a songwriter. On *Gash* I think I have created a new form of music, going within the same song from glam rock to world music, then punk rock meets noise and then into big band. I'm not being deliberately perverse, it's all cohesive and flows dynamically. It's Foetus music."

He may overestimate its significance, but it's bound to be controversial. The sampled voice heard underneath the swelling strings that open "Take It Outside, Godboy" is Daniel Rakowitz, recounting how as an 11-year-old he faced down his father with a gun ("I may be your son but I'm also your lord"). Thirlwell says the song was inspired by the gunning down of the abortionist in Pensacola. The constant references to getting on your knees and giving Jesus a present on his birthday couldn't be mistaken for anything but irony even by the most MTV-impaired. The song's title, by the way, is from an exchange between Homer Simpson and his neighbor Ned Flanders.

Thirlwell's dead-on descriptions of race relations in New York might cause some discomfort. He's lived in "Dumbo" (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass) for the past eight years, and *Gash* is thick with a resulting white-boy fear. Of the song "They Are Not So True" he says, "That's written about me going down to the deli three blocks away from where I live and trying to get a six-pack after they've closed up the main part of the store. You have to buy everything through a bulletproof window. It's about the intimidation factor that's part of hanging out with the homeboys on line."

In the same vein, "Mighty Whitey" should set off all your liberal alarms. It was inspired by Thirlwell's walking past a prison bus on its way to Rikers and having the prisoners yell out at him, "Yo, John Lennon! Yo, Mighty Whitey!" He says "it's from an irresponsible black point of view," but the chorus suggests two points of view: "Mighty whitey stand erect/You don't have to be politically cor-

rect/Hands against the wall and spread 'em/
Your cracker ass is going to Armageddon."
The ambiguity could piss a lot of people off,
from the Nation of Islam to the Aryan Brotherhood.

But Thirlwell enjoys the role of provocateur. Now, with the distribution power of a major label behind him for the first time in his career, he can really reach out and touch the masses. At least he'll finally be able to sit back in comfort as the denunciations roll in.

"I'm not going to censor myself," he says. "If people don't get it, they don't get it. I welcome misinterpretation. I enjoy being irresponsible. After all, I'm a punk rocker."

Okay, but don't hold your breath waiting for Sinatra's call.

