

NOISE WORKS

M A G A Z I N E

MARCH/APRIL 1992 \$2.50



JIM'FOETUS INC.'
THIRLWELL

PLUS ● SWERVEDRIVER ● DANIEL JOHNSTON ● CLAW
HAMMER ● BEVIS FROND ● HIGH BACK CHAIRS



C o n t e n t s

Departments

5 • NOISEMAKERS

Tree People, 360S, and Clawhammer are profiled.

8 • DOES LIFE BEGIN AT 45?

Art Black's take on all that is small and round, good and bad.

31 • REVIEWS

Articles

10 BEVIS FROND

"I'm not against new fangled technology, I just never turn onto it until everybody else does." By Art Black

13 HIGH BACK CHAIRS

"It would be so easy for us to be a hardcore band..." By Scott Crawford

16 DANIEL JOHNSTON

"...Already on his short sojourn to NYC he's been kicked off his new label and he's been arrested, both for wildly abberant behavior." By Art Black

20 JIM 'FOETUS INC' THIRLWELL

"You can imbue a sense of dread and horror in a word like "honey" without it saying anything graphic whatsoever." By Jason Pettigrew.

27 SWERVEDRIVER

"Being lumped in with Moose and Chapterhouse isn't fairly accurate."

By Jason Pettigrew

POETRY

Now

Past Perfect Future Tense

Jim Thirlwell doesn't hide it-he provides it.

Story By Jason Pettigrew





Chances are you've seen the t-shirts, and you've probably passed up the records more than once in your local emporium. There's a good indication that you may have never heard a single note of the Foetus (silent 'o', long 'e') family. So instead of explaining Foetus in terms reflecting musical genres, I offer you this scenario instead....

Picture yourself in an exclusive metropolitan penthouse building. You go past the guard, and get in the elevator. Take the elevator to the oh, 13th floor. You walk out into the long hallway. Halfway down you start to hear a beautiful string quartet. It's Mozart. It gives you a lifting sense of happiness be-

cause the further you walk, the louder it gets.

You get filled up inside with this sense of gaiety, the sophistication. You are wearing a huge smile on your face, basking in the elitism. The quartet is much louder now, so you figure no one will hear you knock, so you let yourself inside.

As you shut the door behind you and turn around, you are faced with the corpse of a transvestite hanging from a crystal chandelier, sunken eyes and a slight stream of blood oozing from his mouth, the victim of autoerotic asphyxiation. Somebody has taken a piece of the world's most beautiful, everlasting music and has reduced it to ugliness.

And that my friends, is what a Jim Foetus record sounds like.

When relayed the above scenario, Thirlwell softly responds, "Maybe it's like one hallway is the Kronos Quartet and the other is a scene from *Hellraiser*."

When you're dealing with Thirlwell, check your categorical tendencies at the door. The man doesn't work within a field as much as he excavates it for his own muse and then it's off to another territory. In the past 6 months he has released an avalanche of product via the English label Big Cat: a cover of Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear The Reaper" with aggro-chanteuse and sometime paramour Lydia Lunch; a mini-LP with Wiseblood, his collaboration with Swiss super producer Roli Mossiman; an all instrumental record under the name of Steroid Maximus featuring the talents of Raymond 'Pig' Watts, Lucy Hamilton and Voivod's Away; and a triple record live recording of his touring band Foetus Corruptus In Excelsius Deluxe, featuring the talents of former Swans Norm Westburg and Al Kizys, David Quimet, Eric Hubble and power drummer Vinnie Signorelli. All of the releases are aesthetically different in terms of execution and result. And then there's his work as a hired gun remixing and producing. The guy is a Grade A Certified Workaholic, who, when asked what the perfect working situation was, responded: "my own equipment, an engineer who knows what I'm after and a couple of cold beers in the frig."

The 32 year old Thirlwell left his homeland of Australia for London when he was eighteen. He released his first recordings on his own Self-

Immolation label. As the content of the records changed, the name of the band changed. His first single was credited to Philip and his Foetus Vibrations. Other manifestations of his early work included Foetus Over Frisco, You've Got Foetus On Your Breath. The Foetus name has always been the product of himself--playing, producing, and packaging.

"I'm pretty much focused into Foetus Inc. now because I'm getting sick of changing the name. Since I have Steroid Maximus, Wiseblood, and the live band has 'Corruptus' in the title, so people know it's not entirely myself."

Since the bulk of your work as Foetus is



insular, how many instruments are you proficient on? The early primitivism of the first records has gradually grown into musically sophisticated (but no less heavy) results.

"I'd say I'm kind of bad at everything," he admits. "Like when I started making the first Foetus record, I'd been playing around with bass and keyboards for quite a while but when it got to the point where I could hear a part and say, 'a horn section, here' or 'sax, here,' I'd pick up a saxophone and learn to play that part and my proficiency on that instrument would develop, the same thing would happen on every instrument from violin to guitar, whatever. At the same time I was using the studio as manipulation to make parts sound the way I wanted them to sound."

There are several threads that run through Thirlwell's work. There is the concept of 'aesthetic terrorism': taking elements from existing familiar contexts and applying them to different situations. On his first LP, *Deaf*, he had tapes of African tribes chanting juxtaposed against the theme song from the Popeye cartoon. "On 'Enter The Exterminator' from *Nail*, you hear Greig's 'Hall Of The Mountain King' dropped in the middle of a song about a mercy killer. On the first Wise-

blood single "Motorslug" Thirlwell (under the pseudonym Clint Ruin) exhorts the ghost of Jim Morrison by screaming, "Keep your eyes on the road and yer hands upon the wheel!" while satisfying his thirst for break-neck speed.

"You can imbue a sense of dread and horror in a word like 'honey' without saying anything graphic whatsoever. A lot of that era of my work was about juxtaposition and throwing in an element of immediate recognition that was thrown against something else that made it jarring."

"It's also to a certain extent playing on people's mind bank of association and it's usurping those associations as well. The stuff that's coming out now has been in the works for a couple of years and I don't know where it came from. I've been drawn to it and it's kind of like the juxtaposition stuff but it concerns itself with working in complete musical forms that it is with quotations, which now everyone seems to be doing."

Then there is the sex agenda that comes out in some of his work. Sure bad metal bands have been making puerile allusions for years but when Thirlwell/Foetus/Ruin comes out with "I'm a one man gang bang" and "I'd

like to slap you on sometime" while some swinging big band music (which is seamlessly constructed from samples) backs him up, he's not getting confused with Harry Connick's "Recipe For Love." Refer also to "Prime Gonzola" where the word "cleavage" rhymes with uh..."beavage."

"People only take it on one level," Thirlwell explains matter-of-factly. "They don't see any irony or analogies in it whatsoever. People focus on that and that only. Look at the fact that retailers stickered Frank Zappa's instrumental album *Jazz From Hell* for explicit lyrics. On "Pedal To The Metal" I was alluding to the swinging motion of the music as well as the wrestler One Man Gang."

Would you rather beat somebody in the face that you despised with an aluminum baseball bat, or would you rather have sex?

"Definitely have sex. The gratification lasts longer and it's a mutual thing."

What are your 3 favorite things in life?

"I don't know. That's a good question, actually."

My 3 are music, cats, and titfucking.

"(huge laughter) Well, in that case I'd have to say girls, girls, girls!"

continued

Steroid Maximus is the handle used for Thirlwell's instrumental side. He doesn't lump it into the Foetus family because of the collaborative aspect. Some of the ground he tears up is in the same neighborhood as ethno-tropic composer Martin Denny, tango master Astor Piazzola, and the big band swing bug that first appeared on a Sympathy For The Record Industry single credited to the Garage Monsters, an alliance between Thirlwell and underground artists Pizz and Buttstain. Originally planned as two EPs, the record was packed into one record as *Quilombo*. The result is akin to former Bad Seed Barry Adamson's *Moss Side Story*--soundtracks for movies that don't exist.

His work with Mossiman (Young gods, Swans, Treponem Pal, Celtic Frost) under the name Wiseblood has produced one compilation cut ("Cough Kill"), two singles, one full LP (*Dirtish*) and the new *Pedal To The Metal* mini-album. The premise behind Wiseblood is that it is an American band without any Americans. In 500 words or less, Mr. Thirlwell, discuss.

"That's how we conceived it in the first place. We were both displaced but the music that we wanted to make was the product of us being here and living in New York City and our experiences filtered through our sensibilities. We work in different areas; me doing music and conceptualizing and Roli doing the beats and engineering. It's been very difficult getting together because of our disparate commitments. Roli's been real busy with production so I don't know when we'll ever do another Wiseblood project."

Jim has continued to work in various capacities with Lydia Lunch. At one time the two were romantically linked (the more voyeuristic of readers may observe filmmaker Richard Kern's *Right Side Of My Brain* or the cover of their collaboration *Sinkfist*) but since they're in two different cities (NYC and New Orleans, respectively), they keep strong working ties. Thirlwell produced the debut album of Lunch's new band Shotgun Wedding, and a fine cover of "Don't Fear The Reaper" backed with the Beatles' "Why Don't We Do It In The Road." The name ain't Foetus, it's Ruin. Clint Ruin, if yer nasty.

"It's something that we had both talked about doing for quite a long time and it's quite relevant now that there's been a lot of death around people we knew lately and it seemed like the right time to do an exorcism of that."

Then there's the live band featuring heavyweights who have played in the Swans, Cop Shoot Cop and Glenn Branca's ensembles. The music is guitar based and closer to metal than the orchestrated conflagrations on a Foetus studio record. They do remarkable covers of "I Am The Walrus" and Alex Har-

vey's "Faith Healer" that are purely devastating in true Foetus style. Next stop Headbanger's Ball? Doubtful, primarily because the Corruptus band is very much real without the pretension of the genre's legions of candyasses.

"Well," says Thirlwell ready to distance

cepts having different names sounds like a grand case of schizophrenia maximus. Since his records change all the time, why not make them all Foetus Inc. recordings?

"I wanted keep Foetus as purely myself except in a live format," he explains. "I've been pretty precious about that, hence Clint



himself from the scenario, "there's a lot of irony in that too. It's taking the 'rock' thing to a very distant cliff and then..." we both trade laughs in the pause, "teeter on the edge of it. And sometimes people take that on face value when there is a lot of irony in that as well."

The amount of collaborations and con-

Ruin, Wiseblood, Flesh Volcano (a one-off project with singer Marc Almond), whatever. The only deviation is the live band. I wanted to keep the purity of 'One Foetus, One Vision'."

Sounds like the Foetus New World Order to me.

"Right."



Jim Thirlwell may be the closest thing underground music has in the context of a renaissance man. While waiting for the next Steroid Maximus record to be released (*Gondawanaland*), he's been doing voiceovers and incidental music for MTV's sports program ("I go up every week, they give me a script and I read it off."), remixes for EMF (adding a bit of Jim Jones to their "Lies" hit single and calling it The Jonestown mix"), remixes for Prong's "Prove You Wrong" track which is interesting in itself (how many metal remixes have you heard?), lyrics and vocals for German free-rockers Soevetskoe Foto and by the time your eyes

meet this line of type, the brand-new self contained Foetus record.

Doesn't an extreme workload tend to border on self-indulgence? Isn't releasing 4 different records under 4 different names smack of ego gratification?

"Yeah, I feel I'm totally self-indulgent," he says in agreement. "The way people use that term is like they're saying it's a bad thing. I think all art is self-indulgent because it is self-expression. I'm making what I want to hear, but that doesn't mean what I want to hear is inaccessible. And I also think that applies to people whose music I like to listen to."

Who do you think makes up the Foetus

audience?

"My girlfriend's sister was saying that her kid brother who is 3, knows all the words to "Ramrod" and stuff. They were in the car once and "Roadhouse Blues" came on the radio and he said, 'That's Jim's song!' and I was talking to somebody the other night who told me his mother has tapes of my records. So I would guess those two people and everyone in between."

Somebody told me you were 'a rock and roll Jeffrey Dahmer'".

"I cannibalize musical forms," he says pausing to laugh. "That's pretty funny."