

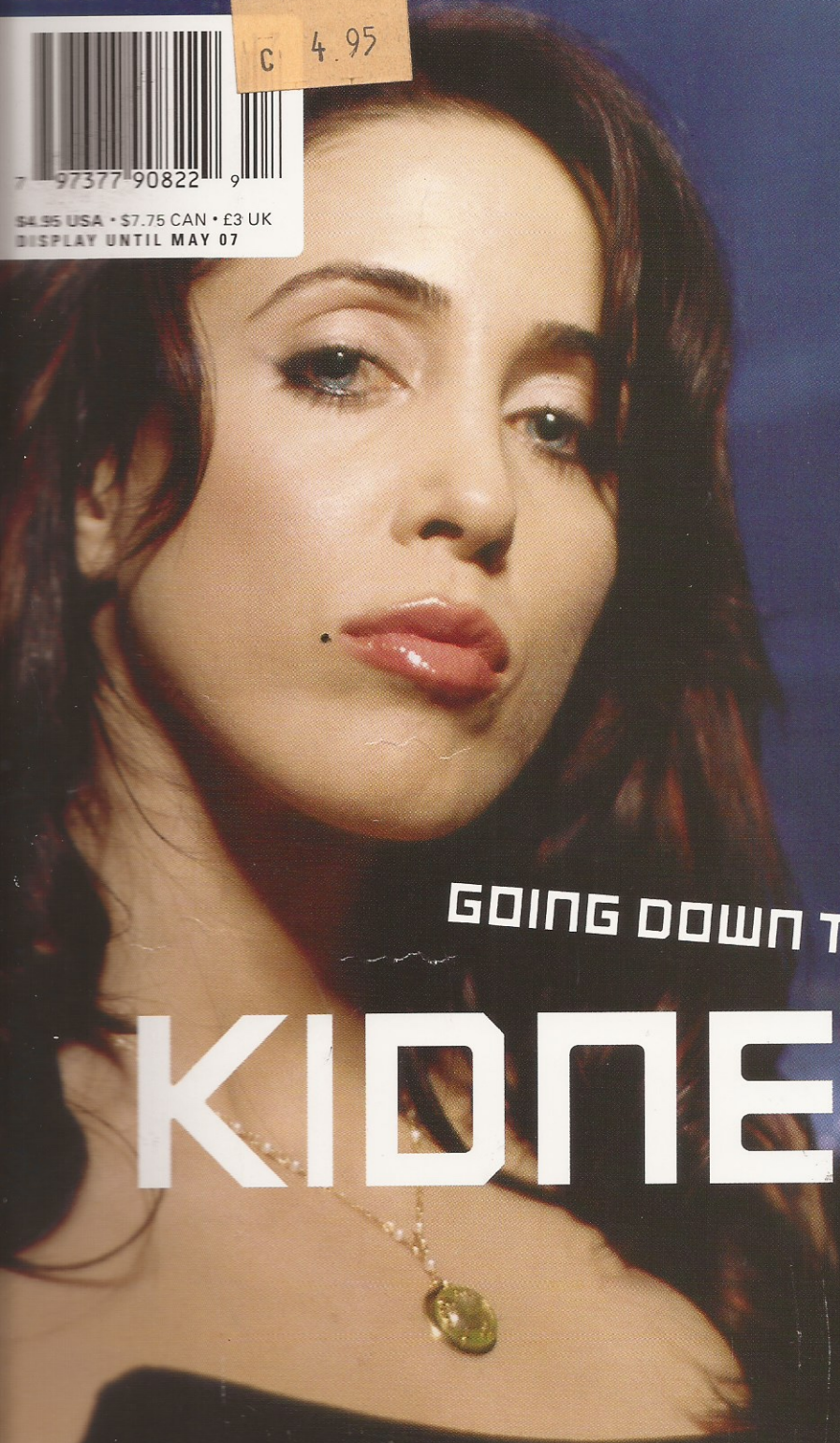
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THE FLOW AND  
THIRLWELL'S

AN INTERVIEW WITH J.G. THIRLWELL OF FOETUS  
BY DANIEL HINDS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAULE SAVIANO

BLOW OF J.G.

# FOETUS



"I'M CONSTANTLY CHANGING AND EVOLVING THE WAY THAT I WRITE."

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN NOISE AND MUSIC, ART AND ENTERTAINMENT, FOETUS EXISTS AS THE CORE EXPRESSION OF J.G. THIRLWELL. Taking alternate guises for his musical endeavors, such as Clint Ruin, Steroid Maximus, and most recently Manorexia, Australian-born Thirlwell has laid down his most primal and diverse recordings under the Foetus moniker. Big band, rock, industrial, avant-noise, and jazz are melded, reinvented, and set at each other's throats with the resulting maelstrom sounding chaotic yet strangely fitting. Beneath the gruff voice, sarcastic lyrics, and tainted imagery, there is a very thoughtful man who truly savors his artistic expression and takes great care to present his unique vision to the world. "We left on the day of the attacks," for a European tour recounts longtime New York resident Thirlwell. "In fact, I was in the air when it happened and we learnt of it on our touchdown into Amsterdam. Not only was it shocking, terrifying and surreal, but so strange that it should happen right when I would be out of the country for six weeks. We had to question why we were chosen to be away and not with our people!"

From the extroversion of technology to the inner torment that is life, Foetus makes a thoroughly human sound. His latest release, *Flow*, and subsequent remix album, *Blow*, are quite possibly his best releases yet—an astounding feat for someone with so much quality work already under their belt.

**How has your view of the music industry changed over the years?**

When I first arrived in London, it was the early days of independent labels and post-punk, and you had to make an active choice to go out and press a 7-inch record and then distribute it. I had sort of this willful obscurity and didn't want my material to be tainted, but at that point people came to me...each record funding the next one. After those records, I started to get involved with labels, being signed to labels or being licensed to labels, having people cut in for their piece of the pie. I can "could've, would've, should've" myself to death about some of the career choices I've made, but I've worked in many facets of the music business, from retail to distribution to being an artist to having a label. Being a solo artist, you have to wear many hats, especially now...I expect it of myself. I'm the artist, the art director, play every note on the record, engineer, producer, design the sleeves, make the deals, and now I'm self-managed again. That's a lot of hats to wear.

**Does worrying about that many aspects detract from the creative process or is it an integral part of it?**

An integral part of it, because I'm a fucking control freak and I don't think I'd have it any other way. I think I have trust issues (laughs), and once I delegate responsibility to someone and they haven't done it in the time that I consider to be reasonable—which is probably totally unreasonable—I have to badger them about it. The amount of time that takes, I feel as though I may as well have done it myself. I like to stand and fall on my own merits, which probably acts against me, but I haven't found the right people to work with and it's been a long time.

**When did you move from London to New York?**

I moved to London back in 1978 from Australia, and that's when I started up Self-Immolation Records and started putting out







Foetus records. I came to New York in '83 for a couple of shows under the name The Immaculate Consumptive, which was a project with myself, Lydia Lunch, Nick Cave, and Marc Almond. We did two shows at the Danceteria and one at the 9:30 Club in DC, and that was kind of a demented cabaret where each person would have their solo turn and there'd also be collaborations. When I came here, New York had a lot to offer me...the opposite of London. I felt like I'd gotten out of London what I wanted to and New York was the 24-hour city...it had this energy which I really fed on. It is really centralized, which I like, and I also like the character of the urban decay, which is sadly disappearing.

**Do your surroundings directly influence your songwriting?**

I can't really delineate what does and what doesn't, but I think certainly my state of mind does and my consciousness does. I've created an environment in which I work... Self-Immolation Studios, which is kind of my Fortress of Solitude. I've always been dictated by the tools with which I work and I'm constantly changing and evolving the way that I write. There has never been a demarcation between composition and production...or let's say composition and engineering, or sound and melody. The lines between all of those are blurred, and the way in which I am recording my stuff dictates the way in which I can compose as well. Musically, I don't have chops. I don't sit

around at a piano or with an acoustic guitar—that's not how I write. It comes into my head, and then I work out a way to transfer it to tape or hard disk or whatever. Or it evolves out of something where there is a certain element of letting a piece lead you to where it wants to go and steering it a bit. That's a fine line, between keeping the original conception and what the end result is.

**Do you write specifically for Steroid Maximus or Foetus or Manorexia, or do you decide the song's fate after it takes form?**

Sometimes I have a place in mind for the song, sometimes a song takes on a form of its own. Occasionally, songs can exist just as successfully as vocal or instrumental pieces. With Manorexia, I always knew where it was bound, as I recorded the whole thing sequentially. But I don't have a given formula. Sometimes a song starts from a title, a feeling, a sound, or a sense of urgency that I want to portray...sometimes I have already heard the whole thing in my head.

**How much are you into the technology you work with?**

I don't know if I'm a tech-head, but I know what's going on. I do change the way I work a lot. I've transferred a smaller version of my studio onto a laptop and that is going to be an interesting development in the way I work. You were asking how my environment affects my writing, well, this will be a really good test of that when I'm sitting on a cliff overlooking the Aegean Sea or something like that (laughs).

**Do you think the progression of technology has made musicians lazy?**

I don't think musicians are lazy...the ones that I know. I think it is facilitating a lot of people who wouldn't be making music to make music. I've gone through a lot of evolutions of what has been available technologically, especially on my limited budget. Starting with analog eight-track studios and moving on from that, and seeing the very idea of mix automation at one point...that was a big deal. Now, it's just taken for granted, and anyone can buy a box that contains the power and flexibility of what, in a studio say 15 years ago, would have cost a million bucks. A lot of people can get a hold of that technology, and the first, most instantly gratifying thing that you can do by turning a few knobs is trance music or something like that...that's what will come out. It never seems to go beyond that. I don't know if this is sort of a democratization or leveling of the playing field through MP3s or the accessibility of technology. I think it makes a glut—a morass of absolute fucking mediocrity. And it even infects the cream. There's just too much stuff out there; it's not special. Music is just like another commodity—an accessory—and that's unfortunate. Music has been devalued by the sheer volume of it.

**Is that inevitable or can we prevent that from happening?**

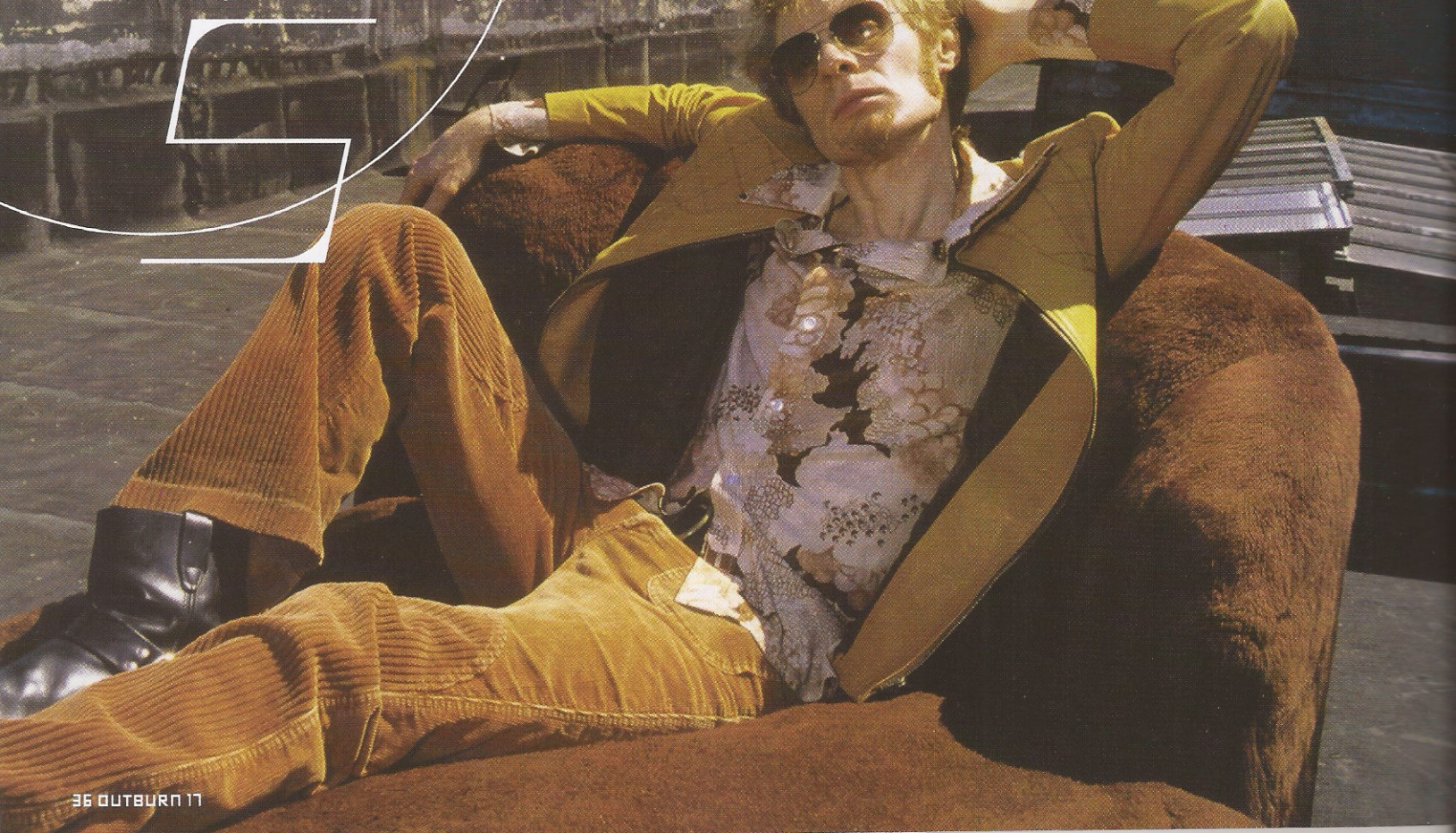
I think everyone should just stop making crap (laughs). I don't know if it is inevitable;

there is just more of everything and more music to sift through. There is great music out there. It's a matter of searching for it, but you are so bombarded...who has time to search? Personally, I'm going more back in time to find interesting music, and I get a lot of vinyl. But there is some new stuff coming up that inspires me, too.

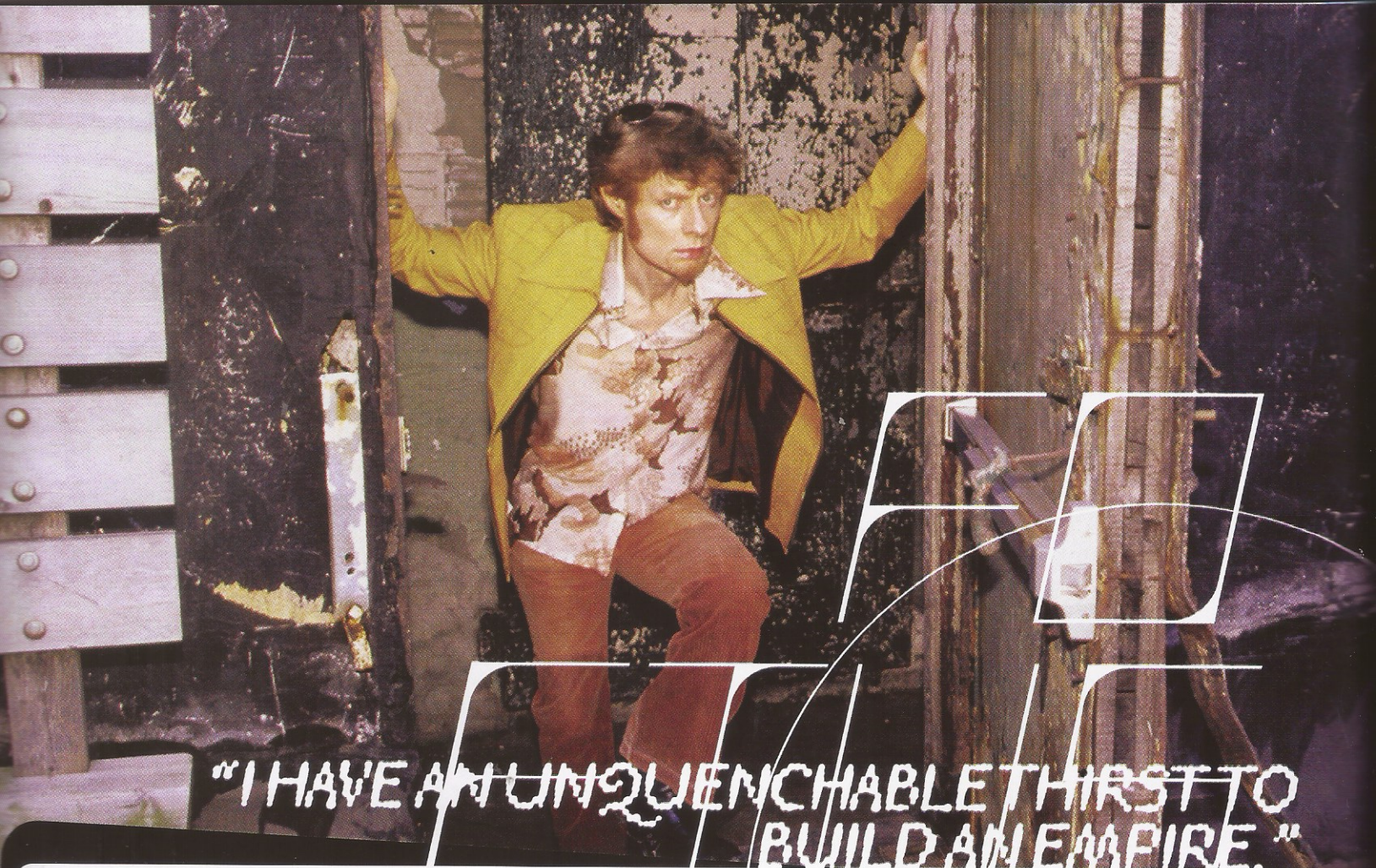
**Do you still feel the same excitement writing and performing music as when you first started?**

Yeah, more so right now. Because I think I'm a lot more open minded about my creative process and just digging deeper into it. I'm a lot freer and I've thought a lot about the creative blind alleys that I've led myself into. I've willfully gone and shaken up the way that I work in a lot of ways, and it is way fresher now. One thing that has really helped is this new project Manorexia, which is something that I sell through the website and at shows. I wanted to do something that was—ambient is the wrong word for it, in terms of the way it turned out—but that may have been one starting point. It was certainly born out of frustration with the music business, and having finished *Flow* and spending a year working out how I wanted it to come out—finding the perfect distribution deal...which you can look for until you're blue in the face, but you still won't find it—Manorexia just poured out of me. I was interested in creating something where I was acting on my first impulses and the first decision that I made, instead of meticulously

"MUSIC IS JUST LIKE ANOTHER COMMODITY—AN ACCESSORY—AND THAT'S UNFORTUNATE."







## "I HAVE AN UNQUENCHABLE THIRST TO BUILD AN EMPIRE."

crafting something and taking a decision and looking at it from every side. I was wondering, what is the difference between a decision that you make instinctively and you feel from the first second you ask yourself that question, or the decision that you make six weeks later after looking at every fucking side of the equation? Not a whole hell of a lot of difference. I think I have enough trust in my instincts to know if that intuitive answer is right or wrong. So I was going more on those instincts and trying to dig deep into what I wanted to hear and create something that had a spatial element, which is sometimes missing from Foetus or Steroid Maximus, which is so dense...there will be these really cool sounds, but they'll go by in a second and they won't reappear. Manorexia is a chance for those sounds to have their little moment in the spotlight. Also the idea of sounds that can breathe, so that your mind and ear will fill in the blanks and you can really get into the textures and timbres of the sound, and it will take you on an emotional or psychological journey, which isn't tied down or made literal by lyrics or a recognizable structure. Working that way is really liberating...writing from the other side of your brain. And I can take that and imbue a bit of that spirit on my other stuff. I think that was kind of a freeing up, and I'll continue to try and work in different ways.

**Do you look very far ahead, as far as planning the next album?**

Well, kind of...I am working on a legacy and I'm conscious of that. I usually have about a year ahead mapped out. Whether that works...a lot of the fabulous strategies that look great on paper either disappear into the ether or turn to a pile of shit before they are

realized. I have some vague guidelines in my head about what the next Foetus album will be like, what it will be about, and what it's not going to sound like—what I'm going to be rejecting and getting away from. But that doesn't mean I'm going to be writing and saying, "Well, that doesn't fit into this criteria. I can't do this or that." I'm trying to create from a deep and pure place without looking over my shoulder too much, but you do have to map things out in terms of when things are going to be released or when you're touring...there's a lot of logistical things you have to think about. Like the remix album *Blow*, I was working on that for well over a year to pull it together. I knew that I wanted it to come out close to *Flow*, so all these things take a lot of planning. The Foetus legacy is still something that is gelling in my head. When I look at it in terms of the studio albums that were recorded—the stand-alone studio albums, apart from live things and compilations—there are still only seven, and I see the body of those albums being 10. Then maybe that legacy can be laid to rest. I would like to work much faster than I have. I have a pretty big oeuvre, but being an addictive personality and also a total egomaniac and megalomaniac (laughs), I have an unquenchable thirst to build an empire.

**How did you select the artists that contributed the remixes on *Blow*?**

It was a lot of people whose work I respect. It came into being as an overflow of ideas from *Flow* and remixes. As I was pulling the remixes together, I thought conceptually it would be better to have the whole album re-imagined by different people. It is something that I've never done before—having other people remix my work. People have

done unsolicited remixes, none of which saw the light of day, but this was an opportunity to have a work by other people whose work I respect. Some of them were people I knew, others were people I had to introduce myself to. Of course, it was handpicked which song I wanted which artist to do—a process which I can't tell you the logic behind. It all makes sense to me, but it would be impossible to draw a chart about it. Amon Tobin was always pretty much number one on the wish list.

**Are you going to be doing more remixes for other artists?**

I'm working on one for a French guy called Norscq, and after that I'm working on one for The Young Gods. There was a time when I was turning down a lot of remixes, but not now. It's something you go in and out of...I only have so much energy. I'm also about three-quarters of the way through a new Steroid Maximus album entitled *Ectopia*, which should come out soon. Steroid Maximus is brain movies and song based scores, and is increasingly influenced by DJ Otfesu, the name that I spin under. *Ectopia* spans soundscapes and espionage, with some funky intrigue thrown in for good measure. The title emerged from ruminating on the prefix "ecto," meaning outside, when I struck on *Ectopia*... "outside utopia," or an outsider's view of utopia through a fish-eye lens. I also really want to get my teeth into another Manorexia album and I am planning to do that live this summer in LA. And some new Foetus material...it's about time for that.

**When you were first starting out with music, did you have a concept of what life would be like now in the 21st century?**

I thought there would be those little Jetsons' space ships going by, making those sounds,

and that there would be a monorail that would go everywhere and we'd all have self-serving robots. I guess those predictions were about 20 years off. I'd probably be horrified if I was suddenly transported into my brain 20 years ago; God knows what I was thinking. I was very idealistic back then and very naïve, and I'm glad that I was, because I think that had a lot to do with how my music turned out. If it hadn't turned out like that, I wouldn't be where I'm at now. I didn't know you couldn't do what I was doing. I invented a lot of weird systems to accomplish my goals, and I look back on it now and go, "Wow, that was pretty bold."

**Do you feel pressure to always be outdoing yourself?**

Yeah, I think I probably do. I'm a pretty staunch critic of myself. With a lot of artists, you look back at your creativity and you go, "How come in the first two years, I put out two albums, three 7-inches, and a 12-inch... it just seemed to pour out?" But the more you do, the more baggage you have to carry around. You work through things, and you start writing from different places. I don't make flesh every fleeting idea that I have, it just doesn't seem worth it to me. It's much more precious to me, which is why the output seems to slow down. And of course, life gets in the way, and my life is a lot more complicated than it was back then. Or maybe I just have a lot more neuroses. Well, I know that for sure (laughs). I think I'm really happy with how it is right now. (pause) That's talking at 12 minutes to 11, New York time, on whatever day it is. It might change in half an hour, after I get the sugar crash from that apple turnover I just ate (laughs). ★