

Susan Battenwieser discovers  
a true artist behind  
the sick façade

# foetus

**WARNING:** the sounds emitting from your stereo are nothing to panic about. It's merely the latest Jim Thirlwell, aka Foetus Inc., EP, "Butterfly Potion".

Foetus is the "occupational" name and has been transformed over the years: Foetus Under Glass, You've Got Foetus On Your Breath, Phillip And His Foetus Vibrations, Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel, Foetus Under Frisco, The Foetus All Nude Review, Foetus Interruptus.

And the music is just as complicated. Using computerized samples, Thirlwell can create the aural illusion of a full orchestra going through a metaphysical change.

Jim Thirlwell is sitting alone in his sunny Brooklyn loft across the street from one of the worst estates in New York City (the second worst according to Jim) and above a factory: the domain of Foetus Inc., Lydia Lunch and their cat Chuck. This is also Jim's studio where he masterminds the contorted sounds that have made him a star in the underside world of industrial music.

The studio walls are adorned with flags, Sumo wrestlers, a painting by John Wayne Gacy (America's most notorious serial killer) and Jim Thirlwell originals — he does all the graphics for the albums and contributes to comic books.

Originating in Australia, Thirlwell moved to London in 1978 and then onto New York City in 1984. "Ever since my earliest memory, I've always been interested in music," he explains. "Ever since I was three, singing 'Viva Las Vegas' to a girl in kindergarten." His musical c.v. includes working with The The, Marc Almond, Nick Cave, Sonic Youth, Thurston Moore, Lydia and members of the Swans to name a few.

He didn't start playing instruments until he was fifteen or sixteen, dabbling with the piano. "But I've always been obsessed by it and it didn't really strike me that I would necessarily do anything with music until later on."

A quick browse through his albums reveals an avid interest in classical music which Thirlwell listens to most, along with ethnic music and "esoteric stuff", but "I like to hear what different people are doing."

His earlier albums seem mainly influenced by John Cage and The Residents. "I don't really feel influenced by people," he explains. "I try to keep a pretty exclusive vision. But I'm not trying to recycle stuff. I do quote musical elements, but not necessarily because I'm bereft of ideas, but because I'm using that as a reference point. Like I might use Beach Boys' harmonies, but I've never listened to the Beach Boys in my whole life. I might have quoted some Jim Morrison lines but its because it's kind of ironic, as opposed to that



*A new corporate image?*

I'm really into The Doors, because I've never really listened to them. That sort of stuff is so kind of standard that for me it's like I wasn't really listening to it when it came out. Same as like a lot of stuff that's been co-opted by commercials like...Motown. I listen to it and I identify it with California Raisins. It means nothing to me."

## Sometimes I'm a good collaborator and sometimes I'm a nightmare to work with

Thirlwell has never been in a band, as such, choosing to work on solo projects and collaborating with other musicians when necessary. "I really like working on my own, but after awhile it's kind of draining and you feel the need to get more input. After I do a Foetus album, I feel kind of drained and then I have to do a bunch of collaborations just to get input. Sometimes I'm a good collaborator and sometimes I'm a nightmare to work with—it depends on what sort of mood I'm in and how much I decide to push the person around."

Sometimes Foetus is a solo tour and sometimes Thirlwell puts together a band. He plans to get a band formed this summer for his up-coming tour at the end of the year, that is

yet un-planned.

Rumours of the Foetus movie, "Foetus on the Beach" are true — it is in the making: "it's my millstone, always three years in the future and probably the one Foetus thing that will never be realized." As an appetizer, Thirlwell made the first un-live Foetus video, filmed inside the Coney Island "freakshow", featuring Thirlwell and a belly dancer. He has, however, used some material from the film for other projects.

A brief tour through the studio and samplings of current projects on the "back burner", reveal his ability to work on a variety of projects in quick succession and simultaneously.

He does this by always maintaining a strong vision of "what's going to happen...I take a different approach every time, which is why the songs come out sounding kind of disparate. It makes it hard for me to discuss my work as a body of work, because there's so many different ideas each time. I find if I do something in one mode, like a hard-rocking sort of line-up, by the time I've finished the song, I've quenched that urge for now and I want to go onto like a pastoral piece or something completely different."

*["Sink", a double LP, is available on Some Bizarre. "Butterfly Potion" the new EP is*