

Foetus: New York

1995

by d.n.l.

It is difficult for me to imagine anything that sums up New York more appropriately than Jim Thirwell's latest musical statement Gash, under the streamlined sobriquet of Foetus. The cover photo montage is Times Square and its glitter and sleaze, with Thirwell and well-placed Foetus images on the giant Times Square screen suggest a visual correlation. As the package would have us believe, the contents are as grimy and gritty as its package. While some of the songs reveal that Thirwell is as intense and singular as he was a decade ago with the classic albums Nail and Hole (recently reissued on Thirsty Ear), it also becomes obvious that Thirwell has expanded his vision and has integrated all the sounds of the city into his repertoire. In the same way that West Side Story captured the underbelly of the rotten Granny Smith apple in its time, and bands like the Velvet Underground and the New York Dolls and the Ramones have captured its seediness. The '80s brought in a whole new realism, though, spurred by the No Wave scene in the late '70s, a new batch of bands came out of the New York art scene: Glenn Branca and his guitar ensembles planted the seeds for Sonic Youth and the Swans, who thrived on loudness and intensity. Most of the upstarts had another thing in common: most had moved to New York from other areas. Thirwell, who was already making a noise for himself in Australia with his Foetus incarnations, adopted New York as his home in the early '80s and members of the Swans helped him early on. His music has remained well underground, despite a steady flow of challenging albums recorded under ever-changing monikers (Scraping Foetus off the Wheel, You've Got Foetus on Your Breath and Foetus, Inc.). He has collaborated, as Clint Ruin, with Lydia Lunch. His influence has been cited

by young suburban upstarts like Nine Inch Nails and fellow New Yorkers Cop Shoot Cop, whose Tod Ashley appears on Gash). On Gash Thirwell throws a few things into the sound that would surprise any NIN T-shirt wearing gloomer. My personal favorite is the New Orleans style jazz romp "Slung", which swings along in a powerfully imposing style. It cooks! The pastiche of nationalities suggests the true strain of New York's girth as the world's biggest melting pot. Thirwell brews up different flavors, from Indian and Oriental elements to the black American catchphrase "Mighty Whitey" to the Iron Man strains that open "Steal Your Life Away". Lyrically, Thirwell has written a masterpiece that captures everything his music does, and in some ways the narratives tell such grim tales of everyday life that the listener might wonder just how much of this Thirwell has lived and how much he has observed. He hasn't compromised his art in the smallest way, and makes his vision of New York even grander and scarier, and all the more believable.

In a recent phone interview, Thirwell seemed a bit dazed, overwhelmed by everything, trying to put his band together for an upcoming tour, and handling a slew of interviews confirming a new found interest in his work.

d.n.l.: How are you?

JT: I've been better. I've got so many fucking things going on at once, it's just grueling. I'm just doing my basic thing of undertaking too many things at once.

d.n.l.: Sometimes it's good to be that busy.

JT: Well, that's sort of a subjective issue that sometimes I plague myself with. It's like you are running through life and not stopping to smell the roses. . . because any time I stand still I get wallowing in self-hatred. It's a fine balance.

d.n.l.: But it's getting better, isn't it?
 JT: Well, ummm... If I was a multi-millionaire I would be totally miserable if I stopped any creative process. My analogy is that I'm always climbing this mountain and I never want to reach the peak of this mountain. I just want to keep climbing and evolving, because when I reach that fucking peak, that's when I die. When I'm on my death bed, five seconds before I die, that's when I'll hit the peak.

d.n.l.: It seems like you've been really busy ever since I've known about you, but as it's been a while since we've really heard from Foetus, have you felt sidetracked by all the production work that you've done?

JT: Absolutely. The last Foetus studio album was out in '88. In the interim I've put out Sink, the double compilation, two double live albums, two Steroid Maximus albums, a Wiseblood mini-album, Clint and Lydia's Don't Fear the Reaper and produced three or four albums, did about 30 remixes and took two and a half years to write this album. So yeah, I was sidetracked. But now I'm just honing down and being Foetus. I've got that shit out of my system. I'm going to continue remixing and there'll be a Steroid Maximus album here and there. Also, I've just started a production company called Eptopic Ends which is sort of a blanket name for a subsidiary of Self Immolation and I'm signing bands to that.

d.n.l.: I saw you on the tour you recorded Male on, back in '90, in San Antonio, and Norman and most of the Swans in the band.

JT: That was with Hahn Rowe?

d.n.l.: Yeah!

JT: Hahn is back in the band. I decided that I wanted to shed skin and have a whole new band. I've got Jim Kimball (ex-Laughing Hyenas) on drums, and this guy Joe Woodenhoser on keyboards, Brian Emmerick on bass, this loser guy on vocals and I'll know about the guitar player soon. The basic tour line-up is Foetus, Unsane and Halcyon. San Antonio... if I remember rightly, that was a really good show.

d.n.l.: I loved it! I'm a big Swans fan, and seeing my favorite parts of the band



in another context was really great!

JT: Well, you know, the Swans are pretty much Michael, but Norman (Westberg) and Al were a big part of it over the years. When I first moved to New York, Michael and Al and Norman were some of the first people I met.

d.n.l.: I was thinking about how some of the other bands you started out with, such as SPK, and to some extent, Neubauten, have gone on to do quieter music, and yet you've found plenty to do being really loud.

JT: (Insert pregnant pause here) I don't really consider myself as having contemporaries. They do what the hell they want and I do what the hell I want. That big gap when I did remixes and two instrumental albums, I do whatever the hell I want and try to create from as deep a place as possible and try to create in a vacuum. When I was recording I deliberately imposed upon myself that that I didn't listen to anyone else's music because I wanted to be pure. What are you saying? Neubauten goes quiet so I have to go quiet?

d.n.l.: No, what I'm saying is that they've explored the other end of the spectrum.

JT: Well, they're maturing

whereas I'm immaturing.

d.n.l.: I wouldn't say that either, because there is definitely a lot of mature stuff on Gash.

JT: I think it's the best thing I've done. I think it's my, kind of, Sgt. Peppers, but I don't see myself in a framework type of thing. It's Foetus music. It comes from me and my vision and my obsessions at the time. It's my life, it's totally autobiographical. The ironic thing is, well, it's not really ironic, it's pathetic really, because I've got ten reissues coming out this year, then there's all the secret things coming out, the point that I was going to make was that I didn't have a copy of Nail and just the other night I got one. I put on a couple of tracks and I was reading the lyrics and the obsessions and there's a real thread through the obsessions, and that says a lot about me. It's a lot about self-destruction, oppression, alcoholism and mental abuse and also oppression of the weak, anti-Christian dogma. That was really interesting, after all that time, to actually hear that again, because I hadn't heard it in so long.