Foetus
Love
[Birdman; 2005]
Rating: 6.0
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Next to "the book was better," stating your preference for the British version of something has become the easiest way to sound smarter and more sophisticated than you actually are. Monty Python is funnier than SNL. Britain's The Office is better than the new American Office. I can't even enjoy Spaceballs anymore without some sci-fi maven pointing out how it ripped off The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy novels. So before you Yankee industrial buffs ravenously rip open your long-awaited copies of NIN's With Teeth, pause for urbanity's sake and acknowledge the visionary whose innovation eventually made everyone in the mid-90s want to "tuck you like an animal"—London's own J.G. Thirlwell, a.k.a. Foetus.

Thirlwell's foray into mainstream industrial rock in the mid-90s almost destroyed him, literally. After his 1995 Sony release Gash, Thirlwell suffered from creative block and alcoholism for six years until triumphantly emerging with 2001's Flow, a resurrection of the grinding, sepulchral sound that made him an industrial pioneer.

Unfortunately, on Love Thirlwell has neither shaken off all the rust nor decided to progress his sound any further since Gash. He's still Trent Reznor with a monacle, juxtaposing electronic drumbeats with Baroque-era harpsichord, referencing literary figures like Dorian Gray and occasionally singing in French. Feeling cultured yet? Don't. While including more melodic vocals in place of throat-choking screams may be Thirlwell's riskiest move on Love, it totally tanks due to, well, the fact that Thirlwell's voice is abominable. We're not talking Janis Hendrix or Bob Dylan bad here; this guy's tone deaf sneer is utterly repulsive. On "Don't Want Me Anymore," he can barely stay on pitch for more than two beats, defeating the song's epic five-minute build. "Mon Agnus Ducis" features plenty of film noir-inspired bells and whistles but little artistry, and Thirlwell's affected nasal crooning only compounds the problem.

Now I know I've been avoiding describing the music, but you all know the selling points with Foetus: Grating, crunchy, layered, intricate, et al. Love's massive strings, sleazy film noir numbers and visceral guitar riffs will undoubtedly captivate fans of their last, oh, dozen or so albums. Thirlwell sticks to what he knows best on Love, but ultimately he sounds too much like an artist just happy to still be making records. Maybe it's because since the mid-90s the industrial sound has been picked up, dusted off, and mass-produced by snooty hacks like Linkin Park and Evanescence, or because listeners are blowing their synth/electronic music load on New Wave poses like the Bravery and Killers, but rather way. Foetus's pissy eat-shit-and-die bit just doesn't have the bite it used to.

Adam Meckler, May 12, 2005