FOETAL MANIA!

He's been under glass, on your breath and even scraped off the wheel but Foetus has always been out there. With his 'Sink' compilation fresh in the racks, this week's Retro features the definitive (ie, he did it) Jim Thirlwell discography, while Sam King considers the man's multiple persona problem and asks: so what does your mum call you?

Perhaps the strangest thing about the so-called industrial music that seemed to dominate the European underground culture of the mid-'80s was that it could make you cry.

Bands like Einstürzende Neubauten, Test Dept, Laibach, SPK and Foetus might have taken the idea of noise as alienation to an icy extreme, but was it really possible for them to affect you too? Friendship was out, life was a bitch and society was something to put up with or be sick of. Crying had no place in the austere 'golden age'.

The music echoed the grim, recessive social climate of the times, where the new you were subjected to a bleak life of strife, unemployment and impending social collapse. It was all very serious. Neubauten's 'Strategien Gegen Architektur', 'Strategies Against Architecture', compiled by Foetus/Jim Thirlwell, attacked the concrete tower blocks that reinforced this oppression using the sounds of industry's derelict machinery and materials in a situationist musical attack. Test Dept waged a guerrilla war against the atmosphere of commercialism, fumes, first with metal oil drums and pipes later a miners' choir. Yugo-industrialist Laibach used the techniques of rock to promote a uniquely totalitarian solution to the problems of Western decline. Only Foetus went straight to the heart of the matter.

His first Some Bizzare album, 'Hole', cut a swath through the industrial music camp by using not only the metallic beats and samples that typify the genre, but also the sounds of pop, its ultimate enemy (one band, enthused by the times, took this ennui even further by naming themselves Kill Ugly Pop). His songs were alienating, yet compelling collages of vocal samples, Beach Boy pop parodies and violent industrial percussion. 'Hole' was at once the most intoxicating and off-putting album of the year. Even now, its continuing influence can be seen in the current works of bands like The Young Gods.

Its high point came with 'I'll See You In Poland Baby', a surreptitious dialogue between Hitler and Stalin that somehow managed to conjure up a range of deep human emotions. Ostensibly about the carve-up and destruction of pre-war Europe, it also acted as a bizarre metaphor for human relations. Lines like "I want to pump you full of burning lead" and "I hear you got a six inch guarantee on that tattoo and let me just sign a mutual non-aggression pact" were somehow transformed into bold statements of eroticism. One music paper even went so far as to declare, "Of all the sad songs emerging from this sad world, the saddest song I've ever heard is written by Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel."

Perhaps the next strangest thing is that this resurrection of the distinctly European idea of music as noise was achieved by a scrawny Australian, whose various assumed identities have included Frank Want, Phillip Toss, Clint Ruin and Jim Thirlwell and whose band names have varied between the happyish Foetus Uber Frisco and The Foetus All Nude Revue to the sickening 'You've Got Foetus On Your Breath, Phillip And His Foetus Vibrations and Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel. There are more, but not for the squeamish.

Thirlwell himself, for they are all his aliases, first arrived in Britain from Melbourne at around the same time as former Boys Next Door, The Birthday Party. Only while they embarked on a memorable tour of the country, Thirlwell settled down, got a job in Oxford Street's Our Price and started working with the nascent angry electronic bands of the time like Nurse With Wound (with whom he recorded in various guises throughout the '80s) and electro-punishers Whitehouse.

By 1980 he'd saved enough money to record his first Foetus record. "I did my first single in a day," he declares proudly, "put it together myself, phoned up the distributors, got Peel to play it, same old story." At the time it would have set you back 10p.

The single, 'OKFM' (the only vintage track on his latest 'Sink' LP), was a taste of things to come. A collision of state of the art synth sounds, incorporating the then hip WASP synthesiser (an upmarket stylophone which sold for £99), white noise interference and aggressive stomping rhythms, it recalls both The Residents' musical adulation and the early electronic work of DAF and KRAFTWERK.

There followed a string of equally uncooperative singles and albums by members of the ever expanding foetal family on Thirlwell's Self Immolation label. "The first six records were all self-financed and distributed, but by then money had stopped flowing and I had fixed my entrepreneurial attention onto Einstürzende Neubauten (who he brought over to the UK), so when Steve suggested I do something with Some Bizzare I thought it was great."

'Hole', the first product of Foetts' Some Bizzare collaboration, was a landmark. Its berserk mixture of pounding aggression, lyrical absurdity and parodic pop ('Satan Place' featured a satirical parody of the Beach Boys) shocked and titillated its listeners, much as The Residents' 'Third Reich And Roll' had done Thirlwell himself. Indeed, Thirlwell promoted it with a singly resident-like process of confusion (all those aliases) and controversy (photos of himself tied to a cross).

A posse of dancefloor smash singles, 'Calamity Crush', 'Wash It Off' and 'Finely Honed Machine' followed, continuing Foetus' attempts at musical destabilisation. One moment you'd be transfixed by their military pace, the next knocked out by the absurdity of the juxtaposition of happy pop and alienation.

'Nail', Foetus' finest work, followed in '85. It took Thirlwell's fascination for oppression and alienation to new, undreamt-of heights.

"'Hole' was pretty autobiographical, covering a time in my life that wasn't very much fun. 'Nail' was just a catalogue of oppression. The oppression of taking someone's life, to the personal oppression of 'The Throne Of Agony', I started to notice these themes coming through and expanded on them."

Sadly, immediately after the release of 'Nail', a dispute between Some Bizzare and Foetus resulted in a two year delay between it and the next Foetus product (The Foetus Of Excellence Box Set T-shirt rip-off doesn't count).

It's this period that his latest album, the compilation 'Sink', contains on. The 'Ramrod' single and most of the 'Bedrock' mini-LP are included, with several previously unreleased tracks from a Dutch radio session.

Now, as Thirlwell is quick to tell you, he's shot of Some Bizzare and on a new label and his projects are flowing as fast and furiously as his former collaborations. In addition to 'Sink', there's a new single, 'Butterfly Potion', due for release in May, and an instrumental album under the name Toxie Plus, which features Foetus, Raymond Watts (from Lucy Hamilton), Avay (from Voivod) and Don Fleming (from BALL and Dinosaur Jr). What will Foetus, indisputably a product of the last decade, make of the gentler, kinder world we're now living in?

Suck on that, squarehead.