

The Devil Makes Work For Idle Hands:
An Interview with J.G. Thirlwell by Arvo Zyló
 Photos by: Marylene Mey

Most people would be well advised to avoid trying to cram too many ideas into one piece of work. For J.G. Thirlwell, it's been a signature component of his free flowing *modus operandi* since the early 80s. Best known under his primary music moniker, FOETUS, even his early work as a sole composer on an 8 track recorder, without sampling or midi technology, bestows a certain maniacal density that heretofore was unprecedented and remains as yet largely unsurpassed. Moments of the first FOETUS (*You've Got Foetus on Your Breath*) album *DEAF*, offer wanton primitive synth funk tracks whose lyrics are as awkwardly polysyllabic as they are strangely fitting; resplendent with nervous clatter, rarefied sound clips, and primal drum patterns. Taken as a whole, *DEAF* reads like a thesis statement for a new kind of music— one that doesn't simply engage in the mental masturbation of "genre bending" but builds music to be as engaging as possible; a kind of utilitarian makeshift music chock full of omnivorous cinematic *chutzpah*. In achieving what I imagine to be some complex, and exacting, visceral listening experience, or to harvest these fruits of abandon entirely from the ground up, tracks were mixed down from 8 track, then bounced to one track of the next maximized 8 track session.

The third album *HOLE* further emphasizes this point, finding Thirlwell with access to a 24 track studio, and more to the effect that he "played the studio" rather than playing any instruments with sufficient comfort to call himself a musician. Instead of properly learning music, FOETUS records would be made by way of crude charts that document various tape speed pitch changes and their corresponding resultant effect. It may be only 40 minutes long, but *HOLE* (by *Scraping Foetus off the Wheel*) is filled to the brim with furious and bitter, self loathing lyrics— or the multiple personality disorder equivalent— atop complex cling-clang crescendos and snowblind pitch bent choirs. Even then, a precise sense of the musical climax; whether it is juxtaposing scrap metal surf rock with what he has called "the back door of

jazz", or the emulsion of sharp, epic classical loops with guitar laden war zone diatribes remains prevalent, and paradoxically not without a sense of subtlety.

It has been said that a lot of people didn't think Thirlwell would live this long. In the distant past he'd been interviewed while pacing around, fidgeting, and chain-smoking as he belted out sharp and witty responses to an interviewer's questions, often with disdain for being asked about "influences" or any succinct association to a specific genre (he is often referred to as the "godfather of industrial" despite his wholehearted rejection of what the genre "ghetto" has largely come to be known for). There are numerous stories of fights with the crowd on tour. *GASH* (1995) was a self described apocalypse, a scathing collision in every sense of the word. Released by Sony and dropped shortly after, it culminated in a series of episodes and breakdowns until eventually a newly revitalized FOETUS album (*FLOW*, 2001) washed ashore, revealing a raw self examination; moreso a naked reappraisal than a symbolic death wish.

All the while, he'd been doing his own artwork from scratch, and through much of the 90s he was the "go-to guy" for remixing the work of popular artists such as Danzig, Pantera, Red Hot Chili Peppers, EMF, Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson, and more, while also being credited as the man who pioneered the "metal remix". He's done production work for a number of bands, White Zombie's first demo was produced by Thirlwell, as was Einsturzende Neubauten's *Strategies Against Architecture*. FOETUS has been strictly a solo project for the most part, but Thirlwell has also worked with Lydia Lunch, Nick Cave, Marc Almond, Nurse with Wound, Jarboe, the early formations of Whitehouse, Cop Shoot Cop, and Roli Mossimann (Swans).

The most recent FOETUS album *HIDE*, inspired by "the culture of fear", is again, all across the board, it features operatic elements along side jangled prog time signatures, while also sometimes traversing dark pop territory, western spy noir, and musique concret, to be short.

Out of the extreme productivity of Thirlwell came another deeply cast umbrella in *Steroid Maximus*, an all instrumental project that has evolved over a period of about 20 years to be exhibited live as a 20 piece ensemble. In 2001, Manorexia was formed as yet another solo project that began initially as an attempt at minimal ambient music, to be sold strictly through the Foetus website, and since has become an entity with a 7 piece ensemble, now supporting an album that was produced in 5.1 surround sound. Thirlwell now releases most of his material through his own label, despite having releases on larger labels such as Sony, Birdman, Thirsty Ear, and Wax Trax!, among others.

More of an obvious ambition towards atmosphere (without recessing into being background music) came to the forefront, and this is even evident with his sets as DJ OTEFSU, known for setting out to create an environment where "time stops after 1975", with spy music and soundtracks being played, but later evolved to be described as something like a dance music mash up muck around. Thirlwell's done soundtrack work for movies and has been on the roster for Comedy Central's *The Venture Brothers* cartoon for a handful of years now.

Where most musicians come from a mainly rock background, Thirlwell was inspired heavily by classical, and the serialist music of Steve Reich and John Cage. He's done tracks where the composition consists of several layers of one loop, with each layer being shifted only slightly in pitch/time, so as to create a gradual (and "transcendental") phasing effect. Touring in America is now almost out of the question since 2001; since Thirlwell found that a live environment "dumbed down" his work, but there have been plenty of ensemble and solo performances.

Thirlwell eventually found his way to New York around 1983, and was struck by the liveliness of the "24 hour city" but also the crime and decay. He moved into an abandoned factory in a part of town that cabs would not stop at, and has lived there ever since. It's been said that every square foot of the huge *Ectopic Ents HQ/Self Immolation Studios* is adorned with taxidermy, masks, and kitsch décor. While being a somewhat private person, JGT's known to have a voracious appetite for culture; a regular in a lot of the record stores, music venues, art galleries, and so forth. He considers himself more of a filter of his passions than a person with deliberate influences. I caught up with him in a phone interview after his second trip down under to perform with Manorexia, and for the venerable Kronos Quartet to perform one of the pieces he'd penned for them.

How was your trip to Australia? How was your performance?

-The performance was really good. I went down with my percussionist Peter Wise and piano player David Broome from New York, and we added the Zephyr Quartet to the ensemble down there in Adelaide. We rehearsed there and opened for the Kronos Quartet. That was my first ever show in Australia, then Kronos played one of my pieces on the bill as well, so it was kind of a JG extravaganza. That was the only show I played down there, and my first ever show in Australia. Actually, until last year, I hadn't been down to Australia for 32 years, so now I've been down there twice in a year. It's kinda crazy. I went to Melbourne for a few days and saw my mom, now I'm back.

Were there any personal memories, being raised somewhere and then having not been there for 32 years, was there a distinct change?

-Well, that hit me much more last year so this time I knew a little bit more what to expect. I went down last year because my father was on the way out and I figured I wanted to see him before he died. When I arrived, I didn't recognize anything of the skyline. I stayed with my mom and she lives near where I grew up. When I got to that vicinity, I drove over the crest of this hill, and then I recognized that there was going to be a railroad track on the other side of the hill. That's where it was and then things started to

click into place. One of the notable things was that the trees were all thirty years taller. It's weird to blink and... you know, things usually look smaller and then when you go back somewhere they look bigger. Everything looks fancy now, nothing's run down. Within a couple of days, I had that kind of feeling that I had that drove me to want to leave Australia in the first place, just this kind of suffocation and a feeling of isolation down there.

I should say, I'm sorry for your loss.

-Well, thanks.

I get a similar feeling going on tour to smaller cities than Chicago and last month I was able to go to New York. I sort of understand how someone could even have that feeling in Chicago now that I've been to New York. It has such a unique energy that is only really comparable to New Orleans, but still distinctly different. It's pretty hard to imagine living in New York and then also living somewhere else even just in America.

-Chicago's not exactly a hick town!

Yeah, but you know, but it felt like the suburbs compared to New York. I'd go to Cleveland or Denver, and very highly populated places and that's all fine and good, but it seems sort of like one neighborhood of Chicago by comparison.

-Well you know, at the same time, Australia is in a distant hemisphere, and it's almost in the fucking South Pole. When I was growing up, I really felt isolated, and I think a lot of people like myself might feel a kind of cultural inferiority or maybe the feeling that you're surrounded by cultural inferiority, or the feeling that you're displaced and you're somewhere you're not supposed to be. My mother's Scottish, so I spent a bunch of time in the UK when I was growing up and I really felt that that was where I was supposed to be. Where there was snow at Christmas, and not barbecues! I had always vowed that as soon as I had the where-with-all, I would leave that godforsaken place and never return. And I never did, until last year.

Well that's admirable, I read about how you were an art teacher at the age of 17 and such... You definitely had that concept of a big fish in a small bowl covered. I don't know very many people who are able to pull that off.

-Well I was a student teacher. Let's not say I was a fully fledged art teacher with a degree or anything. I graduated high school when I was 16 so I was already out doing rounds as a student teacher when I was 17. I went to art school for two years.

London, after some time, fell short of what you hoped it'd be?

-Well I was in London at an amazing time, it was between '78 and '83. I'm really lucky to have been there then, it facilitated what I did and what I wanted to do. Then when I got to New York, after being in London for five years, New York was like the polar opposite of London. London is very dispersed geographically. It takes a long time to get around, whereas at that time New York was very East Village-centric. Everything was in a concentrated area, you could walk everywhere, it was a 24 hour city, the bars were open until 4am. Exact opposite of London. It had this incredible energy, and that immediately captivated me, and made me want to stay.

I am sort of curious, and if it's none of my business, that's okay, I'm curious about the gap... You were on tour with Immaculate Consumptive and you sort of decided to settle in New York? You didn't have much time between starting to do records and being signed to Some Bizarre once you got there...

-I was already with Some Bizarre by the time I came to New York. That year in '83, I'd gotten involved with Some Bizarre, and I think between May and September of that year I did a whole bunch of recording, which was all of the 12 inches and *HOLE*, and those things weren't released until the following year, I think. So I'd al-

ready recorded all that material, and started some other material, which became *NAIL*. I got to New York, really liked it here, just kind of stayed here, went to LA, spent some time in the states, and started some other projects (like *Wiseblood* and *Stinkfist*), and then kinda went back to London and did some further recording, and went back and forth a bit like that. It wasn't like I arrived there and then said "Okay, I'm getting an apartment here today". It was a little bit more gradual than that.

Well, for me at least, it's still very inspiring, because I see that you went from squatting in London, and having maybe a couple of synthesizers and working on an 8 track from time to time, to being signed to a label and just kind of flying by the seat of your pants I guess, in the states.

-That was an evolution that happened over a couple of years. I guess things went kind of fast, I guess I was very prolific. At the same time, I was holding down a full time job but every time I had a vacation I'd go into the studio, and work pretty fast, and have the whole thing composed beforehand. It's a different process than I have now. Working with *Some Bizzare* was timely because I had kind of gone as far as I could in this 8 track studio environment.

That's one of the situations where you had your notation charts, and you were sort of working with what you can find in the studio? I just imagine you squatting and just having a couple of keyboards, sort of just trying to chart things out and then going into a studio where they maybe have some more instruments for you to work with.

-I didn't really use that many instruments. There was piano and keyboard, and not much guitar. Some percussion, my synths, some gadgets. Probably no bass either. Sometimes I would find things on my way to the studio and bring them in with me!

I definitely want to ask you a lot of questions about the more experimental side of your work. So I have to ask, you were coming up with aspects of noise music with the band that would become *Whitehouse*. I remember reading that you were cutting apart tape loops and working with white noise,

and manipulating tape loops from there. I think I remember you also saying that you were using the razor blade as sort of an instrument for tapes and things like that?

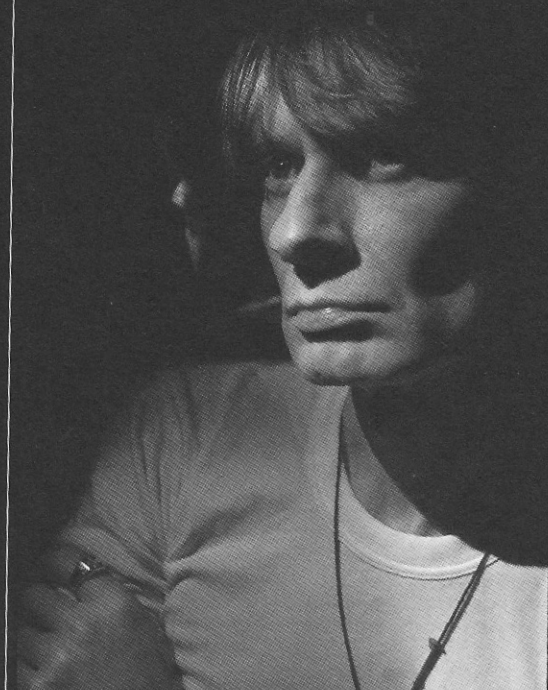
-Oh, the razor blade is a very multi faceted instrument. To clarify the *Whitehouse* thing, that was really William Bennett's domain, and I contributed vocals to one of his albums. That was kind of the extent of our work together even though we hung out a little bit. Conceptually, that was his deal, although I think I sold him my first WASP synthesizer, which I kind of regret. Yeah, there's a lot of audio manipulation in my early work, and tape loops and things like that.

When you were working with *Some Bizarre*, you all of a sudden had a free studio to work with but you'd have these pressing deadlines, so you'd work for 36 hours sometimes.

-Well, that wasn't because of pressing deadlines. It wasn't a free studio either, it was studio time in a 24 track studio which is a jump up from where I'd been technologically. I paid for it in the end! But yeah, sometimes I did long sessions. The longest session I think I did was 80 hours, which was insane, but that was on the track "Bedrock". We'd gotten it mixed and it'd taken 24 hours. It was on an SSL desk and tape op pushed the wrong button to save the automation and erased all of our fader moves. We thought it wouldn't take long to get back to where we were, and we ended up working around the clock 'cause I had to leave the country. It was like from Monday to Thursday working on the mix of that track. That was the longest mix though.

Coming back to present day, you're still doing a lot of experimental work. A lot of people are sort of calling you a musician, but maybe for lack of a better term, depending on how you want to approach it, but I was recently reading how you made the track for the split 7 inch with *Teho Teardo*. I'm really interested in the manual ways that someone can generate frequencies. I know that you do "freq_out", and I've got the first CD of that. I was wondering how you deal with that territory, beyond laptops. I know that there're plenty of ways to do it, and I saw that one of them was dripping water into a bass drum and having it run through a pipe that would go through the other room?

-That was a thing that ended up on the split single with *Teho*. That was actually a sound installation called "Ecclesiophobia" [fear of churches] which I did in Santarcangelo, a town in Italy. One of the impetuses on my installation work is the environment where it will be. They'd sent me some pictures of this grotto where they wanted to place me. That was sort of what inspired to come up with some of these ideas and research some of the elements I wanted to use to create that work, which ended up using an intravenous apparatus to drip water onto a bass drum head. The bass drum was lying on its back. That was below the vaulted ceiling of this grotto, which was deep underground. You had to go down some stairs and down a dirt tunnel to get to it. Underneath the bass drum, there was a light shining upward towards the intravenous drip, so when the water would drip onto the bass drum head, it would cause a ripple, and then that ripple was illuminated by the light below it, and that sent a shuddering reflection of the ripple into the vaulted ceiling. I had a contact mic and was sending the sound of the drip hitting the bass drum head into the computer which opened a noise gate and sent a low frequency into the next room, in which there was another bass drum. I had a subwoofer under that bass drum. The subwoofer was vibrating the bass drum head in there, which also had a pool of water in it, so that also caused ripples. There was another light under that, and that sent another phase of reflections up into that ceiling. So that was visual component, and the conceptual backbone of what that piece was about. Then, there's a lot of churches in that town, so I made a bunch of field recordings of the church bells striking. It was a very quiet in the day, very little traffic on the hill where I was, so it was a good place to record the bells. I combined these recordings with a bunch of other bell recordings that I had sourced, and I had some bells of my own. In that way, I was bringing the bells from above down



underground in this grotto, and they became some of the audio components as well. I had 4 channels, a 4 channels speaker set up in that room as well. It was a composition that I slowly came up with using tones, and the bells coming in and out, and various other elements. I performed that live a couple of nights, I can't remember-- 3 nights, 2 nights or something. So it was kind of a combination of installation and live performance/manipulation. At about 2 hours long, then I had to distill that down into one side of a 7 inch, which was kinda difficult, but the essence is there on that 7 inch.

Wow! That's amazing! That's really incredible. I'd like to ask you about a lot of the other things that are highly complex that you've done. Your installation with LED lights, and your installation for 47 channel [audio] sculpture...

-The one with... that's actually a sculpture. That was a mirrored sculpture that I did with controlled LEDs yeah, "Narcissus Ascenda". It was an eternal mirror box which was suspended from the ceiling. Inside there were 27 LEDs hanging at various angles. I got this piece of one-way mirror which, after many attempts, I finally contorted into a tube which was held together with bolts, and that went up inside this mirrored box. The idea being that when it's suspended from the ceiling you crawled under it and stuck your head in the tube. Between the tube and the walls/interior of the cube were 27 LEDs hung at various angles, which were controlled by a circuit on top of the box, and they went through various programs of strobing and fading and flashing and so on. You put your head into the tube, your head would disappear but you just saw this eternal field. That was a for a group show in Osterson, in Sweden.

I was really dying to try to find more images of that. Maybe it's one of those that you can't download a sculpture.

-No, you have to stick your head in it. I'm all for the non-downloadable experience. It's now sitting in a crate in my hallway. Maybe it will get exhibited again one day.

You did a sound installation that was 47 channels within a huge metal sculpture?

-That was in Vienna, that was last year. That piece is called "The Morning Line". It was created by Matthew Ritchie. I think it actually has 54 speakers, and 47 channels. Commissioned by TBA21 [Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary]. There was a round of compositions guest-commissioned by Franz Pomassl, and so I was invited to write one. I ended up writing a 38 minute piece that was something like 75 stems, and we didn't have too long to spatialize it, but I think it turned out really well. At the opening I performed along with that and now it's in the sculptures archive of compositions. If you go to Schwarzenbergplatz in Vienna, at a certain time of day, that composition will play. The compositions play back daily 9am to 10pm

The 75 stems, I probably should also ask this as it relates to the 5.1 album with Manorexia. Was it a lot of complimentary pieces or is it intended to be 47 different things happening?

-It was one composition with 47 channels, each speaker doing something discretely different. The challenge that I found was that you're working with an audio field which is say 20 meters long and 8 meters tall. The speakers are secreted in the structure of this sculpture. The listener can walk through the sculpture, and where-ever they stand spatially, whatever speaker they're standing next to, is obviously the loudest thing they are going to hear. So if there is a part in the composition where there are multiple sounds that are important to hear at the same time, but they may be coming out of different speakers and locations, how do you spatialize them? One sound is maybe 20 meters away from the other sound. You're working within the limitations of it being outdoors, sounds dissipating, the speakers aren't very large, that is a challenge. I worked with a system where I split up the priority of the sounds into primary sounds that I wanted to be heard throughout the system and then secondary sounds that could be throughout the system in spatial areas, and then the

third category of sounds, they could float, so they could pan and move between speakers. And then there were maybe 5 sections to the composition, so each section had to then be considered in those permutations. We had to set up the program to do that and Tony Myatt designed the software and the system and he and his team did an amazing job of figuring out how to place these things in the program. So it was a lot of placing the sounds, going into it and adjusting the volumes, and getting it as close as we could, as quickly as we could, to my sonic vision of the piece. There's a shack on site, which housed the hardware and the software, and they had a computer that could remotely change the parameters of the system while you were standing inside the sculpture thirty meters away. We edged towards it and I think it was successful. Again I responded to the space and my knowledge of what other composers had created, and I wanted to create something that reflected the grandeur of the surroundings in its climax. I think I achieved it.

Speaking of spatial elements, with freq_out, I've got the CD that they came out with, and you know, some of the stuff is hardly audible within the human ear, and I wonder if you keep that in mind when you're assigned a certain frequency if some of the collective or some aspect of the collective is working with subsonic frequencies to affect a person in the same sense as binaural beats (an online sound program stocked with sounds to cause "euphoria" and "relaxation" etc) or things like that where frequencies are supposed to cause a reaction in people?

-The idea behind freq_out is that the sonic spectrum is cut up into twelve slices and each artist is given a slice to work within, and you can't go above or below that frequency that you're delegated for that sort of event. The lowest frequency is actually 0-25 hertz but most sub woofers don't even go down that low, and even if they do, it's difficult to get subwoofers that can handle that down low without just cracking up. Its difficult for it to resonate. The next frequency up is 25-60 I think, something like that, so there's kind of a crossover of those frequencies so, when working in those frequencies, you have to be mindful of what each other is doing. That's one of the reasons that the project is created with the sites in mind. Each time we do it, we go up one frequency, so if you did 0-25 at one freq_out, you're going to be doing 25-60 and then going up the frequency spectrum. Usually we have a space where we work and you'll kind of get glimmers of what each other is creating or you can get a sense of the space, what you might want to say about the space, what you might want to use to generate the sounds that you're working with. We all come from kind of different disciplines so we all bring something different to the table. As a composer and I can't help but bring compositional elements into the way that I structure my frequencies.

From the pictures, there're a lot of mixers and a lot of cables but I don't see exactly what they're working with. Is it exclusively laptops? I read that Throbbing Gristle was using a synthesizer to use subsonic frequencies to terrify their neighbors [with frequencies that cause reactions in people]. I don't know much about electronics so I wonder how many ways you can go about conducting certain frequencies.

-Usually we're not doing it to experiment on the bowel movements of the audience. Normally the pieces are created with laptops and burnt onto a CD. Those soundfiles are looped and are all various lengths. It's kind of a piece of eternal music that never repeats and it's installed into the space that we're working in, usually on a multi channel system of 12 to 24 speakers. The space restrictions or the parameters that are drawn by the nature of the space definitely influence the placement of the speakers and the way that it's going to be experienced by the audience, and also the duration. We've done it overnight, 24-48 hours of it, we've done versions which have been like a museum opening, we've done versions where it's been up for a week at a time or two weeks. It really depends on the space. In museums, underground, outside, we've done it in a former strip club, the



Communist Center in Paris, it's taken on a lot of different forms. There are parameters suggested by the environment and the resonance of the room, and the amount of speakers, the physical space it is situated in. It's variable proportions.

I'd like to ask what "Miasma" (or "Murnau") was, "A Meditation on Dimensional Densities Through Concurrent Temporal Passages"?

-Is that the thing I did with Lary 7? That was Brooklyn Lyceum and I can't really remember too much about that but I think it was a collaboration with Lary 7. I don't know if you know who that is, I don't know that he's so well known outside of New York but he's a fixture on the experimental avant garde scene here. He's like a mad scientist, works with a lot of analog and vintage equipment, making them do things that they're not supposed to. That particular night he was making projections with glass slides, and in that environment there was some kind of pyramid structure. I came up with some kind of audio piece to accompany that based on a concept I had of temporal simultaneity. The other thing, "The Pinch of The Baboon" (formerly known as "Murnau"), that was another name for a different version of this improv ensemble I've had with Oren Bloedow and Ed Pastorini called "Murnau". We've done that a few times.

Which one of those had something to do with the "aquasonic" which was sort of a string instrument that was made from water vibrations?

-Oh, the aquaphone? I might've used that in the pinch of the baboon. I got hold of that to do this piece with Tony Oursler where he did this piece where he filmed a bunch of people playing solo instruments and then combined them in a video installation, so everyone was "improvising" with each other via their prerecorded video performance.

Are you aware of any plans of this stuff getting released in any way?

-That stuff? No, it's ephemeral.

What are your feelings about the recording as the artifact in

present day? I notice that a lot of the older stuff isn't being reissued on physical releases, at least not yet.

-I'm a strong believer in the recorded artifact, and I'm a strong believer in the physical object as an artifact and fetish object. That's kind of how I started. I believe in the hard object. I don't really release files, I release albums.

Some of us are kind of burning to get a reissue of "DEAF" or something like that, because it's like 50 or 60 dollars just to get a damaged version, even on CD.

-There's kind of a few things ahead of the queue for that, before that would happen. The next thing that's going to be off the ramp is this Foetus companion album to *HIDE*, which I'm finishing in the next few weeks. That's got about ten or eleven pieces, and then that will be rapidly followed by the soundtrack to a film I scored a couple of years ago called "The Blue Eyes", which is being prepared as well. Those two albums will be out this year.

Is this companion album still going to be inspired by "the culture of fear"?

-There are pieces on there that were written around the same time as *HIDE* and have the same kind of conceptual thoughts behind them, yeah, that didn't quite make it onto the album. Some of them were actually written since then but they fit into the same mindset. Parts of them are being culled into this opera that I'm eventually working on. "Cosmetics" (opera piece on *HIDE*) is kind of a public workshop of what...There's another piece on the companion album which is also another kind of large scale piece... [phone cuts out]

We were talking about your companion album to *HIDE* is going to be something of a large scale opera once it's finished.

-The album's not a large scale opera. There's a piece on *HIDE* called "Cosmetics". That's kind of a work in progress. With these pieces I'm workshoping in public for an opera that I hope to realize in the next five years, and there's a piece on this next album which will also evolve into that opera as well.

If there's a god in the sky, then hopefully there will be a big production.

-That's the intention, I want to make it as difficult as possible.

One thing I like about *HIDE* is that while I know it does have a political underpinning, it can be widely interpreted. I prefer that to someone preaching specifically about something immediate such as "Bush". I think things last the test of time and speak more universally that way. Looking back on your old interviews, in one of them you spoke adamantly that preaching should be something that's upheld, or held in high regard. I wonder if you still feel that way now. How do you regard temporal affairs in your work?

-First of all I don't take responsibility for anything I said in old interviews. I agree that *HIDE* is quite a political work, and draws on the culture of fear, post-homeland security control, paranoia, the rapture etc. My other works have been political too but often more about personal (inter-relationship) politics. I try to veer toward universal themes, they are more timeless. My old works have some references to culture in the lyrics (Frank Sinatra, Jackie Collins, Sartre, James Brown etc) but I don't do that now. Not today anyway.

If there's anything else that you'd want to share as far as the meaning of it, for instance, the video for "Here Comes The Rain", it's well, there's a lot of symbolism there, obviously there isn't any rain in there [in the video]. I see teeth being removed and prescription pill bottles in abundance. I was wondering if that's also a side effect of the culture of fear or there's another subtext to it ...

-It definitely echoes the ideas behind *HIDE* embodied in that video, but in some ways when you do a video, you're making a visual interpretation of that song, and then sometimes it becomes inextricably linked with the song in a way where that's the only interpretation of it. In some ways, that demeans the song. Sometimes, when I see a video for a song, it makes the song worse, you know, I don't like the song as much because it was better without a visual interpretation. However, I really do like the video for "Here Comes The Rain". It's probably one of my favorites. It's obvious in the first half of the video that something terrible has happened - I'm finding these figures in the woods and they have their heads bound in burlap, and I go through their pockets, and find prescription drugs. I'm going from body to body finding these drugs, then this goat appears, which is, to me a symbol of life. That was partially inspired by being in Oman, seeing a lot of goats around. The goats there wander around like stray dogs. They give milk, they give meat, they're very hardy utilitarian animals... So anyway, next I disappear into my lair, and in there amongst my large collection of prescription drugs is this girl with six arms who I'm tending to. To me, she is another a symbol of life, and if she dies, the world will die. At one point, her eyes flicker open, and it's very fleeting, but the goat's eyeballs are transposed into her eyeballs. That's some of the things that are running through that. Also, you know, the 6 arms, a figure that's not really supposed to be a reference to Kali [a Hindu figure of time, change, and eternal energy, sometimes represented as dark and violent] but I'm not going to deny that there wasn't that that thought there. I really saw her as more of a spider girl.

If you're going to pick a video that would have what you might call a finite interpretation, that one is wildly open for interpretation.

-Yeah, I didn't want to get too specific in it, you know.

The red, black, and white Foetus color combo was at first inspired to some extent by propaganda and pop art. Now that you have evolved, but kept with this concept, what new meanings have you found with it and what keeps this limitation pragmatic? Are you now inspired by the loud advertising of urban areas, as it relates to being in your recent work with Foetus?

-The Red, White, Black and Gray motif still has a lot of possibili-

ties to me. I was always inspired by loud advertising and where one's eye falls when scanning a room. Lately I have been exploring my palette in the context of minimalism. Interestingly I dug up some screen prints I had made about 35 years ago, and hadn't seen since, and they already hinted at that direction. There is a track on the new Foetus album, "Red and Black and Gray and White", where the lyrics came about partially thru re-searching cheerleader chants and military cadence, where I use the idea of my palette as team colors and the flag.

In the last two albums or so, you've become more, I don't know, maybe not, you've become more outright with the symbolism, and I've started to appreciate that. For instance, your piece that you wrote that was about the fear of deserts, one would superficially assume that it's just maybe a whimsical name, because it was around the same time as there was a piece that was about having the fear of naming things. Now I come to read that it was inspired a desert that makes sound just naturally by the wind....

-Yes, the singing sands. That's a phenomenon that happens in various sand dunes. Excellent examples of it in Oman. I traveled to Oman and made some field recordings of that. I went with my friend and colleague Jacob Kierkegaard, and we crossed the country and searched out the environment, and made recordings of the call to prayer. A lot of those things were kind of rolled into that piece, but the backbone of it was that I was writing a string quartet commission for Kronos Quartet, and that piece starts and ends with the sounds of the singing sands. It's kind of a moaning type of sound which is caused by the wind pushing the sand up the dunes - it reaches kind of a critical point, the sand starts to roll back down again. They're not quite sure what causes the moaning sound but the sand drifting down possibly because of the shape of the grains of sand or something but you get this kind of low moaning sound. I came back and wrote the string parts.

Hopefully that'll come out on a recording some day, but ...

-They played it live in Australia when I was down there. Hopefully they'll make a nice recording of it one day. Our relationship is continuing, I'm planning to write my third piece for them this summer.

Oh cool, so you've got at least one more season, maybe two of Venture Brothers under your belt.

-Season Five is finished and that starts airing on May 19th. And yes, I think we're doing season six.

Great! I wanted to ask, especially with that material I was surprised to hear as much synthesizers as I did, but it begs the question, if you're ever going to do maybe a purely synthesizer album or something that's purely electronic, because I know that you've done solo electronic performances.

-It's possible. I've been doing some work at the Elektron Musik Studio in Stockholm, and plan to return there in May, we'll see what comes out of those recordings.

Is that where you were posting all of those pictures of the old synthesizers that, some of them that Brian Eno favored and things like that?

-The VCS3, that was actually at STEIM in Amsterdam. Another electronic music studio workshop place. I visited recently and also made some recordings there.

Do you think there's a potential of maybe a solo electronic tour? I know that you've done some serialist pieces within the last few years.

-I don't think a solo electronic tour, maybe very special dates. The next tour I'm doing is actually Manorexia in April/May in Europe, ten dates. I'm not big on touring, I'm more about doing isolated shows and events.

I can understand that, it's probably pretty rough to tour ...



-It's difficult for a seven piece ensemble that is not really appropriate for playing in rock clubs.

Do you think the piece that you did that was inspired by France Gall will ever get released anywhere?

-No, that's highly unlikely. Some pieces are just meant to be played once and disappear.

I find that to be admirable, but as a fan, you know, it's painful!

-The Residents had this theory of obscurity many years ago before they released this album called *Not Available*, and they decided that they weren't going to release the album until they'd completely forgotten it existed. Sometimes it's good to do something, and then forget it exists. Maybe I could do some self-archeology in 15 years time. Otherwise there's not going to be anything to unearth when I die.

I guess that means I don't ask anymore questions about reissues then! Hopefully you didn't have a falling out with this person but I'd really like to ask about Raymond Watts, because I read an interview that he did where he said he was only interested in noise, like um, just, he was only compelled by the sound of plastic bending and things like this until he heard about your work. That he came to work with you and obviously was influenced by you, I mean it's pretty evident in his work. I wonder if he ever told you anything about that or how that came to be.

-It's fairly blatant that he was influenced by my work. One of his songs was such a rip off of me that he dedicated it to me. He played keyboards with me on one tour, the first European tour with a live band in '88. And then we did some pieces together on the first Steroid Maximus and that was about it. I'm not in touch.

Being that you've got a lot of covers under your belt, do you think that there's a cover album in the future?

-Actually, there are a three covers on this satellite album, so that should be enough to satiate you. Two that have been released but haven't been available widely. One of which is a cover "Warm

Leatherette" and the other was a cover of a song by Nino Ferrer.

As far as sampling goes, how has that been something that you have to deal with in the past? I know that there's been a lot of concerns about clearing samples. I know that it's often been very difficult to be able to tell whether you've been sampling or whether you're playing something in the studio.

-I do samples as building blocks, as textures, and sometimes as a muse, and sometimes I dissect things. They're very much part of my process, but not exclusively. I work without samples as well. I don't usually use such large chunks that I've ever needed to clear one, or that I've ever cleared one. I don't use them as a backbone of a song like say The Black Eyed Peas might or something like that.

Yeah, that goes without saying, I mean you definitely make a piece your own.

-I use them in kind of a sculptural and layered way. Or repitched and otherwise altered.

It's pretty impressive how you're able to restore some of that stuff. Not necessarily concerned with sampling, but that song "Wild Irish Rose" (on Steroid Maximus's first album, an old woman singing with a very strained voice, almost mournfully), I never would've thought of that, I don't know many people that would.

-The vocal of that piece was actually brought in by Don Fleming [best known for producing Sonic Youth, Teenage Fanclub, and Hole and his bands Velvet Monkeys, B.A.L.L., and Gumball]. He was working at a tape copying house where people would bring in old tapes to have them transferred, and that recording that of the voice in "Wild Irish Rose" was someone's grandmother singing that folk song in their living room. We added accompanying elements on top of that, it's such a haunting recording.

Yeah it's definitely something of a masterpiece as far as found sound goes.

-Yeah. That was a good gem.

I'm also wondering how your stance on Constructivism has changed, because it came up a fair amount in early interviews?

-Uh, I don't remember having a stance on Constructivism. Of course I deeply admire the design qualities and aesthetics and they have effected me greatly but I don't work with the same social agenda as they did.

With scrapping material, you're obviously someone who has a great deal of concern for their work. Would you say that you've got 80% material that doesn't make it off of the cutting room floor or is it a certain thing where if it's not going right you try to chisel it out? Amon Tobin is a type of person who said that if he's not feelin' it, he just scratches it and moves on, he doesn't try to push forward with it. But maybe you're a type of person that tries to squeeze it out.

-Yeah, sometimes I'll look at folders of albums that I've been working on and I'll find 30 pieces that were started, and I'll look at them and I'll see that I maybe spent the morning on something or sometimes a bit longer, just forgot about it, and usually I don't really return to those things. But then there are other things which don't seem to be going anywhere, but eventually I revisit them. I may see that there's potential there and I work on it a bit more, and it can evolve over the course of several years. On the last Manorexia album, *Dinoflagellate Blooms*, there are pieces on that that I worked on over the course of maybe 6 years, coming back to them and revisiting them, and going "oh that's no good" and then coming back to them and saying, yeah, I like the essence of this, what do I do to draw out the essence? Revisiting and editing and editing and then getting it down and finally realizing, yeah, this is actually really good. It takes patience. And then sometimes I know something is good, and then the mix will take forever. So it really depends, it's not like I use every scrap of stuff that I do, I don't know if I could really give you an accurate percentage rate of the fallout. Having said that I would love to hear Amon Tobin's rejects.

When you started doing Manorexia, you sat down to do an ambient or minimal album, and what resulted was not necessarily ambient nor was it always particularly minimal, per se, depending on how you approach it I guess. It was a sort of organic composition where each movement fed off of the last, from what I recall you reading. The new Manorexia album, despite being also in 5.1 surround, struck me as much more minimal and ambient in overall effect, more transcendent in overall effect. Was that something that was a natural

effect as another dimension to your more bombastic/epic output, or is it something you have been striving to do? In other words, have you been striving to develop your more minimal/spacial side over time, or is it a natural expression to counter the otherwise hyperactive side of your work?

-Yes it is a reaction or balance to my epic output, but it comes out organically. I guess I need to have outlets for both of these sides and the spatial side is winning a bit right now. I do think the last Manorexia is a real distillation of what I've wanted to achieve with that project, and it was carved out over a long period of time

The questions I would have now are sort of dealing with causation. It's multiple layered, it's like now you're much different than you were about 15 years ago, and New York is much different than it was about 15 years ago and I know that you do yoga now and your area of New York is ...

-Is a great town for yoga!

[Laughs] You said before that there's starting to be a lot of fratboys and useless stores. The fact that you used to not be able to take a cab home before. And I wonder how much you think that's influencing your current work.

-You mean the gentrification of New York?

It seems like you're maybe not necessarily dealing with pleasant material but you're dealing with it in a more positive way.

-I think that any city evolves, and any city builds until it dies and changes, and the process that surrounds me in New York is just a repetition of what happened in Soho and then happened in Tribeca, and happened in Williamsburg and has happened in Dumbo. Artists move into a neighborhood where rents are cheap, and maybe build up some kind of community and make it attractive to people who wouldn't have moved there in a million years in the first place, and eventually those people move in and push the artists out, and the artists go somewhere else. That's a repeated pattern in this city and a lot of other cities. The landscape changes and Brooklyn is, I've been living in Brooklyn for 25 years, and it's a very different aura than when I moved here. I spoke earlier about the New York that I moved to, how very centralized it was, how it was very East Village-centric. It's not that at all anymore, it's much more dispersed and a little eccentric. A lot of what's happening culturally is mostly happening in Brooklyn, and in a wide area of Brooklyn. Not just Williamsburg or Bushwick, and Queens, and all over. But I'm still very drawn to New York, there's so much going on here culturally, it's such an overload of that. That really inspires me.

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