

Foetal issue

Jim Thirwell is his own industrial cottage industry

by Matt Ashare

There's probably no more active or creative person on the industrial scene today than Jim Thirwell. He's the sole songwriter, singer, programmer, and player for Foetus Inc. (including its incarnations as Foetus Interruptus, Scraping Foetus off the Wheel, etc.), and a producer whose range goes beyond industrial to projects with Lydia Lunch and a remix of the Prong single "Prove You Wrong." It's easy to see why he shuns the industrial label, since in his prolific decade-long career the Australian-born, New York-based multi-instrumentalist has created a diverse body of work that has touched on jazz, blues, grunge rock, and hardcore punk. (His other recent work includes discs by Murder Inc., ex-Killing Joke/Ministry drummer Martin Atkins's new project, and the British noise-mongers Silverfish.)

"I just think the term is totally invalid," Thirwell says of the industrial moniker. "What was originally considered industrial music was stuff like Throbbing Gristle, Monty Cazzaza, SPK. Today it seems like anything that has a dance beat and vocal distortion is considered industrial, and to me it's just dance music."

Avoiding the emotional coldness of industrial dance, Thirwell tops off his sound with lyrics that delve into the dark side of the modern psyche (serial killers and the Holocaust are typical Thirwell subjects; one 90-second song is called "Death Rape 2000"). The industrial tag is most accurate in describing Thirwell's inclination to push the boundaries of rock and roll by incorpo-

rating found and electronically altered sounds. "The tradition is not having a tradition," says Thirwell of his eclectic ethos.

The newest Foetus creation is *MALE* (Big Cat), a double live disc released by Foetus in Excelsis Corruptus, which applies his techniques to an almost conventional rock-band format. Featuring a monster line-up that includes bassist Algis Kizys, guitarist Norman Westberg, drummer Vinne Signorelli (all ex-Swans), guitarist Eric Hubbel (ex-Big Fat Love), and keyboardist Dave Oulmet (ex-Cop Shoot Cop), *MALE* chronicles a tour that steamrolled through Man Ray last December. The release captures the unadulterated raw intensity of a powerful band tearing through more straightforward, guitar-heavy, rock-and-roll versions of tunes like the grunge fest "Free James Brown" ("So he can run me down"), the bitterly cynical "I'll Meet You in Poland Baby," and the sarcastic power ballad "Puppet Dude" (sung in part to the tune of Elton John's "Rocket Man"). Thirwell gives his band some well-deserved improvisational space on a bone-crushingly heavy eight-minute version of Tad's "Behemoth" and the 18-minute long "Your Salvation."

In contrast with *MALE*, the homonymous debut of Steroid Maximus showcases Thirwell's more experimental leanings, in collaboration with the likes of violinist Hahn Rowe and pianist Lucy Hamilton. The songs on *Steroid Maximus* — all instrumentals — range in style from brassy big-band jazz to more amorphous, purely ambient compositions that draw on the influences of major avant-gardists like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Thirwell says he approaches every piece with a clean slate. "It's not like a band that



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has a static line-up of guitar, bass, and drums, where you're always starting with those instruments, because I might start a song that's inspired by dripping water or a tape loop. Or I might do a hardcore-style song and then do one that sounds like a big band, depending on what I'm possessed with at the time."

Some of Thirwell's recording techniques for the *Steroid Maximus* record included "tuned aerosol cans, vacuum cleaners, prepared pianos. And I set up contact microphones in my house to record the stairs. I've also got a huge wooden cross that I mike up to trigger different sounds, and I had people come into my studio and play flutes and violins, which I can manipulate to sound like something else — even a human voice or a gorilla. My next project is to mike the roof of my house and use that as a rhythm track."

Thirwell's two other recent releases are the song-oriented *Don't Fear the Reaper* EP (Big Cat), a collaboration with Lydia Lunch that features a rather straight interpretation of the Blue Öyster Cult classic and a sexed-up version of the Beatles' "Why Don't We Do It in the Road," and a four-song *Wiseblood* EP, *PTTM* (Big Cat), where Thirwell's gritty lyrics and vocals are set to deconstructed bluesy tunes by another Swans associate, Roli Mosimann.

In the meantime, he's trying to get back in the studio for another solo Foetus project and gearing up to release a second *Steroid Maximus* record called *Gondwanaland* (out in August on Big Cat). "I can't really give an overview of what I'm doing now," he says about his current inspirations and interests, "because it's gotten to the point where I'm kind of influencing myself." □