



# FOETUS

**CB:** How are things in Foetus land?

**JT:** Fine.

**CB:** How's the Sony deal gone?

**JT:** They're behind it. I like the people up there.

**CB:** What else have you been doing besides putting out the new record, have you been doing any production work?

**JT:** I just went incorporated, (inaudible) is the name of the company which has been a corporate identity for the two Steroid Maximus albums, the Foetus double live thing, the Mesomorph Enduros compilation, the Clint and Lydia EP, and the Wiseblood PTTM EP. The first release through the new corporation is the first release by Halcion, who are a great New York band. If you imagine a cross between King Crimson, Helmet, and P.J. Harvey, then throw that out the window, because they sound exactly like Halcion.

**CB:** So how's the tour been going? You've been out for what, two weeks?

**JT:** About a week and a half. It's going very well, very emotionally draining because of the type of material. But it's the most kickass band I've had.

**CB:** Who's in the band?

**JT:** Joe Budenholzer on keyboards and guitar, Hahn Rowe on violin and guitar, Dave Reed on guitar, Jim Kimball on drums, and Brian Emerich on bass.

**CB:** How do you feel about playing live ver-

**When you listen to Jim Thirwell's music you realize that he is not subtle about his feelings. The music is loud, abrupt and challenges the listener. Live, the experience is amplified by the presence of a person who appears to be on the edge. Read on and get a glimpse into the bizarre world of Foetus.**

**This interview took place via phone before a show in New Orleans about a week into a U.S. tour. Interview and photos by Chuck B.**

**sus doing this stuff in the studio?**

**JT:** It's a totally different experience.

**CB:** I remember seeing Foetus when you played Boston four or five years ago, I think it was at Man Ray or something crazy like that, and it was a really great show. Much different than I anticipated.

**JT:** Well, this is way different again. When I'm in the studio, I'm layering instruments and so forth, whereas live, it's just a pure outpouring of emotion.

**CB:** Do you find the live sound is more what you're striving for in the studio?

**JT:** When I write a song, I don't say to myself, *I won't be able to do this live.* I just

do the song, and then when I come to perform it live, I rearrange it accordingly, so it takes on a totally different life. But I'm not restricted by instrumentation, because... on one song we do, there's three guitars, bass, and drums, and on one song there's violin, samples and guitar, bass, drums. I've got a pretty flexible lineup.

**CB:** I was just listening to *Gash* and I was thinking, *how the hell are they going to do this live?* I think "Mighty Whitey" was the one, the drums are just so...

**JT:** We do that live.

**CB:** Really!? I can't wait to check that out.

**JT:** We don't do "Slung," though. You'd need a 25 piece band to do that live.

**CB:** Speaking of "Slung" and other songs that you do with the big band jazz thing, where is that coming from? I know you play all the instruments on the album, but is it live horns that you're doing, or...

**JT:** Actually, *Gash* is the first Foetus album that I've had other musicians on. I had a four piece brass section, and I bumped up to forty-eight track with layers and layers so it's like a really big band, and had Marc Ribot playing on guitar. Most of it's just me, but I've got Todd Ashley from Cop Shoot Cop playing bass on a few songs, and Vinnie Signorelli from the Unsane and the previous Foetus bands on drums on a few





songs, and the Heresy Horns, which is Steve Burnstein from the Lounge Lizards, Art Baron, who's played with Duke Ellington, James Taylor, Stevie Wonder, and everyone. But then there's some songs that are just me.

**CB:** Have you ever received any invites from any other jazz people to do stuff with

them? I actually find those songs the most intriguing.

**JT:** Yeah, actually, Steve Burnstein approached me saying how much he liked Steroid Maximus, and if I ever needed a horn player to let him know. I've spoken with John Zorn about doing some stuff. I don't really have a lot of fingers in the jazz world, but it seems that I do have some pretty good ones.

**CB:** It's been a while since the last full-length Foetus album, and I was wondering whether there was any kind of different approach aside from, you probably had a bigger production budget this time with Sony...

**JT:** Actually, the production budget wasn't that much bigger than on *Nail*.

**CB:** A friend of mine commented that this album reminded him a lot of *Nail*.

**JT:** I think that it's light years ahead of previous Foetus albums, not that I don't like them, but I think that with all the 30 remixes and the two Steroid Maximus albums and everything I've done in between has sort of educated... all the ideas that I've messed around with have pushed the music a lot further.

**CB:** So on this album, why is it just Foetus? You didn't come up with another pseudonym.

**JT:** Well, I got that out of my system. I'd taken that far enough.

**CB:** I think everyone was just associating Foetus anyway...

**JT:** Yeah, and we did tours as Foetus.

**CB:** Are there any particular influences in your musical direction, not just influences of individual people per se, but political influences, personal experiences... where does a Foetus song come from?

**JT:** Well, it's all autobiographical. I can be as influenced by something a bum says to me on the subway as a TV commercial as something my girlfriend might say to me or hearing music equally. It's basically just a manifestation of me. I kind of influence myself.

**CB:** Can you give me any good stories behind the songs, like "English Faggot" or "Stumbo"?

**JT:** "English Faggot" is based on a message I found on my answering machine - "Clint Ruin, you English faggot, I know where you live and I'm going to wait outside for you and I'm going to fuck you up." (laughter) So it's sung from his point of view, and a lot of people have misinterpreted it as homophobic, which it's not, it's pointing out his stupidity. "Stumbo" is based on drinking vodka and taking downers (laughter) and feeling like fifty feet tall and you're moving in slow motion. On the new album, "Downfall" and "Slung" are about a particularly ugly relationship breakup that was happening at the time, in fact the vocal on "Downfall" was recorded the day after this girl took out a restraining order against me. "Take It Outside, Godboy" is an anti-Christian dogma, anti-

anti-abortion stance... I mean, it's a pro-abortion song, OK. It's about the stupidity of those people who bomb abortion clinics and stuff. "Mighty Whitey" is based on being in my neighborhood, and one day there was one of those containment vehicles that take prisoners to Riker's Island, and I was wearing sunglasses and waiting to cross the street, and someone in one of those vans yelled out at me, "Hey John Lennon! Hey mighty whitey!" (laughter) "They Are Not So True" is about it being past midnight, waiting to buy a six-pack in my

neighborhood. They close the doors and have this bulletproof glass, you have to line up and make an order. I was waiting fifteen minutes with the homeboys, and (it's about) the intimidation that they put across at that time.

**CB:** I remember when I saw Foetus a few years back, it was one of the first times I'd seen *Akira* - I don't know if it was by your choice, I thought it was at the time - *Akira* was playing on some of the TV screens. What is the visual part of Foetus, have you ever put out a video, or would you be into it?

**JT:** There is a live video out, which is the video version of *Male*, with a holographic cover. I shot a video with Alex Winter for the song "Verklemmt," off of *Gash*, which is like a total epileptic fit, it's like 2500 ads in less than four minutes. It's black and white, shot all over New York, because New York totally permeates all of *Gash*, I think. I did a video for "Butterfly Potion," and I think there's a lot of bootleg videos.

**CB:** Do you have any aspirations to do any soundtracks?

**JT:** Well, I've done some work with Richard Kern, the New York underground filmmaker. It's something I'd like to do eventually, but not for a while. You have to work with directors, and A, they leave it until the last minute, and B, you don't have control, you have to kowtow to their vision, and you know... "Foetus don't play that." Foetus always calls the shots.





**CB: Is the album artwork yours?**

**JT:** Yeah, I've done all the album artwork. For *Gash*, I had my artwork projected on the Sony Jumbotron in Times Square and then photographed it, it was actually up there.

**CB: That must have been pretty exciting.**

**JT:** Yeah, it was great. It was sort of my proudest moment. There's also ten-second bites of the video that go up there several times a day. They'll play about ten seconds of the video, then put up a thing that says "Foetus - *Gash*, the new album." So I've pretty much taken over Times Square, which is pretty exciting. It's one of the biggest, most famous landmarks in the world.

**CB: As far as your influences from Japanese culture, such as *Akira*, what fascinates you about that?**

**JT:** I think the mystery of it, because I don't understand the language, and also the fact that the actual characters and the lettering are really great pieces of graphic design unto themselves. I just like the way it looks, and I like messing it up.

**CB: You've been doing Foetus now for...**

**JT:** Fifteen years.

**CB: I didn't even hear Foetus until 1988 or so, when a roommate of mine had a copy of *Deaf*. What was it like back in those days as opposed to now, as far as your method of coming up with an album and so forth?**

**JT:** When I look at that stuff I can see that I was working through a lot of experiments in compositions, and I can hear a lot of influences, stuff like John Cage and Stockhausen, in terms of composition. Maybe the Residents. Then around *Hole*, I sort of hit my stride, I finally got to the point where I could get what was in my head onto magnetic tape. So that early stuff... I guess I stand by it, but I can't listen to it. But if I hadn't done that stuff, I wouldn't have reached the conclusions that I did, and around about *Hole* I started influencing myself.

**CB: Were you initially so proficient at a lot of different instruments? I know you play sax...**

**JT:** Well, I play everything, but I play them all badly.

**CB: But you can definitely hear the progression from *Death to Hole* and *Nail*, and the rest.**

**JT:** I've definitely gotten better. I think *Gash* is my *Sergeant Pepper's*. So I guess the next one is going to be my *White Album*.

**CB: Do you think that, after fifteen years, Foetus is an adequate expression for you at this point?**

**JT:** Yeah. And I have so many other avenues as well, I have my visual arts, and I have Steroid Maximus, I have remixing, I have... I have friends, I have sex, and I have alcohol.

**CB: Do you like bourbon?**

**JT:** Right now I'm drinking vodka. It depends on what bar I'm in, I've got three favorite bars in New York - the International, that's where I drink Long Island Iced Teas, at Mars Bar I drink Johnnie Walker Red straight up, and when I go to Max Fish I drink Margaritas, and they pretty much start pouring them when I walk in. They're kind of like my living room.

**CB: You mentioned other art, visual art. What sort of stuff are you doing right now?**

**JT:** I've been drawing a lot. It really varies, a lot of scary

stuff, and a lot of my stuff is kind of montage and reappropriation. Recently I've been doing more psychotic portraits, a lot of... Otto Dicks meets Ed "Big Daddy" Roth. I just did the cover for the Brutarian the other day.

**CB: It seems from your music that you're a pretty wild person. Have there been any insane things happen on stage, anyone sending you still-beating hearts or anything?**

**JT:** I've had a couple of bomb threats. One show I had to stop halfway through, I was in the middle of the show singing, and the instruments were dropping out one by one and I was like, *what the hell's going on?* I turned around and the entire band were beating up the promoter (laughter) because



he had thrown a pitcher of water over the drummer to get his attention, because there had been a bomb scare and we had to clear out of the club halfway through the set. The cops went through the club and didn't find anything, and then we went back in and picked up the set again and I finished the set. That was such a great feeling, and the audience were going apeshit because they knew they were in the presence of something dangerous. The other bomb threat I had I didn't know about until after the show. It was that "English Faggot" story I told you, I do have a lot of stalkers. One night the band surprised me with a stripper on stage. On this recent tour, the second date I had a nervous breakdown on stage. I started crying and ran off, I couldn't deal with it.

**CB: As far as performing in the U.S., where do you get the best reaction?**

**JT:** New York, San Fran, L.A. - there's a lot of towns, it varies tour to tour. Always San Fran, L.A. and New York are always really good.

**CB: You mentioned some negative reactions to your music. Has this been an overwhelming thing for you?**

**JT:** Well, I think I bring it on. I think my music is really accessible, and I hate it when people ghettoize it. Sometimes people don't get the irony, that I'm taking a first person stance to point out the stupidity of that attitude, they think that that's my attitude when I'm actually saying the opposite of what I'm saying. People don't get that. A song like "Mighty Whitey," I'm sure a lot of people construe as racist, but it's not at all.

**CB: What have the reactions been to *Gash* so far?**

**JT:** Everyone loves it. And so they should.