

# Bouquets of barbed wire

After two decades exploring the ugly psyche of the American underground, Australian expat JG Thirlwell is incubating a brighter strain of Foetus music with his new album, *Love*, alongside his ongoing sleaze soundtrack and electronica projects, *Steroid Maximus* and *Manorexia*.

Words: Alan Licht. Photos: Daniëlle van Ark











**The Brooklyn block** leading to the disused ice cream factory that JG Thirlwell has been living and working in for the past two decades is lined with barbed wire – fitting, one might suppose, for a man who used to take the stage with a baseball bat or surrounded by newly severed pigs' heads. Once inside his tastefully decorated loft, there's a panoramic view of criss-crossing offramps from the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, high rises owned by Jehovah's Witnesses, a concrete playground and the adjacent Projects – the urban jungle in full sprawl. Looking over at the corner of the loft dedicated to Thirlwell's recording set-up, I notice a wall covered with various primitive ceremonial masks – also appropriate given his aliases over the years (Clint Ruin, Frank Want) and the disdain for using his own image on album covers, not to mention the multiple variations on the Foetus name he has used since its inception as his music making project more than 20 years ago. You've Got Foetus On Your Breath, Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel, Foetus Interruptus, Foetus Inc and now simply Foetus – these names will be familiar to anyone who surveyed the noirish corners of the underground rock scene of the 80s, as will the familiar red, white and black self-designed album covers and one-syllable, four-letter album titles (*Deaf*, *Ache*, *Hole* and *Nail* being the first four).

But if Thirlwell once bridged the gap between Soft Cell (with whom he once guested onstage for a cover of Suicide's "Ghost Rider") and the Nick Cave/Lydia Lunch/Neubauten/Swans circle (all of whom he's worked with in some capacity), his recent projects – the swinging sounds of the big band/bachelor pad/spy movie-inspired Steroid Maximus, the darker, sparser instrumentals of Manorexia, sound installations curated by Swedish artist CM Von Hausswolff, cartoon soundtracks, commissions from Bang On A Can and The Kronos Quartet – may well give him more in common with John Zorn or Elliott Sharp.

It all seems to come to a head on the new Foetus album, *Love*. "Like the French song, "Mon Agonie Douce", that started life as a Manorexia song," the mild-mannered fellow behind the Foetus persona tells

me. "Then I said if I added this element it would take it into Steroid Maximus territory and then I realised if I put a vocal on it would be a Foetus song. They don't usually crosshatch like that, but that one in particular did. When I started, I kinda wanted to make a slow album, ballads, and I started making some songs in that direction. Each time I work on an album I have periods where I go away and let it gestate, and digest what I've done, and on one of the early gestation periods I realised that it was feeling a little turgid and I had to give myself permission to infuse it with this bombastic feeling that I really felt it needed, and that is really part of me, which kept the same kind of spirit but made it more explosive. There was a real conscious decision to develop from what I've done before, to really experiment as opposed to having a craft and exercising the craft." Most of the tracks feature harpsichord. "Everything it invokes seems right for what I was writing," Thirlwell continues. "It can be delicate or sinister. It also gave me a chance to work with things in the higher frequency range – a lot of my recordings get gridlocked in the midrange, harpsichord and tambourines can give a sparkle and energy that doesn't roadblock the mids."

The results sound like something Serge Gainsbourg might envision had he grown up listening to Alice Cooper. "I definitely was trying different vocal stuff on this album," he admits, "and I didn't really notice Alice Cooper being in there, but sometimes if I listen to old Alice Cooper stuff I can hear inflections that he does that have crept into my stuff, some guttural things that he does. Some of those records were pivotal to me as a kid. If you listen to those albums like *School's Out* and *Billion Dollar Babies* and *Killer*, I look at some of the musical choices that they made, in terms of jumping from style to style, and I think that's something that reverberated with me, because I jump styles a lot within one album."

By the time Thirlwell migrated to London from his native Australia in 1978 it was punk rock that was providing the inspiration. "When I actually first started going into the studio, I think that punk rock and the

immediately post-punk energy really put the medium into the hands of the proletariat," he says. "It demystified the process and first it said 'anyone can do this', and then it said it's not about technique, it's about *ideas*. That's kind of where I jumped off from. That sort of energy's what drew me to London. I knew I wanted to do something in music and I wasn't too sure what. I bought some synthesizers, making tapes and stuff like that, and there was a lot of amazing stuff happening at that time. The week after I got there was when the first Public Image shows were, Rough Trade was just starting up and a lot of people were doing DIY stuff from the embers of punk. There was a lot of fragmentation that happened really quickly. People were experimenting a lot. I'd see bands like This Heat, Throbbing Gristle, Gang Of Four, Joy Division, they were playing all the time. Scritti Politti were one of my favourite groups to see live. They did a lot of Improv and making songs up on the spot. I was encouraged by one of my roommates at the time to go out and play with some people, and they had a group called prag VEC. We played together for a while."

Meeting Steve Stapleton of Nurse With Wound proved more decisive. "He used to work down the street from me, I was working at Virgin Records on Oxford Street, Steve came into the store one day, it was right when the first Nurse With Wound album had come out and we had it in stock. He was asking me about it, so I was describing it to him, not telling me who he was. He was impressed that I'd actually listened to it. So he told me who he was and we started talking and became friends. He exposed me to a lot of stuff and introduced me to William Bennett – who I'd previously seen playing guitar with Lora Logic." He wound up being invited to record with Stapleton, the results appearing on the obscure Nurse With Wound 12" *Insect & Individual Silenced*. "There wouldn't be any instruments, in particular – there would be objects, or he'd be recording something and then two weeks later go back and he'd processed it so much that I didn't know what it was. I went into that same studio, booked a day and in that day recorded and mixed both sides



of the first Foetus single. I don't think I could work at that pace now [laughs]. In the first 18 months that I was doing Foetus stuff I released three singles, two albums and a 12" EP, all on my own label, which I distributed myself [Self Immolation]. I was making it up as I went along, I had a ton of ideas that were spewing into a million directions at once – they probably still do."

Thirlwell's familiarity with modern composition, specifically minimalism, also dates back to this time. "When I started doing Foetus," he recalls, "that was when I was first exposed to serial music, Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and reading John Cage, and the early singles have a lot of those ideas in them. On the back of the first single it says, 'Forthcoming releases: *Foetus On The Beach*', which was a reference to [Glass's] *Einstein On The Beach*. There's been consciousness all along of contemporary composers but I haven't studied it in school." Last autumn, Bang On A Can performed his piece *Anabiosis*. "We'd been talking for some time about doing it. I thought a lot about where I wanted the piece to go and I'd heard a lot of their works and seen them play live a lot, I knew what they were capable of, but it was my first time writing for a chamber ensemble. I decided to write a piece that I was happy with and then work backwards in re-voicing the melodies for the instrumentation that they had. It grew out of a piece of fake 12-tone music which didn't really adhere strictly to 12 tones but used that as a jumping off point. But at the same time it's just as informed by Morricone or anything else that I listen to. I don't know how other composers work, but I'll think about something, I'll think about the mood and start to sing the melody and that's where it comes from. Hopefully it's something I've made up," he chuckles.

The Kronos Quartet work is to premiere next year, but is still being composed. "I have some ideas about how to start," says Thirlwell. "This time I don't think I'm going to try to write for ten orchestras and then try to reduce it down to a string quartet [laughs], but I'm definitely going to try out different ways of doing it,

and I think it's going to have three or four movements. Part of my nature, which I've tried to shape a little bit in recent years, is to try and condense the entire history of recorded music into one piece, and I'm going to try and shy away from that."

CM Von Hausswolff's *freq out* installations also proved stimulating to Thirlwell. "The Hausswolff things have been really interesting," he says. "They were curated by him for this installation workshop thing in Copenhagen called Disturbances, and the concept that he came up with was using 11 or 12 people, slicing up the frequency spectrum and giving each person a slice of the frequency spectrum to work with. You're creating it on site, but also within the constraints and inspiration of the architectural environment, and to a certain extent you're also hearing what all the other people are doing. When you're done, you leave your little workstation and you're replaced by a looping CD, and then they all interact. We did that again in Oslo the following year. The previous one was a lot more clamorous, and then everyone seemed to go a lot more meditative. But the first year was in a space that had a lot more antechambers, the architecture and the acoustics were working together in a lot of different ways. This time it was all in one room. We're doing it again in October in Paris for Nuit Blanche, when the museums are kept open all night. This time we're bringing in a visual element, which is also going to be about frequencies. Light frequencies will be generated by the sound frequencies, and it will reflect the space as well."

Foetus has largely been a one man studio operation, with guests participating from time to time. Initially live shows were solo performances with backing tapes, but by 1988 Thirlwell had started organising groups to back him up on tour. The Steroid Maximus and Manorexia albums are still completely recorded and played by Thirlwell, but in 2002 Steroid Maximus became a live entity as an 18 piece group. "When I did that in LA I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven," he sighs. "It's the closest I've gotten to some kind of real

feeling of representing where I'm at musically, at that time, onstage. It's not easy to do and I've had to fight to realise it. The last time I was touring with a band I felt like, I've *done* this. There's gotta be more. It was very disenchanting. Now we're about to do a tour where it's a Steroid Maximus set and then I'm singing with the same ensemble, doing the *Love* album."

Thirlwell began the Steroid Maximus project in 1990, his first real departure from the post-Industrial sound of Foetus and other 80s projects like Wiseblood (with Swans' Roli Mosimann) or Stinkfist (with Lydia Lunch). "Steroid Maximus grew out of Foetus albums at that time being almost 50 per cent instrumental," he says, "and I wanted something that would showcase the instrumental side of what I was doing, give me a chance to collaborate with other people and make real cinematic music – there's always been a cinematic slant to what I do and what I want it to sound like. And it was a way of divorcing it from lyrics, which put a literal interpretation on what I did. Plus there was a perception of, if it's a Foetus record it's going to be slobbering, violent, masochistic, blah blah blah, and I think that got in the way of the fact that there was this other thing going on." The big band sound is another early favourite of Thirlwell's – he recalls "digging Hollywood jazz-variety-show style, especially high energy intense screaming brass as a kid". Lydia Lunch's 1979 big band excursion *Queen Of Siam* "was definitely something I heard that struck a chord in me. Sometimes I hear things and I go yeah, I've always wanted to hear that. But in the same way I think that Alice Cooper and Alex Harvey had both done big band kind of things too."

Manorexia, in turn, grew out of Steroid Maximus. "Steroid Maximus was meticulously crafted and I wanted something more openended, more spacious and sprawling," he explains. "Some of the sounds that I mutate and create in samples and manipulation are very fleeting in the context of what I do in these tightly arranged orchestrations. Manorexia was a way of letting those things breathe. When I was creating it I spent a lot of time with my eyes closed, it was a really







organic thing. On the first Manorexia album, the first 45 minutes are split up into discrete chunks but it was really conceived as one long piece that never ended – but then it *did* end, after 45 minutes [laughs]. There was a freeing process to that, and then the second album grew out of that and started to become a bit more crafted. I'm working on the third part of that trilogy at the moment."

Thirlwell is an avid soundtrack listener. "I really enjoy listening over the top Hollywood action scores by people like John Debney, Marco Beltrami, Alan Silvestri and Danny Elfman," he enthuses. For the last two years, he's been scoring the Cartoon Network series *Adventure Brothers*. "It's probably the most rigorous exercise in scoring that I've done," he says, "it's just been such a large amount of material. Working in television, it's a different medium and you're really working by committee. It's so foreign to me. I'm used to creating what I do, mixing it myself, making the network, presenting it absolutely as one person's vision. Here I'm part of a group of people which is then part of a machine, and that machine imposes limitations on what you're doing. I haven't had any limitations on what I've been able to do musically, but I don't have any input into what the script is like or what the animation is like. But I'm not even there for the mix and I know that the hierarchy of mixing cartoons is: vocals are up there, sound design's here and then music's down there somewhere. It's kinda heartbreaking when that happens, but it's also a lesson in what you can and can't do and what you're up against with the guy who's mixing it, who's also the sound designer. It's interesting, I went to this panel that [film composer] David Shire was on, a couple of weeks ago, and he's talking about the score for *The Taking Of Pelham 123*. He said the instrumentation of that was in the higher frequencies and lower frequencies, because he knew he had to leave a hole in midrange for the subway train [laughs]. And that's really what you've got to do in these situations."

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Thirlwell was also a sought-after remixer early on. "Yeah, I was the golden child for a couple of years there," he smiles, "and I think that's sort of the wave that those things go in. I liked doing them to start with. I think I got painted into a corner with them and what I was getting offered, because I did this remix for Prong called "Prove You Wrong" [1991], and it was a bit of a hit, and that was the first Metal remix that there'd been. I started to get a lot of people on the strength of that, and the next thing you knew I'm doing Pantera, Megadeth, I became the go-to Metal remix guy, and I'm having dinner with Rob Halford [laughs]. I think I rode that wave for a while and it probably detracted a little from my own stuff, because it was so easy to do and I was doing so many of them. It was a situation that came along, I knew I could do something interesting with them at the time, but I don't think that I was elevating my craft from it. I think I fell into a bit of a formula with the way I approached things and I kind of regret that."

I wonder if his remixes helped pave the way for the deal with Sony that produced one album, *Gash*, in 1995. "The Sony thing had been bubbling for a while, but it started with Nirvana breaking, that's when there was a feeding frenzy, and it went for a while because there were other people being successful in the wake of that, and I knew some people in that circle. And I think when Nine Inch Nails got successful, and I'd been remixing Nine Inch Nails, I think they looked at that connection and saw me as some kind of mentor... I don't know what they fuckin' thought, I don't know if anyone up there knew what was going on, really." Thirlwell relates a series of A&R troubles after signing, and remembers that the week after *Gash* was released, a directive "came down from business affairs in Japan that they weren't going to promote the second album, after I was negotiating for a year to have two albums firm. So then we started the process of getting me out of my contract – the week that album came out. The whole thing was just heartbreaking to build up to this thing where you think you're gonna have a solid infrastructure, and it's just

pulled out after all this work. It was horrible. And that was the beginning of the big crash in my life. I toured a lot after that, I think I really lost my way for a year or two there. In my touring I started to become really 'rock', and I look at it now and I go 'How did it get so rock?' Because that album was a great distillation in being this form of Foetus rock music, it's really savage and pretty much the pinnacle of what I was trying to get at, this pre-apocalyptic intense music. But then the live manifestation of that became way too rock. At the same time [in July 1996] I did this Improv thing over at the Anchorage and that came out as an album too [York, by Foetus Symphony Orchestra] and I think that was trying to succeed at something else, and that didn't quite crystallise too. So there's documentary evidence of my downfall. And hopefully documentary evidence of my phoenix-like rise from the ashes."

With all these activities and identities, Thirlwell never comes off as a pop chameleon – on an artistic level, it all seems a part of one tapestry, and on a business level, well, there's just a lot of subsidiaries of Foetus Inc. And he's eager to keep moving forward. "Now I'm almost looking back at the first Manorexia album and the headspace that I got to to create that, and what a joy that that was, and how I'd moved on creatively from that by the time I'd got to the second Manorexia album, because it already had a history. I'm really happy to shed these histories and start again. That's why it's exciting for me to work on something like the *freq out* project. Especially because you really have to be there, in the space, to experience it. There may be ways of recreating it but it's something that's very immediate. And to me, doing the 18 piece band thing, everyone says are you gonna document it, but you know, you have to be there. Of course I could document it but... everyone is so eager to document and blog and put everything up these days, and I think there's something to be said for the fact that we're sending signals up into outer space that will reverberate forever, and they don't have to be captured on a server somewhere." □ *Love is out this month on Birdman*







# Charts

Playlists from the outer limits

## Tired & Lonesome 15

**Crutcher Trio**  
Clockadoodledon't (Rev-Ola)  
**ANS** (Threshold House)  
**ious**  
am: Thai Country Groove From Isan (Sublime  
quencies)  
**nda Jackson**  
ama Mama (Capitol)  
**Carpet**  
y Shiny New (Tired & Lonesome Recordings)  
**Hud**  
It Away, Put It Away, Put It Away Dad (IK7)  
**ss**  
They Owe Us A Living? (Crass Records)  
**ement 5**  
5-1980 (Island)  
**ious**  
Nothing Your Ears Have Ever Heard Before Vols  
2 (Vladimir Twist)  
**rm**  
is (Remixes box set) (Earache)  
**azine**  
etheart Contract (Virgin)  
**Finesse & DJ Mike Smooth**  
y Technician (Wild Pitch)  
**'Love' Lee**  
re Hombre (Tummy Touch)  
**er**  
el Of Death (Def Jam)  
**mond Scott**  
py Time (Basta Audio)

Compiled by Keith McColl, Tired & Lonesome  
Recordings, [www.tiredandlonesome.com](http://www.tiredandlonesome.com)

## Faraway Swimming Pool 15 Circus Maximus 15

**Greg Davis**  
Arbor (Carpark)  
**Tape**  
Opera (Häpna)  
**Aki Onda**  
Precious Moments (Softl)  
**FS Blumm**  
Ankern (Staubgold)  
**Collections Of Colonies Of Bees**  
Fa.Ce (Crouton)  
**Matmos**  
The Civil War (Matador)  
**Four Tet**  
No More Mosquitoes (Domino)  
**Fridge**  
Happiness (Temporary Residence)  
**Alog**  
Miniatures (Rune Grammofon)  
**The Books**  
Lost And Safe (Tomlab)  
**Boom Bip**  
Blue-Eyed In The Red Room (Lex)  
**Brendon Anderson**  
Falling Air (Psych-O-Path)  
**Black Dice**  
Beaches And Canyons (DFA)  
**Isan**  
Lucky Cat (Morr Music)  
**Gavouna**  
Stings And Drum Machines (Arable)

Compiled by Brendan Finney, *The Faraway Swimming  
Pool*, KBGA 89.9 FM, Missoula, MT, [www.kbga.org](http://www.kbga.org)

**The Books**  
Lost And Safe (Tomlab)  
**Marc Leclair**  
Musique Pour 3 Femmes Enceintes (Oral/Mutek)  
**Günter Müller & Steinbrüchel**  
Perspectives (List)  
**Nobody**  
And Everything Else... (Plug Research)  
**Various**  
Katapult Vol 2 (Karat)  
**Bibio**  
Fi (Mush)  
**Deadbeat**  
New World Observer (Scape)  
**Fenin**  
Grounded (Shitkatapult)  
**Stuntman 5**  
Melted Fake Plastic (Effervescence)  
**Peter Rehberg**  
Fremdkörper (Mosz)  
**Six Organs Of Admittance**  
School Of The Flower (Drag City)  
**Benge**  
I Am 9 (Expanding)  
**Okapi**  
Where's The Beef (Inflatable Lab)  
**Terminal11**  
Illegal Nervous Habits (Cock Rock Disco)  
**MIA**  
Arular (XL)

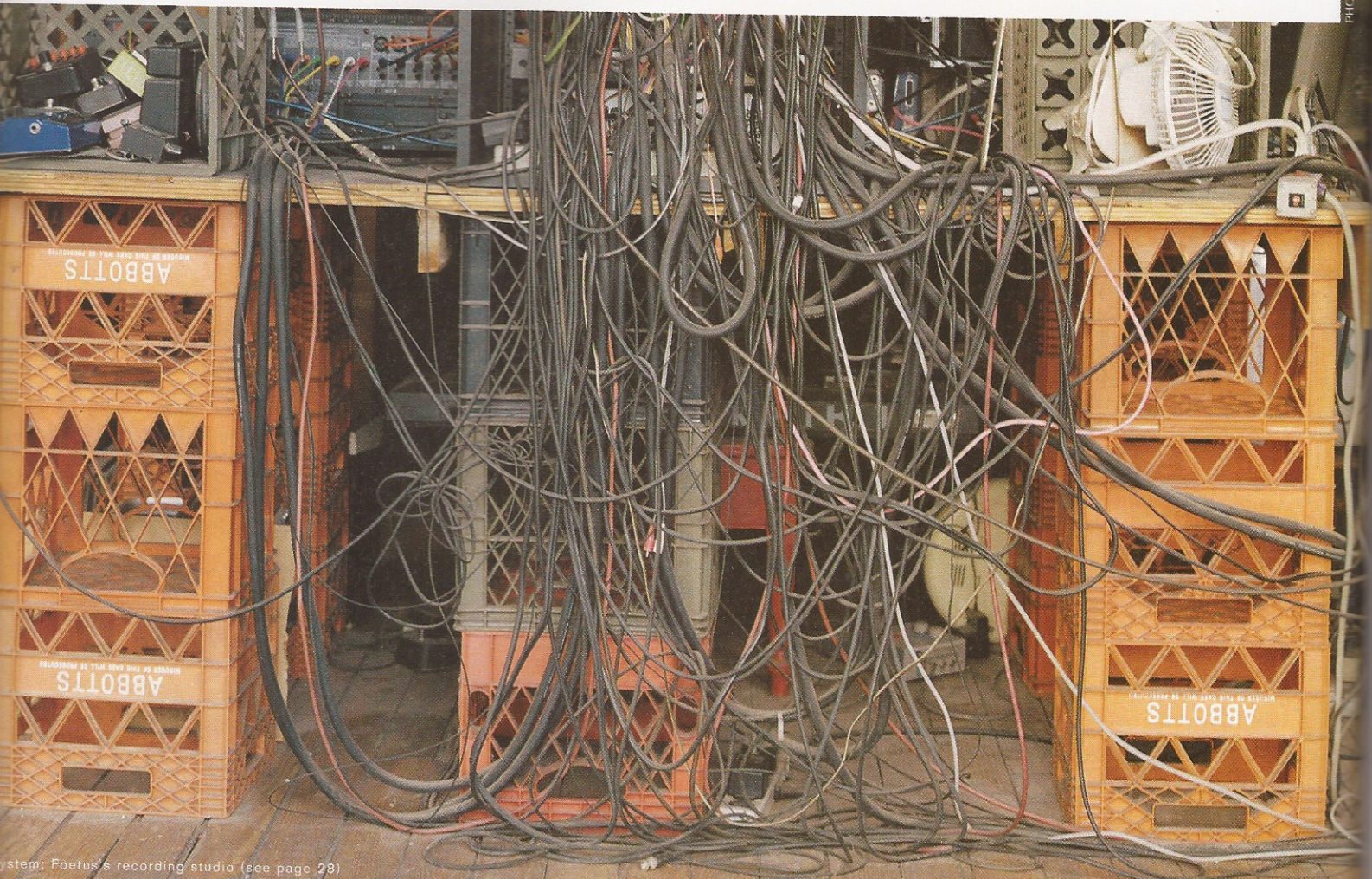
Compiled by Christophe Taupin, *Circus Maximus*, Jet  
FM (91.2), Fridays 8-9:30pm

## The Office Ambience

**Albert Ayler**  
Live On The Riviera (ESP-Disk)  
**The Focus Group**  
Hey Let Loose Your Love (Ghost Box)  
**Ghost**  
Metamorphosis (Drag City)  
**Various**  
Qbico U-Nite: New York 1/Bruxelles II (Qbico)  
**Zeitkratzer**  
Kraft Der Negation (white label)  
**Smog**  
A River Ain't Too Much To Love (Domino)  
**Basil Kirchin**  
Abstractions Of The Industrial North (Trunk)  
**Various**  
Spirits Of Life: Haitian Vodou (Soul Jazz)  
**The Pedestrian**  
UnIndian Songs (Anticon)  
**Keiji Haino**  
Uchu Ni Karamitsuiteiru Waga Itami (PSF)  
**Four Tet**  
Everything Ecstatic (Domino)  
**Jon Hassell**  
Maarifa Street (Magic Realism 2) (Label Bleu)  
**Robert Lippok & Barbara Morgenstern**  
Tesri (Monika)  
**Theodore**  
A Summer She Has Never Been, A Winter She Fears  
(Lo Recordings)  
**Axolotl**  
Archons?/Archons! (Collective Jyrk)

Compiled by *The Wire* Sound System

Welcome charts from record shops, radio shows, clubs, DJs, labels, musicians, readers, etc. Email [charts@thewire.co.uk](mailto:charts@thewire.co.uk)



System: Foetus's recording studio (see page 28)