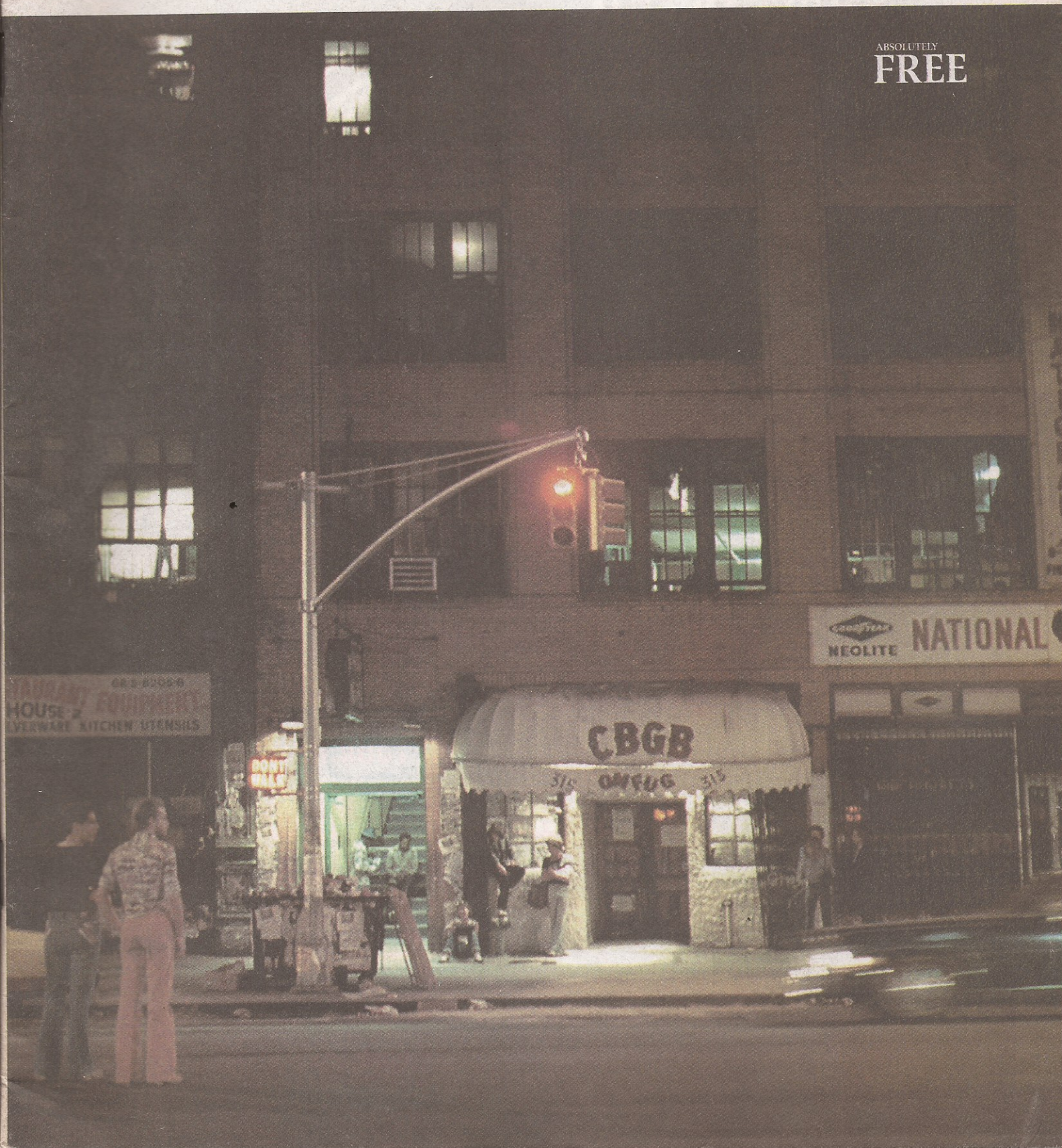


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Story: Brad Filicky
Photo: Taylor Crothers

THE IRT INTERVIEW

Celebrating 25 Years of Metal Machine Music
with International Industrial Icon
Jim Thirlwell

Jim Thirlwell needs no introduction. A native of Melbourne, Australia who started making music when he moved to London in the late 70's before making his permanent residency in NYC in the early 80's, Thirlwell has been one of the great pioneers of industrial music for the last 25 years. Since moving to New York, he has been an active participant in every incarnation of the local music scene. From the early days of Sonic Youth and The Swans in the LES art ghetto (most notably his work with Lydia Lunch as Clint Ruin) to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs (Karen O directed a video clip for his new album, *Love*), Thirlwell has been a fixture of our fair city's sound system going on three decades now. Still producing music after many of his contemporaries have retired, Jim is as uncompromising as ever. Give a listen to *Love* (Birdman Records, 2005), to hear an artist ever pressing boundaries and challenging themselves to go over the edge. I had the pleasure of interviewing Jim just recently via telephone from his Brooklyn digs. Don't let his reputation as a cantankerous grouchy fool you, he is a really nice guy.

IRT: You live in Brooklyn. What made you choose the Metro area as your home?

JT: I came here in 1983 for a performance and I fell in love with it. It was the antithesis of what I had experienced in London over the past few years. At that time the city had a lot of character, a lot of urban decay. It was also very centralized. It was a 24-hour place, which London never was. There was a lot going on in terms of the arts and many interesting people here.

IRT: What's your opinion of the scene in the city these days?

JT: It's different. The arts probably have a different feel when rent is approaching \$3000 a month for a small apartment. It pushes things further out into the boroughs. Any artist on a marginal income has been driven out of Manhattan. As a cultural observer there is a lot of stuff going on that references pop culture and things that have happened in the past. There is a post-modern take on stuff. There are small pockets of people still making interesting things.

IRT: Why do you record under so many different names, and how do you decide what gets released under what name?

JT: What it boils down to at the moment is that Foetus has vocals and

Steroid Maximus is instrumental and cinematic. In some ways it was created as a spin off of Foetus because Foetus was becoming 50/50 instrumental, but people's perception of it was still violent and aggressive. I wanted to break away from that and let the musicality stand alone. And Steroid Maximus gave me an opportunity to collaborate with a lot of different people and focus on my love of cinematic music. *Manorexia* is a bit darker and more spacious. It is less dense and structured.

IRT: You've branched off in to other fields of art, including film scoring, video instillation and even poetry. Do you ever find those more rewarding than the Foetus project?

JT: As time goes by my focuses have shifted. The things that may have moved me when I was 23 may not be the things that move me now. As opposed to wanting to do the same thing over and over I think I've set goals for myself and achieved them. I want to move on. I've found on the last time I was touring with a band format there were times when it felt it was exciting, but it also felt like I had done this and it wasn't taking me any further. There had to be more. I did consciously shift my attentions. Something like the cartoon coming up (The Venture Brothers on Cartoon Network, which Jim has scored) it may have not been something I would have done years ago because it would have taken me further away from the core in terms of my own projects. But it was something that I had carte blanche to do whatever I wanted for the project and try to elevate it. And, as a result, I came up against a new set of circumstances of creating and that was interesting to me. As far as instillations I find it a very inspiring, new way to receive music in a deeper kind of way. You just take things in and experience them deeper. In some ways I think I was trying to create the ultimate album, but I felt like I did that. So I felt I had to move sideways where I wanted to make things that were a continuum. And from there things really opened up for me. I started a project called *Manorexia*, which was in revolt against a period of time when I was trying to rekindle a lot of my business associations and trying to get records released. I wanted to release something by myself so I created something that had no history to it. I didn't really have to escape my place. As much as one tries to create from a pure place, there is probably some subconscious stuff going on your work. This didn't really have any of that. I created it from a completely different place. As inconsequential as it may be on the pop culture map it opened a bunch of doors for me. I didn't

mean for it to, but copies found their way in to certain people's hands. Now I find myself treading in a few different worlds.

IRT: You are respected remixer. How do you choose which artists to remix?

JT: Well I don't go out and choose them. I had a period of time when I was sort of the remixer du jour. At that time I didn't get offered some of the artists I would have liked to do. I remixed a lot of metal for a while. I never really wanted to do that, but it came as a result of one remix I did of Prong. I did some White Zombie stuff as well. The next you know I'm doing Rob Halford and Megadeth. Each time I thought there was something interesting I could bring to it. That lasted until the mid 90's. I still do the occasional remix. I just did a remix for End. The sort of remixing I'm doing now is a completely different animal, mainly because of new technology. It shifts all the time. I'm actually in the process of getting a bunch of people to remix Love.

IRT: Do you prefer to work with older technology or the newer stuff coming out?

JT: I've run the gamut. When I started I was using pots and pans, tape loops and analog synthesizers. I started out in 8 track studios. It was before MIDI and all of that. I think it some ways you have to use a lot ingenuity to create what you want with limited tools. I was doing a lot of the stuff with multitasking and sound manipulation. As sampling technology became affordable and attainable it was a way of organizing what I'd been doing. I've continued to change the technology that I've used and there's a certain point that I had sufficient means in my own studio that I didn't have to go to other studios any more. That's changed my relationship to the music. On Foetus, I play all the instruments myself and use the studio as an instrument to make it seem like I can play.

When I was doing that I was working with an engineer and there was a limited time where you could have that creative spurt and then you'd dissimulate that and digest it and come back to it. You were under the clock. Now it is an entirely different process. I was involved with every step of the process, from the artwork to playing every note, now having the means with you at all times puts a different perspective on things. I go through periods where I wake up first thing in the morning and turn on the studio and it's on all day and I kind of nibble or graze at the creative process. The equipment that I work with is always evolving. Sometimes I feel like I've squeezed every little thing out of the equipment that I have. Then I'll have a big upgrade. I keep expanding it in ways that I write as well.

IRT: There's a lot of orchestration on the new record. How much of that was live instruments and how much was done on a computer?

JT: Most of it was live at one time or another. It is manipulated and twisted and turned.

IRT: You also DJ. What kind of tracks do you spin?

JT: That depends. I used to create an atmosphere of espionage, a spy kind of thing. And you can pour a lot of things into it. It became kind of tribal and percussive and exciting. Now I'm a little more free form. I'm all over the map. There is some electronic stuff and kind of raga things, which morphs into African type stuff. It kind of depends on what I have in the box at the time.

IRT: How often do you DJ?

JT: Not very often. It's not something that I pursue. It kind of falls into my lap.

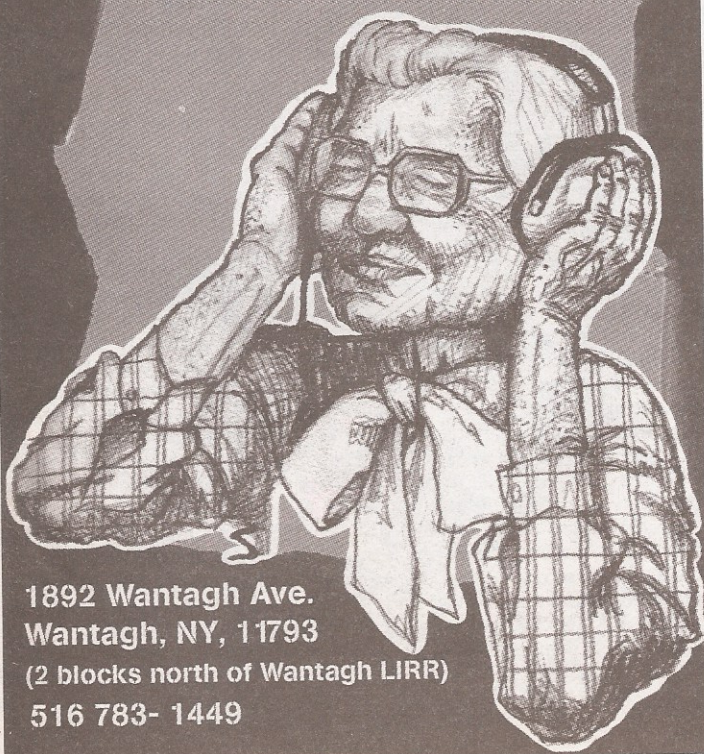
IRT: What are some of your influences outside of music?

JT: It sort of changes all the time. I cast a pretty broad net of what I take in. What I am currently interested in may filter in. Right now I'm reading some authors that I hadn't read. I've been seeing some Asian cinema that is very inspiring. It's hard to say what filters into my subconscious. It hard to say if the film I've just watched is any more important than the bum I saw on the subway.

IRT: Why call the new album Love?

JT: Apart from being another installment in the series of four letter words with one syllable with multiple meanings, I think that in some ways it is the least expected thing I could do. A few people hearing the title were shocked although to me it seemed like a natural thing. It is such a broad thing that can have so many interpretations that you can pour so many things into. I could have called any number of my albums Love and it would be interesting to see what a different light it might cast on the content of them. When you put it in context to this album there is sort of a subtext to it in terms of what was going on in my life. When I was naming my previous record (Flow) I realized that karmically they were sort of predicting what would happen in my life. Some of them have intense titles. Gash in particular ushered in a pretty tumultuous period in my life. So one might say there is similar subtext in calling this album Love. On the other hand, be careful what you wish for, you know?

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