

# New Musical Express

## **STEROID MAXIMUS**

### **Gondwanaland**

*(Big Cat/All formats)*

JIM 'FOETUS' Thirlwell's latest manifestation finds him orchestrating a sprawling soundtrack to the scariest movie never made, a Vietnam bad-trip horror opera from the deepest bowels of the Inferno itself.

Assisted by dark-rock extremists like Roli Mosiman and Don Fleming, Thirlwell reins in the elemental forces of pure noise before letting slip the dogs of war. Our descent begins harmlessly enough in a scarred cityscape of timeless big-band bebop, *The Man With The Golden Arm* updated and fed through samplers, all crashing brass and *film noir* tension. But then, imperceptibly, the scene shifts to some hideous underground abattoir ringing with Muslim prayer chants and the disturbing death moans of doomed creatures.

Then all hell breaks loose. Several levels down we hear the deafening roar of subway trains colliding, massed demonic choirs screaming in unison, slaves being beaten to bloody offal in the shadowy depths of some rusting supertanker as it crosses an ocean of toxic sludge. Yep, it's party time and Beelzebub's buying.

Oases of calm punctuate the dislocation, but calm of a distressing kind. The breathy moans of someone either being tortured or brought to a vigorous climax, elegant string passages that could almost belong to Debussy or Mahler. Except Mahler never used a chainsaw.

Test Department, Swans and even Barry Adamson have scoured different quadrants of this windswept tundra before, but Thirlwell comes closest to creating an entire universe of pain and deformed beauty. (7)

**Stephen Dalton**