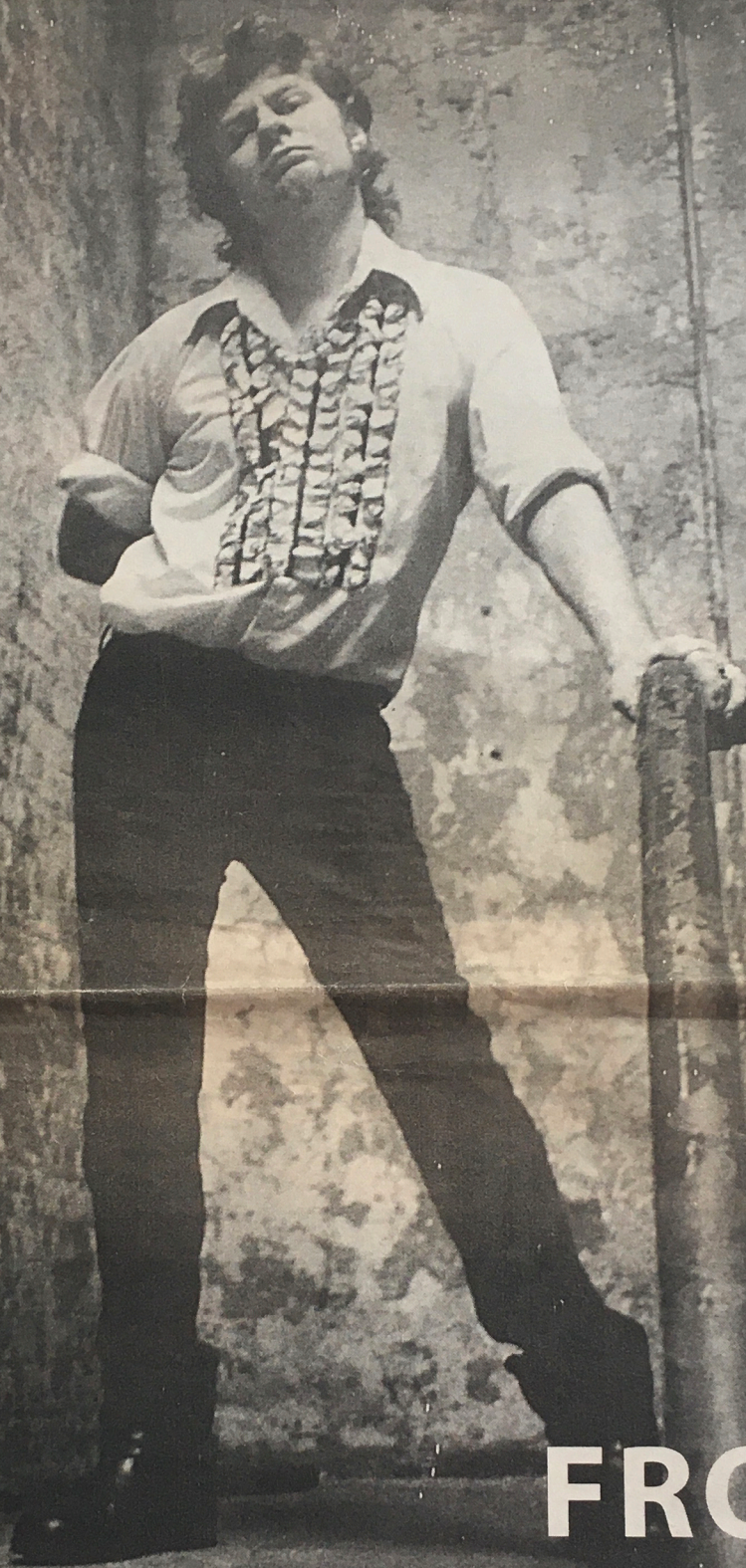


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THIRL *w e l l* INTERVIEW BY
PHOTO BY RUS

Jim Thirlwell (a.k.a. Clint Ruin, Wiseblood, Steroid Maximus) is the brain behind the highly eccentric and original musical phenomenon **Foetus**, and is considered by many to be the grandfather of industrial music (even though he hates the "I" word). While it's true that almost everything that works about a band like Nine Inch Nails was derived from Foetus, what makes Thirlwell's music much stronger than industrial is its ability to establish an incredible velocity while moving in directions that industrial music shies away from. An aesthetic schizo, Thirlwell pulls influences from factory noise, big band, jazz, blues, classical, noise, and no wave to create a musical field where generic distinctions seem simplistic and irrelevant.

In the course of more than 30 recordings in 17 years, under nearly twenty different identities (if you count all the Foetus variations: Foetus, Inc., Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel, You've Got Foetus On Your Breath, The Foetus All-Nude Revue, etc.), Thirlwell has produced a varied, intense, and disturbing body of work. With most of his work recently reissued through Big Cat and Thirsty Ear, and with three recent, original releases, Null/Void, York, and Boil, everything seems to be coming up Foetuses.

Hugh Foley woke Jim up one morning with a phone call...

grid: Let's start with your latest, York. What's the concept behind that album?

Thirlwell: Well, it's kind of a documentation of my living environment in Brooklyn. It's a piece which myself and Lydia Lunch have been postulating about for some time. It documents life across from the Farragut Housing Projects, which is where I live. It's touted as the most dangerous projects in New York City. There's constant free gunfire. There's three reasons I live here, Hugh: location, location, location.

Now this is essentially the base of the Brooklyn Bridge?

Yeah. If you look out my window you see the base of the Manhattan Bridge. I'm right at the junction of the Brooklyn and the Manhattan Bridges, on the Brooklyn side. York documents a lot of nefarious activities that happen over there. It's been composed of time. Lydia, since about 1990, has been moving around and now lives in Pittsburgh. We discussed the project and she would fax me little bits and pieces. And I put the whole thing together on a kind of libretto and assembled a kind of mini-orchestra out of various people that I've worked with but who had not worked with each other. It was recorded live at a place called The Anchorage, which is one of the pillars that holds up the Brooklyn Bridge. So it documents various guys that Lydia and I have known. There's this one particular guy, Charlie, who's kind of the minder of the projects, has like six brothers, all bodybuilders, who are in and out of Rykers Island all the time. That's what the song "Black Adonis" is all about. At one point, Lydia got her purse snatched and he arranged an impromptu line-up of the purse snatchers from the projects and she picked him out of this line up and this guy got dragged away and got his ass kicked.

Project justice.

Yeah, well, "frontier justice" as John Gaddi might say.

What's interesting about that "Black Adonis" song, and a lot of the other music on York, is that you start the performance with a digeridoo. You begin with this very primal sound. Why?

For various reasons, mainly textural. I was playing conch shell, too, which was something I always wanted to do. Just the overlapping tones I like. It sort of builds up.

As the album builds up you also work with traditional American styles, blues, and really jazz. The beginning of the CD has a sort of fusion feel to it. Have you been listening to some of that sort of music?

No, they're listening to me.

[laughs nervously] I noticed on Null/Void you use a slide guitar.

Yeah, that's Foetus Clearwater Revival. I was listening to some Ry Cooder at that point and that was sort of an influence, along with Mark Ribot, a great guitarist who worked with everyone from Tom Waits to Keith Richards to Lounge Lizards.

I don't want to say you discovered noise as music, but your music is very Brechtian, in that it's meant to make a point by stretching the realm of your musical imagination.

I've always found my music pretty accessible. Not to all ears maybe, but in my ideal world it's totally pop music. I never found it inaccessible. It's just the way that I organize sounds is maybe initially antithetical to conventional thought coming from a less trained background; it comes from the fact that I studied cello and percussion and stuff like that.

How would you say that your lyrical or musical philosophy has developed for you over the years?

Well, I think certain themes have always pervaded my work. I make an effort not to repeat myself; however, the whole thing is pretty autobiographical. So there are recurrent themes that come up which are basically sex, death, and revenge. And all the fun things in-between. Those are basically the things that are in the forefront of my mind. That's why I don't leave the house that much.

How do you think your music will be looked at ten years from now?

I think basically the cream will rise to the top in historical perspective. I feel like I've never compromised, so I don't like to be pigeonholed into any category. I consider what I do to be Foetus music. What irritates me is when I get relegated to being a second rate Nine Inch Nails. I mean, I've been doing this for fifteen, sixteen years.

Yeah, when "The Perfect Drug" came out, I said, "Wait a minute, that's Foetus's 'Verklemmt'!" It has the same kind of melodic arrangement.

Yeah, well, Trent's said nice stuff. He acknowledges it. As long as he keeps writing the checks I don't mind.

I'd like to ask about your use of horns. How do the brass instruments help color the music in a way that electronics can't?

They sound a lot more real, as opposed to sampling. My use of brass goes way back to my second album from 1982 (*Ache*) where I felt the need for a brass section. I basically borrowed somebody else's saxophone and got taught the rudimentaries of it, and then—I was working eight track then—multi-layered it and then bounced them all down and created a brass section. I don't know, I've always been drawn to that.

People may or may not now that you've worked remixing an incredible list of people. It ranges from Daniel Ash to Front 242 to Red Hot Chili Peppers to Sonic Youth... Why do you think they come to you?

[laughs] Because I am the master.##

Thirlwell is currently finishing his next album, tentatively titled *Bust*, and just completed the soundtrack for a screen version of J.G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*. *Thirsty Ear* will be re-releasing the first two Foetus albums, *Deaf* and *Ache*, this fall.

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