

FOETUS, INC.



ROAD TO RUIN

Would you trust your children with a man named FOETUS?

BY CARLO McCORMICK

Welcome to the kingdom of unrepentant pleasure and unrestricted pain. Bow down before the beast who rules there, presiding from his bleeding throne of flayed genitalia and diseased brains. Hear him howl, he shall make you deaf. Watch him rant and rage, he will open your eyes and make you blind. Bide his agony, he will strike you dumb. Herk and jerk, jump and shout, scream and screech to this demon's dance while we all shiver, shake, stumble and fall down into the hellish depths of our society's inhuman condition. He is Jim Thirlwell, Clint Ruin, Foetus, Flesh Volcano, Toxicoplus, Steroid Maximus and there is simply no escape.

SECONDS: From the production, to the music, to the lyrics, to the visual graphics, you maintain complete control over your product's concept, execution and packaging. How do all these work together for you?

THIRLWELL: Obviously the music and the lyrics are pretty inextricable, but my working process has changed over the past few years. Now, since I've set up my studio, I'm also engineering myself. So that changes the process. Whereas before I'd be translating my ideas through an engineer, now the whole process is interlinked. I'm sure in retrospect I'll look back and be able to see how this has had a marked change in my music. Having control over the entire process is good in some ways and probably not so good in others. It's a much more solitary way of doing things. Graphically, I'd essentially have to say that I started out with an initial concept and never consciously tried to change that, but it has evolved a great deal over the years. Previously, I used a lot more references to neo-constructivism and stuff like that. I guess the best analogy of the music to the graphics would be that with the music I try to make everything louder than everything else, and with the graphics I try to make it look as explosive as possible—a graphic fist coming out. I use my favorite colors (red and black), and make it an evolutionary thing whereby the next cover builds on the previous cover, so it's telling a story in the same way my music tells a story.

SECONDS: One thing your music and art work have in common is an attraction, or obsession with, violence.

THIRLWELL: Not just violence.

SECONDS: No, not just violence, but control, oppression, sex and a number of other issues.

THIRLWELL: Yes, I plumb a lot of different areas. I guess you could say violence is a leit-motif of my work. I might do a song that deals with that, but then that gets exorcised from my system and then the next thing I do could

be a pastoral suite. It's not like a band concept, whereby you have a certain line-up and you work within that framework. I have no framework to tie me down, so it's always different. Now and then I feel the need to do something that is crunchingly in your face, but I couldn't do that all the time because I'd be even more of a cartoon than I am.

SECONDS: In terms of imagining yourself as some sort of cartoon character, would you say there is a deliberate level of parody in what you do?

THIRLWELL: No, not consciously. But I'm pretty much laying myself bare to express what I want to say. You can look back on it and see a certain nakedness there. Obviously, it has been translated into poetic or rhythmic terms to start with because it is enumerating this concept. When I think of some of my songs, like "Throne of Agony" on *Nail*, to me it is very honest and naked, yet at the same time I see this very definite character, the character being me, that could easily be perceived as a cartoon. But I think all the best people are kind of like cartoon characters anyway.

SECONDS: You say the character is yourself. By that you mean you identify with it, that the character you portray is some sort of projection of your personality, though perhaps not so much in a literal, autobiographical sense.

THIRLWELL: It depends on the song. Some of them are heavily autobiographical, while others are elements of my character that I might not have a chance to otherwise express because it's pretty antisocial. Often I take a character from our society that I'm trying to reflect or make some sort of statement with. Earlier this year I put out an EP with a song called "Butterfly Potion" on it about Joseph Callenger, the machine maker in Philadelphia. It's not about his creepy crawl missions or anything. It's about his childhood, which was really horrible. He was adopted and he had these strict German parents who would punish him by holding his hand over an open flame. His only euphemism for freedom was from when his family had a beach house and he would get off by himself and see butterflies. The song has both the darkness of his life and the escape of the butterfly.

SECONDS: Beyond producing your own material, you've also worked with a number of different bands like *The The*, and most recently *White Zombie*. Is that something you want to do a lot?

THIRLWELL: Yes, I want to continue doing that. I can get a lot of ideas out of my system which I might not be able to manifest in my own work. There are certain bands that I respect, that I wouldn't want to join or try and take over, but I like to work with in an entrepreneurial way, just helping them out.

SECONDS: In all the various guises of Foetus you've recorded under, it has generally just been you with only your split personalities as company. But you've also done a number of collaborative record projects with different people of the years, including *Lydia Lunch* and *Mark Almond*. You also formed a band with *Roli Mosimann* after he left *Swans* called *Wiseblood*, and last year you took an extended break from your massive Foetus oeuvre to do a record of instrumental songs with a wide array of different musicians, not together as a band but as a set of separate collaborations.

THIRLWELL: Doing Foetus albums is so solitary. After each one I feel so completely drained that I feel the need to do something else and rejuvenate myself. The instrumental record did take me an entire year. I worked with ten or so different people on the various tracks—*Don Flemming*, *Lucy Hamilton*, *Away*, *Roli*, *Mark Cunningham*, *Pizz*...

SECONDS: You did a single with *Pizz* as well.

THIRLWELL: Right, under the name *Steroid Maximus*, which is sort of my instrumental guise. The band is called *The Garage Monsters*. It's on the instrumental record. The instrumental LP is called *Gondwanaland*. Before the continental drift, when all the continents were joined together, that's referred to as *Gondwanaland*. The music is bringing together a lot of different cultures and a lot of different people. It's everything but rock. It goes from exotica to big band to musique concrete to neo-ethnic to orchestral to big beat to accordion. It's Foetus world music, ancient music for a civilization in a distant future.

SECONDS: To me, the recent release of "Sink," a double record compilation of material from your last five records along with an assortment of previously unreleased tracks and new re-mixes, is a very definitive sort of summation. It is also the first time you've compacted all your different band names under a single moniker—Foetus, Inc. It seems to draw a whole period to a close, and as you've now done this project using a lot of other people, was it a way to create a break for you to go off in a new direction?

THIRLWELL: No, not really. One of my motivations was that because the LPs have become increasingly fifty-fifty instrumental and vocal, I wanted to split that up for at least the next record. I wanted the emphasis to be entirely on the music and not on the cartoon character. I also wanted to work with these people and use the studio I built in such a way as to get a lot out of it. When I finish touring with the new band I just put together, I'll get back into the studio and do an all vocal record.

SECONDS: In a way, each successive release of yours comes as a radical break from its predecessors, if for no other reason than that the one-man band has a new name. One good thing about using the generic Foetus, Inc. is that it pulls together some of the continuity that might be lost on people when you constantly change your name.

THIRLWELL: That's why Foetus, Inc. came about. I was sick of changing the Foetus name. I've already got *Wiseblood*, *Steroid Maximus*, *Clint Ruin*, *Flesh Volcano*...

SECONDS: Was there a deliberate strategy behind your continuous name changing?

THIRLWELL: With the Foetus stuff, it used to be changing it for each different concept. The idea behind *Foetus Art Terrorism (F.A.T.)*, is different from *Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel* or *You've Got Foetus On Your Breath*. Each time I changed it was like I had completely explored the possibilities of that concept, and a new band, if in name only, gave me a new lease on life to re-expand.

SECONDS: Can we expect another name on your next Foetus record?
THIRLWELL: No. Right now I'm planning to stick with Foetus, Inc. Which is not to say I won't change my mind.

SECONDS: By inventing and then discarding these multiple personas, you've been doing something that is really anarchistic and totally subversive to the usual program of the music industry.

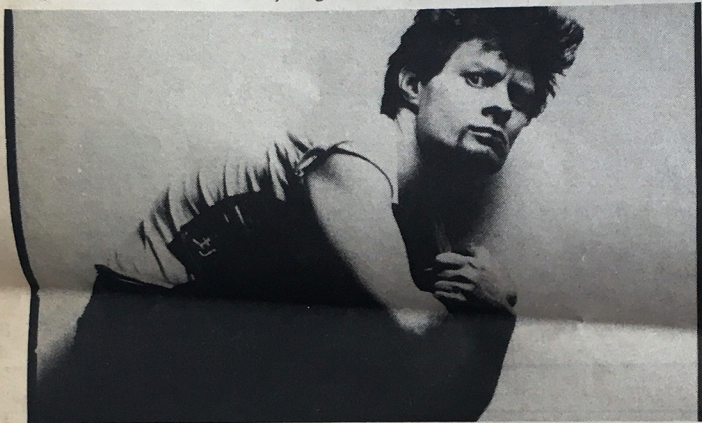
THIRLWELL: You're supposed to have one name aren't you? Yeah, it's hell to change your name all the time because you have to re-educate people and say "Here's my new project." If you only do a couple of records under that name, it's commercial suicide.

SECONDS: I seem to remember you telling me once how you used to do interviews in which you were a few band members simultaneously, who would inevitably have a fight and bad mouth one another.

THIRLWELL: Well, yeah, I may have done that once or twice. For a long time though I refused to do interviews. I used to really manifestoize my stuff. Now it's a much more natural thing. I don't feel the need to explain myself, or intellectualize what I'm doing.

SECONDS: Do you feel that's the result of a certain American influence on you from living here? American rock bands are largely intuitive, and some of the best of them have very little to say, while in the U.K., they all have some elaborate pseudo-intellectual rap that's part of some larger pop-culture discourse going on.

THIRLWELL: Over there you have to have your discourse before you even do your first gig. It's pathetic. But I don't really think this has been an influence of America on me. It's been more of a natural process. The music has just taken me over, and I just guide the ship.



SECONDS: What sort of shifts, psychically and artistically, do you think have occurred as you've moved from Australia to England to New York?

THIRLWELL: Leaving Australia in the first place was a liberation. I had to shed everything that I'd learned for the first eighteen years of my life and discover what it is I wanted to do. That's why I went to England. When I got there, after playing in a band for ten months, I discovered that I didn't want to work in a democratic set-up, and put up with everyone else's shitty ideas. That's what motivated me to do the Foetus thing where I played everything myself, not necessarily knowing how, but just wanting a total dictatorship so I had no one to blame and no one to thank. I can see shifts musically, but I think it's more been building on what I've already learned, or simply getting ideas out of my system. Looking back on the early stuff, I can hear definite reference points. John Cage, Stockhausen and the Residents were influences then. After I went through a lot of conceptual ideas, they got integrated into the whole thing. I try not to have any direct influences, and by now I think I just influence myself.

SECONDS: One way I think your music has changed has been in its libidinal drive. It has gotten not necessarily dance-oriented so much as rhythmically attuned to the groin.

THIRLWELL: Yes, it got a lot more that way—after the speed years. The early stuff is pretty frenetic in its beats, and then it got into a more visceral body-oriented pulse. I think that's where a lot of music came from. For a long time I couldn't listen to contemporary music. All I could listen to was ethnic music because it was not tempered by egos and whether it is going to sell. It's created more for a pure reason, and I think a lot of that music is coming from the same place—to create trances for a religious ritual. I'm very much into the trance-like qualities that music can create. I particularly enjoy live shows for their possibilities of inducing a trance-state. There you can control the volume for your audience and keep it a kind of cathartic extreme. I learned a lot from composers like Steve Reich on how the use of repetition can create an exultant experience as you start to hear all these different things within it. It becomes like a ritual groove that can trigger all your... whatever Foetus triggers.

SECONDS: Your obsessive fascination with raw emotions and extreme experiences often focuses upon disturbing and provocative subject matter that goes over the top in its pornographic and brutal vision. What sort of relation do you have to the psychic misery, physical violence and sexual excess that festers in your music?

THIRLWELL: I must say that I'm seduced by it. I guess it's whatever I'm interested in at the time. I'm not really conscious of the audience, shocking or titillating them. It's more for myself, whatever my obsessions are at a particular time. It's my open diary. It's what comes out. The idea in the first place was probably as some sort of personal exorcism, but I don't really think it works that way. It doesn't really help heal the wounds, it's just a way of articulating them. ☆