

How do you spell genius? F-O-E-T-U-S. Since 1981, Jim Thirlwell has been creating a staggering array of music under various names, the most famous of which is Foetus and variations upon it (i.e.: Scraping Foetus Off the Wheel, Foetus Interruptus, The Foetus All Nude Review, etc.). You could call him the Godfather of Industrial except that the label doesn't do justice to the variety of music that Thirlwell immerses himself in. Besides, he hates the term "industrial." Throw on one of his albums and you'll hear big band jazz, twisted surf music, cartoon music, classical music, musique concrete, electronic noise... sometimes within the space of one song. The thread that holds these disparate styles together is Thirlwell's twisted personality. Wacky, disturbed, violent, and unpredictable are just some of the ways you could describe the themes in his music.

Foetus with the lid off

by Howard Shih

Unfortunately, Thirlwell has gone largely unappreciated, as is the usual case with genius, while others have copped his techniques and laughed all the way to the bank. This is due to the obscurity of most of his recordings. However, this is about to change due to a slew of rereleases on Thirsty Ear, Big Cat, and new ones on Columbia. (This is Thirlwell's first major label deal.) You should be able to find the full length Gash, and the Null and Void EPs (all on Columbia), and the hard to find Hole and Nail albums (both on Thirsty Ear) on the shelves as we speak. Thaw and the double CD compilation, Sink (a good place for a beginner to start), will be out on September 19. If you like NIN and Ministry, then pick up one of these discs and see where they got their inspiration from. So brace yourself and enter the world of Foetus.

photo by Jimmy Jenner Jr.

Smug: What's it like being signed to a major after all these years?

Jim Thirlwell: It's great. I think the people here are really behind me. I've been on a million labels and worked in every aspect of the biz. To me it's just basically another tool to get my music across to more people, which is something I've been deprived of for a long time.

Smug: So you don't have a problem with the whole corporate aspect or anything?

JT: I embrace it. [grin] I've got total artistic freedom and the option to do outside projects. And I'm forming my own production company. Basically, I don't care if I don't get reviewed in Maximum Rock and Roll. [laughs]

Smug: Are you hooked up on the Internet?

JT: Ahh... No, but I want to tap into that. I think that's a great way to disseminate information. The only time I personally went into cyberspace I got kicked off after ten minutes. I didn't know you weren't supposed to fucking insult people! [laughs]

Smug: Before Gash came out I hadn't heard any of your stuff, but I knew about your reputation.

JT: Yeah, I'm the most famous person nobody's heard.

Smug: Do you mind all these other industrial groups copying your sound and getting ahead of you? Or do you take imitation as the best form of flattery?

JT: I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that it may incriminate me and intimidate others. [grin] That's the classic question. I get asked that every fucking interview. I hate that question. I'm not bitter. [pause and then grins] I'm not a bitter man, I just play one on TV. [laughs]

Smug: My favorite track on Gash is "Slung." I

thought that it was really cool to stick this big-band track in the middle of what's supposed to be an "industrial" album.

JT: Thanks. Actually, after this tour my pipe dream is to put together a 25-piece big band. I've done a lot of stuff along the lines of "Slung," way more than an album's worth, that I want to play live with an actual big band. I'd like to do two nights only and record it for a live album, and maybe make it a four camera shoot, too. It'll be thrown out as sort of a stop-gap album, but I've still got to work out the cost. The thing that's gonna kill me is the union rates for all those people.

Smug: In an old interview you said you were aspiring to make the ultimate pre-apocalyptic album. Do you think you've made it yet?

JT: I think I'm a walking envisionment of that. [grin] [long pause] That must be a really old quote.

Smug: The interview was from 1985.

JT: My work is more about a personal apocalypse. And in that light I think this work [Gash] is almost like it's in the middle of the fucking mushroom cloud. Maybe the next album will be post-apocalyptic. This one I think is in the middle of the mushroom cloud, emotionally. Although... it is catchy. It's got a beat... And I can dance to it! [grin]

Smug: What made you go into music as opposed to any other art form? Were you driven to make music or was it something you found that you just happened to be good at?

JT: Yeah, my dad drove me and he dropped me off. "Here ya go son!" [laughs] As long as I can remember I've been immersed in music, a total music-aholic and art-aholic. I'm sort of a sponge for disparate muses. I don't necessarily have to like some-

thing to absorb it. I'm not that well versed in a lot of genres that I've pummeled, or pillaged, but it's appropriate for whatever I'm trying to put across at that point in time. I'm as influenced by a TV commercial as I am by Bob Dylan. I was transcribing the lyrics for the lyric sheet and, apart from the fact that it depressed the fucking hell out of me 'cause it's a real document of my life, I noticed there were like six quotes from TV commercials. My new obsession is this new ad for Dunkin Donuts with all the people staring at the new coffee. So that is as big as an influence on me as a bum on the street. I absorb everything and wring out the sponge onto tape. I try and create from as pure and as deep place as possible. I create in a vacuum that I impose upon myself when I'm recording. I have a total embargo on listening to other people's music. I didn't listen to any music for four months when I was recording this album.

Smug: You didn't want any outside influences then?

JT: Yeah. I kind of influence myself and I build from a deeper place.

Smug: Any favorite bands that you wanna plug?

JT: Halcion. They're a totally amazing four-piece out of New York City. They're like two guitars, bass, drums, amazing lead singer. The sound like a cross between King Crimson, Helmet, PJ Harvey... but they sound exactly like Halcion. They're fucking great. Ultra-Bidet. They're a Japanese three-piece based in New York. They just signed with Alternative Tentacles and they've got an EP out and an album coming. Them and Halcion are just the most amazing fucking bands in New York right now. In fact I'm touring with them. Forgot about that. [laughs]