

After 45 years of sound and fury JG Thirlwell's Foetus project approaches its termination

By Erick Bradshaw

Foetus

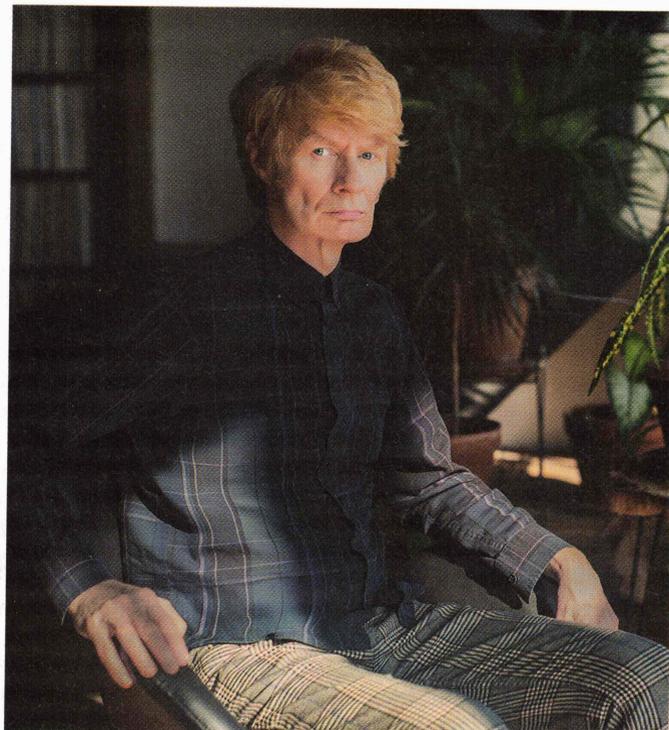
Halt

Ectopic Ents CD/DL/LP

Born in Melbourne, Australia, James George Thirlwell has come a long way since Foetus came into existence in 1981. After an initial flurry of activity in London, he crossed the Atlantic Ocean and never looked back, making New York his home and the base of operations for his Self Immolation Studios. During the four decades since, Thirlwell took Foetus from a one-man destruction unit to a wrecking ball live band featuring the city's noise rock cognoscenti, collaborated with Nurse With Wound, Come Organisation and Coil, and fathered numerous other projects such as Wiseblood, Steroid Maximus, Manorexia and Xordox. The most recent Foetus release was 2013's *Soak*, the companion album to 2010's *Hide*. Since then, Thirlwell has been busy composing soundtracks – notably for the animated television series *Archer* and *The Venture Bros* – and playing ambitious, site-specific shows around the globe. *Halt* is announced as the final Foetus album – with, as has become Thirlwell's habit, the companion album *Leak* to follow.

Halt manages to satisfy the core Foetal concerns of engulfing volume, sardonic humour, rhythmic thrust and widescreen drama. While some of the overriding aggression is gone, the disgust still remains. Adapted from military march "Sound Off (The Duckworth Chant)", the opening line of "Succulence" – "*I had a good home/But I left*" – points to the project's prime directive, to plunge headfirst into the nature of experience itself, whether good, bad, ugly, violent or ecstatic. Thirlwell walks the edge between meticulously controlling his environment and giving himself over to pure abandon. The tension resides in the space between these compulsions. Over the stomping beat and stabbing horns of "Succulence" he does make a point to declare that "*This ain't a TV show/This is for real*", simultaneously winking at his day job and putting the listener on notice. Thirlwell's soundtrack experience becomes apparent – several tracks are less dense than earlier material where he stacked sound upon unrelenting sound.

While *Halt* doesn't necessarily represent a mellowing of the general Foetus worldview, there is an undeniably elegiac timbre to the whole affair. While "Succulence" kicks the door in with the kind of defiance expected from Foetus, "Scurvy" takes a mournful tone and laments that "*15 children died today*" as Leah Asher's violin keens away. Satisfying the urge for self-flagellation, "The World Is Broken" and "Die Alone" are aggressive, fatalistic rock songs that use musicians such as drummer Brian Chase, guitarists Timo Ellis and Brendon Randall Myers, and vocalist Sami Stevens to fill out the



Mission aborted: JG Thirlwell aka Foetus

Foetus sound. To some degree, these songs are throwbacks to the mid-1990s when Thirlwell poked his head out from the underground, signed to Columbia Records and released *Gash*. In spite of major label backing, Foetus was far too scabrous, cynical and untameable to be the next Nine Inch Nails – even if he helped create the sound that Reznor and the like took to the masses.

"Harpoon", the longest track on the album, is its centerpiece and demonstrates how Thirlwell's focus has shifted – where once grinding guitars would have applied the pressure, now crescendos of brass, orchestral flourishes and well-placed drum crashes ratchet up the intensity. "Dead To Me" is a slight letdown afterwards, but its blend of harpsichord whimsy and chase scene dramatics is unique even within the Foetus catalogue. "Crater" shows off Thirlwell's scoring skills, sounding like the battle scene of an old Hollywood epic as a disembodied chorus chants "*I am the life*". The nautical theme persists with "Warships", a tale of colonial aggression. Deviating from previous Foetus works, here Thirlwell is not the aggressor, but engaged in a struggle against an invading force. He vows to "*Push back hard against them until I die*" as the music turns into a funeral march.

Calling a halt to the proceedings, "Many Versions Of Me" finds him looking back and confronting his mortality head on. It's bombastic, but leaves a forlorn note hanging in the air. The irony of this long-gestating album is that it performs wonders in revitalising Thirlwell's most celebrated project. ●