

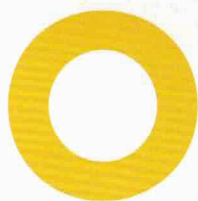
Four and a half
decades exploring the
dark end of the street

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STILL FOETUS AFTER ALL THESE YEARS



JG Thirlwell, Third Eye Blind.



ne of James George Thirlwell's earliest memories is of the autumn 1964 day at kindergarten in Camberwell VIC, when he approached a

classmate named Vegas, to whom he was quite attracted, and proceeded to serenade her with a rendition of Elvis' "Viva Las Vegas." Whether or not Jim was wearing a little black suit with a red shirt opened to the waist is lost to the vagaries of time. But this innocent (and, let's call it what is—damn near *adorable*) image is almost impossible to envisage for anyone who experienced the perversely stellar mania of the live shows Thirlwell did in the guise of Foetus during the 20th century's final decades. Whether playing alone with backing tapes or surrounded by all-star scum-rock heavies, Jim's approach to stagecraft was beyond intense—so far over the top it was like some really fucking evil, scary pornographic cartoon. If Thirlwell may not have seemed quite as dangerously insane as Alan Vega did in the early days of Suicide, he was clearly begging for the same straitjacket.

Of course, as so often happens in the world of performative arts (as well as with Bond supervillains), JG Thirlwell is one of the nicest, smartest guys you'll ever meet. The saga of Foetus, and all it has engendered, is a weird and gnarly tale that closed a big chapter when the 10th and final Foetus album was released in late 2025. I should point out that the criteria for being a "real" Foetus album are as follows: First, it must have a four-letter title; second, it must have vocals; third, it must have been planned, recorded, and put together as an *album*. (Also, yeah, it's pronounced "Fē-tus.")

Thirlwell was born in Australia, specifically in the southeastern city of Melbourne, which has long vied with Sydney for status as the cultural capital of the continent. Melbourne had a lot going for it in terms of underground weirdness. But as is so often the case for people not born in London, Manhattan, or Berlin, Thirlwell yearned to get the hell out of Dodge and relocate to where the action was/is/forever-will-be.

Submerging himself in British music weeklies, CREEM, and *Rock Scene*, haunting local record stores for oddities and things he'd read about, going to Gary Glitter concerts, then



Spookily, when this photo was taken, there weren't any plants in the room. ~

falling for punk rock...all these things made Jim certain he wanted to vamoose from the Southern Hemisphere. Melbourne had great local bands like the Babeez, Jab, Whirlywird, and Boys Next Door, but they didn't scratch his subcultural itch. After a couple of years pursuing arts at Melbourne State College, Thirlwell packed his bags and persuaded his folks to buy him a ticket for a brief vacation in London near the end of 1978. He would not return to Australia for 32 years.

Naturally, soon after he left, the scene in Melbourne became a lot more interesting. A whole passel of "Little Bands" sprang up on every inner-city street that had cheap

apartments to live in and wreck.

Jim landed amidst the sprawl of London and was immediately swept up in the fervor of post-punk invention. Even though the city could be hard to navigate, there were amazing shows to see every night. Bands like Swell Maps, the Pop Group, Cabaret Voltaire, and the Raincoats were expanding the barrier-smashing innovations of the punk ethos, creating a new post-chops musical language valuing raw imagination and energy over "mere" technique. London was pretty much everything Jim had hoped it would be, and he spent the next five years there, moving through a series of squats, bedsits, and group apartments.



After a few shitty temp jobs, Jim began working at Virgin's small Oxford Walk record store. It was an ace environment for keeping up with the cultural churn and resulted in a serendipitous meeting with Steve Stapleton, who worked at a nearby graphics shop. Steve had just put out the first *Nurse With Wound* LP, 1979's *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella*. Virgin carried this record, and one afternoon Stapleton brought it up to the counter and asked Jim what it sounded like. Thirlwell gave him an enthusiastic review and consequently got an invite to the weekly session at IPS Studios that Steve booked every Friday night. There the pair and various accomplices recorded odd noises and voices that Stapleton would fiddle around with to create new *Nurse With Wound* music. This was another revelation for Jim. Not only did you not need to be proficient on an instrument to be a musician, YOU DIDN'T EVEN NEED A GODDAMN INSTRUMENT.

This mind-blowing idea made Jim eager to graduate from working inside the confines of a band. At that point he was playing Wasp synthesizer for Spec Records, a quartet that emerged from the wreckage of an earlier London outfit named pragVEC. Spec Records' sole LP, *No Cowboys*, was the first release on which Jim appeared. But he was so obviously annoyed by having to take orders from other people that they gave him the boot just before the band's debut gig (opening for Cabaret Voltaire at London's ICA). Jim was disappointed to miss the show, but he'd already begun working on his first Foetus release. That single, "Spite Your Face/OKMF," was released under the name Foetus Under Glass in January 1981. The record's sound is more overtly musical than *Nurse With Wound* or William Bennett's *Come* (with whom Jim also recorded). With tape manipulations, electronics, vocals, and whatnot, its vibe is halfway between *Nurse With Wound* and the Residents. Nice neighborhood! The day his copies arrived, Jim had a ticket to see Merce Cunningham perform with music by John Cage. He brought a few singles with him and after the show noticed Cage sitting by

himself up front. He tried to work up the nerve to give Cage a record but couldn't manage to do it. He *did* pass a copy to DJ John Peel, however, who praised the tracks on his radio show and invited Foetus to record a session for him the following year.

During this period, the Boys Next Door also left Melbourne, changing their name mid-flight to the Birthday Party. Jim had been friendly with them back in Melbourne, and they began hanging out a lot in London, with Jim even doing their promotional writing when required. And the Foetus catalog was expanding. Jim would do one project, release it on his own Self Immolation label, and as soon as it was paid off he'd start a new one. By mid-'82, the label had issued three 7-inches, one 12-inch, and two LPs, credited to Foetus Under Glass, *You've Got Foetus on Your Breath*, Phillip & the Foetus Vibrations, and *Foetus Over Frisco*. And each of these records displayed a different face. The first album, 1981's *Deaf* (#1), gave hints of what would become Foetus' trademark overdrive—balanced between real and imagined instruments, with passages recalling Zappa's great NYC experiments of 1967. Its follow-up, 1982's *Ache* (#2), is more of a form brawler with thick rhythm underpinning worthy of the Pop Group. And Foetus was just getting started!

Around this time, Lydia Lunch was working with the Birthday Party and saw one of Jim's press releases. Intrigued, she asked him to write one for her as well. So he did. And a gaggle of black-clad, mascaraed freaks—Jim, Lydia, various Birthday Boys, Marc Almond (from Soft Cell), etc.—began hanging out at the original Batcave on Dean Street in Soho. When the Birthday Party finally imploded, Jim wrote the music for Nick Cave's "Wings Off Flies" on the piano at Lydia's place and was briefly in a protean lineup of the Bad Seeds. Meanwhile, Jim and Lydia found each other's company charming, and he played with her (and Swans) at the May '83 Speed Trials festival in NYC, then stepped into Rowland Howard's shoes for a brief Scandinavian tour supporting Lydia's *In Limbo* session.

Lydia and Nick had written 50 short plays together, and Jim was regularly guesting with Marc Almond's band to cover Suicide's "Ghost Rider," so Lydia got the idea of the four of them joining forces for a demented cabaret revue called the Immaculate Consumptive. There was a three-show U.S. "tour" around Halloween '83, but the major result of the tour was getting Foetus to NYC for a deep dumpster dive. And he dug the place so feverishly he never left.

Unlike the nearly boundless conurbation of London, in any remote corner of which *thee shit* might be happening at that very moment, Jim focused on the small area of Manhattan's lower reaches, where Glenn Branca, Sonic Youth, Swans, Richard Kern, and other agents of the transgressive underground were all jammed into a small chunk of the city. He and Lydia shacked up at her pad on East 12th Street, and Jim dove into guest work while continuing to crank out Foetus material. The 1984 album *Hole* (#3) was the last U.K.-recorded Foetus session and is a massively amped-up album of evil hot-rod music, but the first real fruit of Jim's American Era was *Wiseblood*. Originally planned for four drummers, it boiled down to Jim and Roli Mosimann (then of Swans) creating "violent macho American music made by non-Americans." It is a thumping screamer of a record, and *Wiseblood*'s entire discography is great. My fave of theirs might be *Dirt Dish*, on which Robert Quine plays some of his nicest guitar ever and the band lurches as hard as the Birthday Party.

The first American Foetus album was 1985's *Nail* (#4), which was also the first time Jim was able to avail himself of new technology like sampling and a MIDI. *Nail* represents the beginning of a phase where Foetus experiments with expanded orchestral-type musical forms, invoking both wide-screen film soundtracks and the insane chopping of cartoon music by Carl Stallings and Raymond Scott. New York was also where Jim decided to create live shows for Foetus.

Jim was still doing work with old friends like the Virgin Prunes, the The, Thurston Moore,

Marc Almond (in a duo called Flesh Volcano), and Lydia. There were also a couple of Foetus 12-inches, but one of the best places to hear how insane live Foetus shows could be is the (noncanonical) two-LP set *Rife*. *Rife* captures a bruising live 1988 show recorded in Europe, with a band drawn from members of Prong, Swans, and Pig. It is an apex noise-a-billy riot of sexual grunting, yowling, and general bad behavior. *Rife* was followed pretty closely by the 1988 studio album *Thaw* (#5), which employs big-ass thug-rock riffery entwined with some of the harshest vocals Jim ever recorded. There are moments where it sounds like Wolfman Jack totally whacked out on acid and staggering around a strip club in Miami. It's an intense spin, marking the stylistic pinnacle of this phase of the Foetus saga (although Jim's reputation as a hyperactive roustabout would take many years to dispel).

"I WANT TO BE THE ONE TO WRITE THE ENDING TO THIS STORY."

As the '90s dawned, Foetus released some comps, 12-inches, and more live sets, but Jim's focus was turning ever more in purely instrumental directions. First was the Garage Monsters project, which combined Raymond Scott's insane charts with the tiki exotica of Martin Denny. This kind of thing had long been folded into Lowbrow Culture's aesthetic celebration of offbeat '50s/'60s weirdness, but Jim was among the first to actually explore the music's voicings rather than just spin records at parties.

The same era produced what may be one of the most overlooked records in Jim's discography: the gorgeous biker/art-rock fusion of the "Don't Fear the Reaper" EP, released in 1991 as a duet with Lydia. If you haven't heard this o/p slab, check it out on YouTube. It's killer.

Jim's main focus soon became Steroid Maximus. Ostensibly a more serious version of Garage Monsters, Steroid Maximus' 1991 debut LP, *Quilombo*, is explosive. It truly makes the tiki/cop show/cartoon orchestrations shine and is perhaps the most friendly Foetus-related record ever issued. It has loads of strange



"So, it was at this very piano that I came up with the line 'Yeah, I'm the one who gave the sandwich to Mama Cass.'"

undercurrents, but its surface is pure brass, spit polish, and Wile E. Coyote. *Quilombo* was heard and loved by a lot of folks who were not Foetus fans. And it led directly to some of the later soundtrack work Jim would be asked to do. Some of the earliest music on *Venture Bros.* episodes on Adult Swim uses needle drops from Steroid Maximus. But all that happened a bit later. Steroid Maximus' trajectory got sidetracked by the flow of the early '90s, when, in the wake of Nirvana, every major label started casting *desperately* for the next next big thing. And so Foetus was actually courted and signed to Columbia.

"I had been doing a lot of work for majors at the time,"

Jim says. "With remixing, including some very high-profile ones—Nine Inch Nails, Pantera Prong... You have to remember the climate in those days. Boredoms were on a major label too. I actually had a couple of meetings at other labels and settled on Sony, I guess 'cause of having an ally in Jim Dunbar. Unfortunately, he jumped

ship for Geffen soon after I was signed, and I was adrift without an A&R person."

The resulting album, *Gash* (#6), is a great set of music. It includes a totally berserk Bollywood interlude and has one of the more amazing videos you'll see (for "Verklemmt"). It also gave Jim a chance to project images of his choosing on the Jumbotron that looms over



Trying to come up with funny captions for a dude who has album titles like *Gash* is like bringing a penknife to a bazooka fight.

Times Square, and who the hell wouldn't love the chance to do *that*? It did all fade away like a dream, however, not too long after it began. But what the hell? The latter part of the '90s mostly saw Jim changing his wardrobe (from black to white) and working on a wide variety of projects—such as Foetus Symphony Orchestra's *York*, a song cycle from 1997 dedicated to the sordid history of the Farragut Housing Project in Dumbo (the neighborhood in which Jim's lair exists).

But the new century brought a great new Foetus album with it. 2001's *Flow* (#7) is a classic eclectic mix of everything from scum rock to jazzy samba duets to Queen-damaged freak-outs and a very odd little rock operetta titled "Kreibabe." Alongside *Flow*, Jim undertook a new project called Manorexia, signaling another shift in direction. The original idea for Manorexia's *Volvox Turbo* was to create a drone album, but this idea mutated along the way, becoming a very orchestral assemblage with elements of both film scores and contemporary classical music all squeezed together. This album and its follow-up, *The Radilarian Ooze*, announced the arrival of Thirlwell as a "serious" composer. Jim was commissioned to write work for Kronos Quartet, Bang on a Can Allstars, and other totally legit "new music" organizations all over the globe. For an autodidact like Thirlwell, this was strong meat, and an indication there might be more method to his apparent madness than anyone had suspected.

Once this happened, Jim was well on his way to being a well-regarded composer of film and television soundtracks, working with a bunch of heavy "new music" ensembles and putting together arrangements for a variety of artists (Noveller, Zola Jesus). Still, he continued to work on all sorts of ongoing projects and starting new ones like Xordox, a totally bloopy synth project combining Berlin School and post-Zeuhl approaches to space music. He has also been working in a duo with Swedish musician Simon Steenslab crafting very dark and progged-out instrumental music. But Foetus proper would still pop up as a force every few years.

2004's *Love* (#8) is as "pop" a Foetus album as you'll hear. Seemingly influenced by French chanson/yeh-yeh traditions, it mixes sweet mock string arrangements and harp-sichord with scum-lunging in an impossibly

seamless way and is a left-field fave for many fans. Jim calls it "my psychedelic record." 2010's *Hide* (#9) goes full-on orchestral/chorale, inflating some of *Love*'s style suggestions into dirigible-size party balloons spray-painted with wiggled-out commentary on the depressing torpor of the recently ended Bush Era. Played in sequence, the nine primary Foetus albums present an incredible arc in terms of style, reach, and sheer weird progress.

More recently, Jim has worked on different sets of installation pieces—from CM von Hausswolff's freq_out series to his own "Silver Mantis," a four-channel work for piano, theremin, electronics, and projections. There are also the cartoon projects that have probably gotten him more fans than almost anything else. Thus far there have been three—*Venture Bros.*, *Archer*, and *Dicktown*—in addition to soundtrack work for movies and a host of other commissions. The third volume of *Venture Bros.* music is due this year, alongside the new Xordox LP.

In his spare time, Thirlwell has been writing songs with Simon Hanes (Guerilla Toss/Tredici Bacci) and working more on his visual art. Jim was always responsible for the artwork on most of his records—notable for their use of basic colors, iconography borrowed from Communist

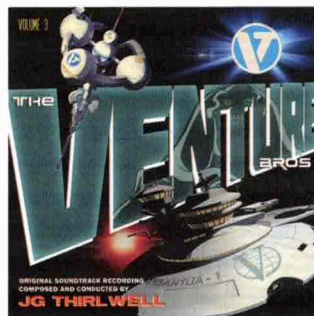
propaganda, and constructivist art. But he has begun doing prints as well as sculptural assemblages in the tradition of the Italian Futurists or the British Vorticists. He is also planning a trilogy of books covering his art, his lyrics, and his memoirs, so there's all that to look forward to.

I have to admit, the one I'm *really* waiting for (personally) is the new Foetus LP. Jim says *Halt* (#10) will be, "Music with a relationship to what's gone before, but there are also things I've never done. There's a lot of growth—the kind

that just comes from repetitive work and pushing the boundaries of what I'm capable of. Expanding my sonic palette is sort of what's behind this album. When I turned 60, mortality came screeching up to my face, and I felt like I wanted to put my affairs in order. I want to be the one to write the ending to this story."

Of course, the end of one story just means it's time to start another. With the fevered imagination of Jim Thirlwell as its animating force, there's little chance the First Foetus Saga is not the prelude to another set of epics.

One has to wonder what little Vegas would have done if she'd flashed on the sequence of volcanic cultural explosions that would flow from the rendition of the Doc Pomus throw-away she witnessed back in '64. Only the devil can know for sure. 🍀



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