



JG THIRLWELL

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JG Thirlwell isn't one to take breaks. He is currently scoring season nine of the animated television series Archer and season seven of Venture Bros, he is putting together albums with various different projects and is working on creating an opera. Foetus, his main musical outlet, began in 1981 and Thirlwell recorded all instruments, produced each album and created all illustrations. Aside from his solo projects he also frequently collaborated with Lydia Lunch, Nick Cave, Marc Almond and Thurston Moore, among others. The Australian composer now resides in New York City where he frequently attends live music and collaborates with established and up and coming artists.

Julian de la Celle: Do you remember the first time you interacted with music and how it made you feel?

JG Thirlwell: I listened to music on the radio obsessively when I was very little. One of my earliest memories was singing the Elvis song "Viva Las Vegas" to a girl named Viva in Kindergarten when I was about three years old. The first band I ever saw was The Monkees when I was about seven years old. I quickly became obsessed with music and records to where it was the core of my life.

Was music your first step into the creative field, or was there something else that came first?

Drawing in notepads, I guess. Apart from messing around on the piano a bit, the first instrument I learned was cello and I didn't last too long on it. The teaching methods were not too kind and I found sight reading difficult. When punk rock emerged in 1976, I learnt you didn't have to be a virtuoso on your instrument and I picked up bass guitar. I went to art school in Melbourne for two years - I was interested in graphic design - then dropped out and moved to London in 1978. I knew I wanted to do something in music but wasn't sure what it would be. But I continue to create graphics to this day, in fact I just started a limited screen print series.

You've chosen to go by many different pseudonyms in the past. I'm curious as to why that was and how you went about choosing these titles ie. Clint Ruin, Frank Want, etc.

First I wanted to distance myself from the cult of personality by putting out records under variations of the Foetus name - Foetus Under Glass, Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel etc. When I made the press release for the first release I wrote something fanciful about the group being two Brazilian statistics collectors and their penpal from Athens, Georgia, partly inspired by the mythology and mystery that The Residents had built up around themselves. To my surprise those "facts" were printed verbatim in the music press news pages, so I concocted variations of this mythology and started naming the "band" members Clint Ruin, Frank Want, Phillip Toss, Bubba Kowalski etc. The facade grew tiresome after a while but I continued to use various names as aliases for a few years afterwards.

Foetus was my primary music until about '90 when I created Steroid Maximus as an avenue for instrumental work. At the time I called it music for an imaginary movie, and that term has since been overused but it seemed like no one was doing it then. I started Manorexia in 2000 as another avenue for instrumental work, more expansive sound and it veered more into contemporary classical territory. I formed a chamber ensemble (two actually - one in New York and one in London) to perform Manorexia works. In the last couple of years I started Xordox as an outlet of my electronic music, and had an album released by Editions Mego. I've also started releasing albums as JG Thirlwell over the last few years, my newest addition to the franchise.

How did you and Richard Kern begin working together on some of his films? I know you both starred in and composed music for them.

I met Kern through Lydia, he was doing stealth shock performances at The Pyramid. He had started making Super 8 films that needed some scoring, he liked my music and asked me if I had anything he could use. Later on I scored some of his films to picture. Lydia worked tightly with him on a couple of films so we were all partners in crime for a while.

Can you recall how the Immaculate Consumptive was formed and why you chose to be a part of this very brief, but very interestingly mysterious project with Lydia, Nick and Marc?

Lydia was asked to perform at Danceteria in NYC on Halloween '83, and thought it would be a cool idea if she, Nick, Marc and myself had a set where we all did solo turns and collaborations. We were all pals and liked the idea. She came up with the name. We made some backing tracks in London, and live I played sax with Marc and Lydia, as well as duetting with Lydia and doing a few songs of my own. We had one song where we all played together, and the set finished with Nick singing "Box For Black Paul" accompanying himself on piano. He never finished playing the song though - he would stop before the end and say "and it goes on like that for a while longer". That used to drive me crazy! I was a Bad Seed for about five minutes around this time, and co-wrote "Wings Off Flies" on Nick's first solo album. As a result of the Immaculate Consumptive I fell in love with the city and moved to NYC, and have lived here ever since.

What exactly was the transitioning moment for you when deciding to put more emphasis on your composition work? How did you end up working on Venture Bros. and Archer?

The Manorexia albums came to the attention of some people and as a result I was commissioned to write pieces by Kronos Quartet and Bang On A Can. Around 2003 Jackson Publick approached me - he had heard Steroid Maximus and thought it was the perfect score for a cartoon pilot he was working on, Venture Bros. He had me score it and it got picked up by Adult Swim. About ten years later the Archer people approached me to score their show as they liked my work on Venture Bros. I've also scored a couple of features for Eva Aridjis, and many short films.

What were some of your favorite collaborations with other musicians throughout your career?

My collaboration with Roli Mosimann, Wiseblood, was a fruitful one that seems to still resonate today. I had a collaboration with Jim Coleman called Baby Zizanie for a while, which didn't crystallize in the way that I imagined, but I learned a lot. It was great to create string arrangements for Zola Jesus. Lydia Lunch was a long-time collaborator of course and we made some great projects. She was very open to ideas. I am member of freq_out which is a collective of sound artists curated by Carl Michael Von Hausswolff and we have created site-specific sound installations all over the world. My main collaborator now is Simon Hanes, who has a fourteen piece band called Tredici Bacci. I have performed with them occasionally and Simon and I have a writing partnership. We are creating songs for female singers and we are amassing quite a body of work. Simon also plays instruments on some of my sessions and has transcribed some of my works, he's an extremely talented guy and a sweetheart!

Who are you listening to at the moment? Any new groups or musicians you've found recently?

I'm constantly looking for new music and new artists and composers. I go to a lot of concerts between two and five a week. I keep a blog on Tumblr <http://jgthirlwell.tumblr.com/> where I post a playlist every month and write about concerts and exhibitions I see. This week I've been listening to Louis Cole, Display Team, Jaap Vink and stuff on the Pan and Bedroom Community labels, among other things.

Can you expand on what you've been working on the past couple of years and anything you're currently doing that we could be looking forward to in 2018?

I'm scoring season 9 of Archer and season 7 of Venture Bros at the moment. Expect an album of my Cholera Nocebo project this year (as JG Thirlwell). I'm writing some string arrangements for the new Helm album and just finished scoring a short film for David Slade. I'm assembling an album of my string quartets. I have started a new Foetus album for release in 2021, this time with an orchestra. I have been working on an opera for a few years, and I'm continuing my Xordox project, both live and studio recordings. Among other things.

