

Invisible Jukebox JG Thirlwell

Every month we play a musician a series of records which they are asked to identify and comment on – with no prior knowledge of what they're about to hear. Tested by Phil Freeman. Photography: Michael Schmelling

James George Thirlwell grew up in Australia, but decamped to London in 1978, where he hooked up with Steven Stapleton of Nurse With Wound, Einstürzende Neubauten, The Birthday Party, Lydia Lunch (who later became his girlfriend) and other artists on the fringe. He was soon releasing solo records under various Foetus names (Foetus Under Glass, Phillip And His Foetus Vibrations, You've Got Foetus On Your Breath, Scraping Foetus Off The Wheel), which hopped from genre to genre, encompassing noise-rock, big band jazz, string arrangements somewhere between Igor Stravinsky and Bernard Hermann, and vocals that combined black-humoured wordplay, rampaging sexuality and deranged nihilism. Body horror recurs in his own label names, Self Immolation and Ectopic Ents, which "represents my art fatally attaching itself to the uterine wall of the culture", Thirlwell explains.

In the 1990s, his underground notoriety brought him to the attention of major labels. He became a sought-after remixer, turning tracks by Nine Inch Nails, Prong, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Pop Will Eat Itself and others into roiling seas of queasy noise. He has also launched a big band sleazy listening project Steroid Maximus and, more recently, his noirish instrumental unit Manorexia, a live version of which he brings to London this month featuring violinist Angharad Davies, among others.

These days, the Foetus name (and associated 'Clint Ruin' persona) has retreated into the background, with Thirlwell writing works for Kronos String Quartet and Bang On A Can, and scoring the animated TV show *The Venture Brothers*. The most recent Foetus release, *Damp* (Ectopic Ents), is a compilation of rare tracks from 2003–06. The Jukebox took place at Thirlwell's loft in Brooklyn, New York.

Radio Birdman "Descent Into The Maelstrom"

FROM *RADIOS APPEAR* (SIRE) 1978

Is this Radio Birdman?

Yes. A similar surf-rock drumbeat is on your 1984 album *Hole*. Were they an influence on you in Australia?

Well, Radio Birdman were from Sydney and I grew up in Melbourne, and there were different vibes in each city. The Sydney scene was more oriented toward Detroit punk rock, like The MC5 and The Stooges, and that kind of rock 'n' roll type of thing, whereas in Melbourne, the scene was a bit more coming from the English [acts] like The Buzzcocks or Magazine. It was more art school. I never saw Radio Birdman, and I was not a huge devotee of their work, but I did see The Saints in Melbourne, and that was there around 1977–78, the scene in Melbourne was really small, and The Boys Next Door played a lot. I'd go to parties and they'd set up in the living room and play in someone's house. It was an amazing band, one of the best bands I ever saw. In front of very few people – I think it exploded a lot more after I left in late 78. But that Saints show was... first of all, they played way faster than anyone usually played – well, The Ramones had already come out by that point – but also it was pretty decadent. Chris Bailey started with a full bottle of Jack Daniels in his hand, and by the end of the set it was empty and he was on the ground making out with a girl while the band was steamrolling through their songs. Good times... Was there a feeling of existing in a void in Melbourne? I absolutely felt culturally isolated. My mother's Scottish and I would go back and forth a little bit, so I was aware of what was going on in the other hemisphere, and that was where I was drawn. Even

as a kid, we'd stop in London and I'd go to Carnaby Street, and that was much more attractive to me.

CHBB

"Untitled [These Boots Are Made For Walkin']"

FROM *CHBB* (SELF-RELEASED CASSETTE) 1981

Oh, I don't know this. Who's this?

It's CHBB, the pre-Liaisons Dangereuses duo cassette-only project of ex-DAF member Chrislo Haas and Beate Bartel. What was your involvement with DAF?

I really liked the first DAF album [*Die Kleinen Und Die Bösen*], and I saw they were going to be playing with The Fall at [London rock club] the Marquee. It must have been 1979, because I was working at a record store and I had this badge that said 'I'm Ready For The 80s', which was the name of a Village People single. Seems so long ago now... 80s nostalgia's already over. They were a four-piece at that time and Chrislo was the keyboard player, played Korg MS-20s. After the show I went up to Chrislo, and as a greeting, I gave him this I'm Ready For The 80s badge, which he really liked. He didn't speak any English at that point, but we kind of hung out and were friends and stuff, and he stayed at my house a bunch.

Kip Tyler "She's My Witch"

FROM *ROCKIN' BONES: 1950S PUNK & ROCKABILLY* (RHINO) 1958

I don't know anything about rockabilly. What is this?

It's Kip Tyler's "She's My Witch". I hear some of that same rockabilly psychosis in your vocal delivery – rockabilly and film noir, all combined into one, particularly on the 80s records.

I've never listened to rockabilly in my life. I've never been into it. It's a 'yet' for me. There's a big pile of yet's – yet to get into – over in the corner. Country &

Western is another, and The Grateful Dead. I'm sure I'll never get to that.

I was wondering about the creation of the persona that you had on record in albums like *Hole*, *Nail* and *Thaw*.

That's all part of me, Clint Ruin or whoever I am onstage. I stopped playing with bands about six years ago and I don't really inhabit that character. But it's definitely a side of me and it's an emboldening process, being up there.

When rock performers choose to be transgressive, they often do it along a fairly narrow continuum that runs from, say, Motörhead to GG Allin. But you went into horns, strings, upright bass...

It wasn't a decision that had to be made. I never started with the rock thing. Where I was coming from was very much out of creating from the ground up, with sound sources and using objects and tapes and, you know, I would make tapes in my bedroom using delays and synthesizers and stuff. It wasn't like I was playing in a punk band and I had to deviate away from that. I started from a place of using pause buttons on cassette machines, and ideas coming from way out and structuring them and getting what I had on tape, when I started going to the studio, in as expedient a way as possible. I think I really fell in love with the recording process, what you could do with sound.

When I moved to London it was an exciting time. Rob Young wrote that book on Rough Trade, and that's making me kind of nostalgic, because that's the time I was there. I started my own label, and a lot of it was about being in the studio, but also creating this object, the record. It was a piece of art, but it wasn't a limited edition. Everyone could have an original. I came up with lots of weird, convoluted ways of getting what I had in my head onto a piece of paper, so I could go through the process of building it up in a multitrack studio.



JG Thirlwell at home in Brooklyn, September 2007



It's not like with Reason software, where you just move stuff with the mouse.

No, the means now are totally different. The means now are great. But it's really democratised the process a lot, for good or bad. A lot of my ideas were coming from the first group I recorded with, Nurse With Wound. Steve Stapleton had a very liberated sense of what music was, and what a record was. I don't even know if there were necessarily any instruments in the studio. He'd say, 'Well, that chair's got a good sound.' And [we] would do something, and two weeks later I'd hear it and it was totally unrecognisable.

Lydia Lunch with The Anubian Lights
"Champagne, Cocaine & Nicotine Stains"

FROM *CHAMPAGNE, COCAINE & NICOTINE STAINS*
 (CRIPPLED DICK HOT WAX) 2002

Oh, that voice. This is from *Champagne, Cocaine & Nicotine Stains*.

Do you keep up with what Lydia's doing?

We're still very close, we still talk all the time.

What is she like as a collaborator?

For someone like me she's kind of a dream collaborator, because she just lets me do my thing. I would do my part and bring her in and say, 'This is what we're doing, this is how we do it', and she would come up with the words, and I would guide her with a finger, in the vocal booth, pitching her up or down if she was flat. Pretty much, she'd let me do my thing and she really liked what I did, so it was easy.

How did you two meet?

I was living with [The Birthday Party's] Mick Harvey at the time, and they had gone to New York and met Lydia there. Then Lydia moved to London, and I was aware of her work. I had *No New York* [Brian Eno's 1978 No Wave compilation featuring Lunch's group Teenage Jesus & The Jerks] from the day it came out. I had [Lunch's solo album] *Queen Of Siam*, too; I was a big fan of that album. At the time, I'd written a couple of press releases for The Birthday Party that were quite whimsical, maybe a bit fanciful. She'd read one of those and asked if I'd write something

for her. She needed a one-page bio. So I had an opportunity to go over to her place, talk and gather information. And she didn't know anything about me. She didn't know I made music or anything. We started to become friends, and I think the first time we worked together she was going to do a show somewhere in Scandinavia. [The Birthday Party's] Rowland S Howard was going to play sax with her, but he dropped out, so I came and did it. And a little bit after that, romance blossomed.

You two and a couple of other people did a thing here in New York called The Immaculate Consumptive...

That was just three shows. It was myself, Lydia, Marc Almond and Nick Cave. It was actually suggested and conceived by Lydia. She was offered a performance at [New York's] Danceteria on Halloween in 1983. We created backing tracks for the show, each of us had a couple of songs and we collaborated on some songs. Lydia started and I played sax, we did a duet, I did some songs, maybe I did something with Marc, and it ended up with Nick. I think we may have done one ensemble piece as well. It was just the three shows, and I loved New York when I came here. It was the first time I'd been here in my adulthood. That was what brought me here and I just ended up staying.

Don Byron
"Powerhouse"

FROM *BUG MUSIC (NONESUCH)* 1996

That's [Raymond Scott's] "Powerhouse", but who's doing it?

It's Don Byron. You did it on the Steroid Maximus record *Gondwanaland* in 1992?

Yeah. Well, it was originally suggested by The Pizz, who's a friend of mine. We talked about doing that track, and he came out here and we did it at my studio and put it out under the name Garage Monsters. It came out as a one-sided 7" on Sympathy For The Record Industry, and on the other side there was an etching by Pizz, but it's also on the Steroid Maximus album. There's a lot of versions of "Powerhouse", and that sounds a lot like a Raymond Scott one but it's much cleaner. But we went back to some of the early Raymond Scott ones, studying his versions.

Was he an influence on your own cartoon scoring?

No, not really. You know, Raymond Scott, and what Carl Stalling did, the way he appropriated Raymond Scott, that's really ingrained into me from my childhood. The idea of motifs that last for a bar, or a bar and a half, or huge stylistic shifts from one place to another, that type of thing is a big influence on me, and I think it's a big influence on a lot of people, whether they know it or not.

How does all this impact your work on the *Venture Brothers* soundtrack?

I like to move around a lot, musically, but I also kind of treat the cartoon as if it was a live action thing. That gives it more weight and makes it more interesting to me.

And how did you get that job?

It actually came about through Steroid Maximus, because the show's creator, Chris McCulloch, had the [2002] album *Ectopia*, and that was a big inspiration

when he was writing the scripts and the pilot and so on. So they contacted me about scoring it, but I wasn't really interested. So they said, 'Well, what if we license this stuff from you, and we'll pay you as if you scored it?' I said, 'Hey, knock yourself out.' Cartoon Network liked it and picked it up, and they came back to me again and asked me if I'd score it.

What about Manorexia?

Manorexia's a whole different project. It's also instrumental, but it started from a different place. I wanted to make something really spacious and also wanted to make something dronelike, and it didn't really turn into anything dronelike at all, but something where a lot of the sounds I used so densely in my works which are heavily arranged – often I'll use a sound that's really fleeting, and it never really gets a chance to breathe and you can't listen to the timbres of it. I thought I wanted to use some of those sounds so you could really hear the timbres, and it evolved organically from that. I started the first album as an ongoing piece. I started from zero and it turned into this 60 minute piece that went from start to end.

Alice Coltrane "The Firebird"

FROM *LORD OF LORDS* (IMPULSE!) 1972

I know this piece, but not this version.

It's Alice Coltrane, doing Stravinsky's *The Firebird*.

Stravinsky really shook things up in the 20th century. I don't know if that's considered the start of postmodern classical music or whatever, but he was one of the most important, in my head anyway. I'm an idiot when it comes to classical music. I listen to a lot of stuff and I read up about people's approaches to composing, but I never went to music school. I don't consider myself a musician, even. I guess I'm a musician, but I'm not an instrumentalist.

I learned a couple of instruments when I was a kid. I learned cello and percussion for a while, but I found it really difficult to read scores, and I kind of gave that up. And then, some years later, I became a self-taught musician, starting on bass guitar and moving to synthesizer. My approach to instruments was always, since I was in the studio, I would learn how to play the overdub, put the overdub on tape and then put the instrument back in the box. I'm not the sort of person to sit around on an instrument and get chops, or write on an instrument. I write in my head, and then sit down at the keyboard and work out that melody that's in my head.

So the strings on *Nail*, for example; are those actual strings, or is that a keyboard?

That's Fairlight. I've used lots of live strings, though. My latest live ensemble is a version of Manorexia, and that's a string quartet with piano, percussion and laptop. So I've been writing a lot for strings. I've always had a lot of strings on my records, but they've been sampled. And the Fairlight strings on [1985's] *Nail*, that was really the dawn of sampling technology.

Yeah, there are a couple of weird pitches on there.

I always do things out of the range of the instrument. That becomes a problem when you start rescoring things for live instruments. When I started in the

studio, the ideas I was using – tape loops, pausing tapes and varispeed and things like that – by the time sampling had come in, sampling was really a way to organise what I'd been doing all along. I was always using other studios and was fairly itinerant, and there wasn't a way of gathering instruments until I moved here to this loft, and that's when I started my own studio. I got my own sampling equipment and started building from that.

Now I write for string quartet a lot. I wrote a piece for Kronos Quartet, and I've been doing this project with robot instruments, with an organisation called LEMUR – the League of Electronic Music-making Urban Robots. They commissioned a piece and they wanted live instruments added to it, so I added a string quartet to that. Now I'm expanding that project, writing more pieces for the robots and string quartet. I've got a guitar robot coming over next week for a bit of a writing session.

Ayumi Hamasaki "Startin"

FROM *SECRET* (AVEX TRAX) 2006

Is this J-Pop?

Yeah, it's Ayumi Hamasaki, the Madonna of J-Pop. The production is so dense and complex, I thought you might be interested. Do you pay attention to pop, just from an observational standpoint?

Yeah, I'm very interested in hearing production techniques and what people are doing, and just the way things are mixed and compressed. It's an interesting time for that. I've recently been listening to a lot of psychedelia, too. It's something that, I don't know why, it bypassed me all that time. I go through phases – I'm always listening to soundtracks, but psychedelia I never paid attention to. But there were a lot of tricks with psychedelia, quirks in the arrangements, that you just don't hear in music now. It's kind of of-the-time, but to me it doesn't sound dated, it sounds very fresh.

Because the ideas didn't continue.

Exactly, they just kind of stopped at 1968. And that's exciting to me, to go through a street sale. Last weekend, I found this album by The Fallen Angels, who I'd never heard before, and looking at the album I couldn't tell if it was made now in a half-assed attempt to be retro and live in Williamsburg, or whether it was really from 1967. But I looked it up when I got home, and indeed it really was from 1967. So there's a lot of gems that are yet to be discovered.

White Zombie

"Thunder Kiss 65"

FROM *LA SEXORCISTO: DEVIL MUSIC, VOL 1* (Geffen) 1992

Oh, White Zombie, yeah.

I heard that you produced this record, and then the label rejected it. Is that what happened?

No, that's not true. I produced the demos that got them signed to Geffen, and I was supposed to produce that album, and through missed communications I kind of drifted off, and they got Andy Wallace. And I know I could have done such a better job. I just know what we did in the demos, and it's much better.

How did you know them?

I first heard them when they did [1987's] *Soul-Crusher*. I love that album. Of course, Rob [Zombie] hates that album. I don't know if they even acknowledge that album anymore. But I love that record, it's totally demented. So I knew them from then and I would go see them all the time, we hung out and were friends. And then Geffen started sniffing around and they asked me about producing them. We did a lot of preproduction, and finally we made the demos. They turned out great.

In the mid-90s, you did lots of remixes. Red Hot Chili Peppers, Nine Inch Nails, Prong, Pantera, etc. Were those just money gigs?

It was a weird time. Those just kind of fell in my lap and I didn't really nurture it. I wasn't really in the presence of mind to nurture it, because I was just too out there in my mental illness. It kinda started with a couple of remixes, one for EMF and one for Prong. And I think the Prong one was kind of a tipping point, because no one had really done Metal remixes then, and it was kind of a hit. Not a Top 30-type hit, but it definitely got out there, people heard it. In fact, they started playing it live like I did the remix, replicating my arrangement. So the Prong thing got a lot of A&R guys thinking about me, thinking it was a good way to get their Metal band to other people, so these things were coming along. And I'd listen to something and I wouldn't necessarily have to like what they'd done with it, but I could see the potential and what I could do with it, and that was interesting enough to me. Unfortunately, a lot of it was Metal, and that's not really what I wanted to be doing. I would rather have been doing Tricky or something at that point.

Duran Duran "Pilldriver"

FROM *VERY PLEASURE*
(COCK ROCK DISCO/VERY FRIENDLY) 2005

Oh, it's Duran Duran Duran. I know him. Ed [Flis], I think his name is. I've met him a few times in various places. I met him through Jason Forrest, who's kind of the king daddy in that scene.

It follows behind what you were doing with Foetus Art Terrorism. Do you hear that stuff as descended from your early drum programming work?

Well, no, I don't think there's a lineage necessarily from Foetus to this thing, 22 years later. I mean, maybe. I think that a lot of production techniques that I was using then that were extreme are kind of par for the course now. Times have changed.

Just the levels of bass on records now are insane...

Also, the use of distortion. It's everywhere now and people are abusing equipment, which they didn't used to in pop. I like some breakcore stuff, but a lot of it is such a barrage that it's a little hard to get a breather. There's no space in it. It's very exhilarating when you hear the first few minutes of it, but after a while it's like, yeah, I'm officially pummeled into submission. □ *This month JG Thirlwell participates in Christian Marclay's Screen Play as part of The Wire 25 season, and presents Manorexia at London St Giles In The Field Church: see Out There*