

# Smith's Moanin' Institution

**T**he *NME* may have branded Mark E. Smith as 'the grumpiest man in pop' but he is undeniably one of the hardest working in the business, an unlikely heir to James Brown. 2001 saw the working-class hero celebrate 25 years as a perennial outsider in the music industry. Although arguably marginalised in recent years, Smith remains as necessary as ever as pop becomes ever more production-lined. *RC* caught up with him on yet another gruelling tour with the Fall — the band whose line-up has changed more often than a police identity parade.

Skulking in a quiet corner of Bogarte's pub in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire, Mark E. Smith, one of pop's great anti-heroes, is characteristically nursing a pint. It's Stella Artois — reassuringly expensive, as the adverts say, so times can't be too hard for Salford's angriest man. Smith gets to his feet to shake hands. "Sorry, I'm a bit spaced out," he tells me apologetically. "I'm very tired. I only got five hours sleep yesterday."

The poor bloke looks like he could do with a nap. At first glance this fragile looking post-punk icon could easily pass for a pensioner — especially when he tells me he broke his leg some months ago. It's when you see his eyes glint that you realise he's younger than he first appears (the official



**An interview with  
Mark E. Smith of the Fall**

by Piper Terrett

line is that he's 43, but his old school website suggests he's at least 47). The barman is making punters roll a die for their drinks — if they score a six they get them free. Smith gleefully tells me his wife won him a pint.

Since forming 25 years ago, the Fall have toured Europe exhaustively almost every year. Smith, it seems, never tires of the road. "I love touring. It's the only rest I get," he winks. "The audiences have been great. They're all really young. They look like 12 year olds to me." This time they're also dropping in on their fans across the pond. "We haven't been to America for a while," Smith nods. "We're going soon, hopefully, touch wood. We've got a good following there. In America they're great. Very hardcore fans. They go way back and they don't change. They're very loyal." But does Smith still get that buzz when he performs on stage? "Sometimes," he says, shyly darting his eyes around the pub. "Sometimes I don't enjoy it. I still get nervous. I'm nervous now."

The Fall are one of the UK's most prolific bands, with a mountain of 25 albums released in Britain alone, not counting the compilations which surface periodically. Smith has mixed feelings about the latter. "It's annoying. People think you're loaded because there's all these unofficial compilation albums out, when you're actually broke. I suppose it's sort of flattering in a way. I remember Elvis used to have about 50 albums."

Fans, including music guru John Peel, reached into their pockets again last November when the Fall's last album, *Are You Are Missing Winner* (sic), was released on Voiceprint. It features a cover version of 'Gotta See Jane', Smith's second dip into the R. Dean Taylor catalogue (the first, his memorable rendition of 'There's A Ghost In My House' made the Top 30 in 1987), alongside new tracks such as 'My Ex-Class Mates Kids' and 'Crop Dust' — eerily inspired by a dream Smith had about two towers and office executives running from a building. "I wanted the last LP to be more current than the others have been," says Smith. "The others have been much more esoteric. It's straight down the line, this one — and we've got a new line-up. I can do what I want the way I want it. Simple, you know."

Personnel changes are all in a day's work for the Fall. The self-confessed tone-deaf Smith formed the band in 1976 and is the only founder member remaining after



The Fall rocked The Tube in 1983, bemusing the Newcastle weekend audience with 'Smile'.

27 such changes. "You get bored working with the same people all the time," Smith explains. "I don't really like musicians. They get to a point where they start looking down on ordinary people." One celebrated ex-Fall member who joined straight from school in 1979 — replacing Tony Friel on bass — was Marc Riley, better known as the corpulent half of Mark and Lard — Radio 1's answer to the Chuckle Brothers. So is Mark E. Smith a regular listener to the show? "Er, no," he laughs. "It's funny, when he left the group I said he'd be better off in children's telly. I was right."

Another Fall alumnus is ex-wife and guitarist Brix Smith who helped shape the 80s Fall and somewhat improbably left both band and Smith in 1989 for Nigel Kennedy. She returned in the mid-90s for two albums and some stormy live performances with the group.

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Considering the world-weary artist as which he is universally known, it's difficult to envisage, but at the time of the Fall's inception Smith was an 18-year-old clerk. "I worked on the docks, actually," he reveals. "I was a dock clerk and I just used to write in my lunchtimes." But the young Smith started the group for surprisingly pragmatic reasons. "The main reason was they closed all the docks down in Manchester and I was very into garage music — Can, the Velvet and all that." Unlike most youngsters, Smith did not harbour a desire to be a rock star from infancy. "I was a very unambitious child,"

he recalls. "I wanted to write horror stories — short stories. With my songwriting and stuff I try to make it as concise as possible, make it almost like well-edited journalism, except there's a lot more meaning in it. When publishers have offered me contracts and I put to them that I want to write short stories three to 15 pages long they just say 'oh no, you've got to write a novel'. Like, the more words the better. I think that's what got me into the group, really — I felt there wasn't a group that packed sort of short things into intelligent lyrics and very basic music. That's why I started the Fall."

Despite being knocked-back from heavy metal auditions, Smith had a sound he wanted to explore — raw and primitive — which manifested itself in darkly humorous lyrics and unusual vocals. The Fall's first line-up was Smith (vocals), Martin Bramah (guitar), Tony Friel (bass), Una Baines (electric piano) and Karl Burns (drums). Bramah was initially vocalist — Smith was learning guitar but then packed it in to take on the vocals, gradually fashioning his uniquely sardonic Salfordian rasp. Smith later

flirted with keyboards and even the fiddle, although nowadays he doesn't tend to play.

"Sometimes I pick up the harmonica for a bit and I've got a violin as well. I do it more at home now. I write riffs on it. It's only, like, got two strings." More recently he has even dabbled with the art of DJing. "I did do it a few years ago at Cream, funnily enough, in Liverpool. Stuff I like — Motown, Boney M, a bit of Fall stuff. It went down very well actually."

Legend has it that one early Fall gig was a supermarket staff Christmas party where the band went down like a rat in the freezer section. According to Smith it's an

apocryphal story. But the early Fall did cut its teeth in working men's clubs where audiences showed their appreciation (or lack of it) by throwing beer glasses and spitting. "It was a fantastic grounding," Smith recalls. "If you weren't playing Led Zeppelin numbers you got bottled off every night. It still doesn't matter to me if there's ten people or ten thousand."

Their first EP, *Bingo Master's Breakout*, found an unlikely ally in Danny Baker — now better known as Chris Evans' lager buddy — whose rave reviews helped get it released in June 1978 on Step Forward, Miles Copeland's punk label. "We had a very small and fanatical following at the start," says Smith. However, the EP had few other friends among the record companies, who wanted to make it more New Wave and dress the band in skinny ties, just like the Jam.

By the time the debut album, *Live At The Witch Trials*, was released in 1979, Smith had ditched Friel and Baines (the latter later formed the Blue Orchids with Martin Bramah) for Yvonne Pawlett and Marc Riley. For periods the band were dirt poor as Smith was often unable to pay them.

Certainly, as a band satirising hypocrisy and injustice, the Fall have somehow maintained their integrity; not for them the trappings of mainstream success and merchandising. Steve Hanley (bass) and Craig Scanlon (guitar) joined for the second album, *Dragnet*. The label hated the album so much they didn't want it released.

The Fall moved from label to label, leaving Step Forward for Rough Trade where classics 'How I Wrote Elastic Man' and 'Totally Wired' were recorded. *Hex Enduction Hour*, featuring 'Hip Priest' and the stunning 'Winter-Hostel Maxi' came out

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## Smith's Half Dozen

The Fall's golden greats

by Daryl Easlea



### Totale's Turns (It's Now Or Never)

(Rough Trade ROUGH 10, 5/80)

Closing a decade that saw the live album in rock becoming a slab of superannuated pomposity, the warts-and-all approach of *Totale's Turns* captures the ramshackle, sub-comedic approach of early Fall. It remains a more satisfying listen than either *Witch Trails* or *Dragnet*. 'Last orders at the bar,' draws Smith as a bemused audience wonder what on earth they are listening to. And a fine version of 'Spectre Vs Rector', as well.

### This Nation's Saving Grace

(Beggars Banquet BEGA LP 47, 9/85)

Like a happy *Hex Enduction Hour*, with better production, *This Nation's Saving Grace* cannot be faulted. Succinct pop, full-on weirdness and more acoustic guitars make it the group's high-water mark (E). 'Paintwork', 'Gut Of The Quantifier' and 'Spoilt Victorian Child' demonstrate the overall strength of the work, and 'LA' acts as a calling card for Brix's offshoot band, the Adult Net.



### The Fall 458489 A-Sides

(Beggars Banquet BEGA 111CD, 9/90)

Providing an alternative history of the 80s, the Fall's back to back singles of this period rip along like one enormous (rebellious) jukebox (yeah). It is no wonder that Smith and Pete Waterman remain long-term friends. Still the only album where you can find 'No Bulbs', 'Cruiser's Creek' and 'Hey! Luciani' in the same place. And how great is that?

### Extricate

(Cog Sinister / Fontana B42 204-2, 2/90)

From the flailing fiddle that introduces 'Sing! Harpy' to the swaggerbilly stroll that is '... And Therein', *Extricate* served notice that the Fall could survive the departure of Brix and their signing to a major label. Original guitarist Martin Bramah was also briefly back in the line-up. 'Telephone Thing' marked a collaboration with Coldcut, and 'Bill Is Dead', Smith's paean to his recently departed father, was the Fall's first truly successful, ahem, ballad.



Reuter

on the tiny label Kamera in 1982, which promptly went to the wall. Bizarrely, the band were almost rescued by a signing to Tamla Motown, who later changed their minds. "There were some problems with a track on *Hex Enduction Hour*," Smith admits. "But I think mainly the problem was they were shutting down the office in London." The 'problems' Tamla Motown had with the album were essentially the lyrics "Where are the obligatory niggers / Hey there fuck face / Hey there fuck face." Even worse, they appeared less than 30 seconds into the opening track, 'The Classical'.

One of the more experimental moments of Fall history was its strange foray into ballet, with the avant-garde choreographer Michael Clarke. After dipping their toes in the wider aspects of performance art with Smith's play, *Hey Luciani: The Life And Codex of John Paul I* in 1986, the full-on

result was *I Am Kurious Oranj*, which premiered in Amsterdam in 1988. The Fall acted as backing group to the performance, which featured a most inspired reworking of William Blake's poem 'Jerusalem' and a haunting guitar overture by Brix Smith. "It was a good discipline because you have to do it right all of the time," says Smith. "Every song's got to be the same. I'd like to do another ballet with Michael Clarke in the future."

Mark E. Smith appears to take his 25 years with the Fall in his stride and certainly isn't one to spend hours reminiscing about his back catalogue. "I don't really listen to the old albums," he admits. "Well, now and again I listen to it and think 'this is pretty good, actually.' I like to keep looking forward. I'm not one for nostalgia. I like to look at the albums like diaries."

"Topical" really would be the word I'm looking for. The last couple of years everything's just been money, money. You know, on the telly and everything. You can't open the paper without pound signs everywhere. It's depressing — especially when you're broke! I don't begrudge people having money but I'm not very interested. It's like people's sex lives — it doesn't interest me at all. But a lot of people are interested in those two subjects and that's why the Fall are necessary because they don't go down that path." So how does Smith feel his sound has changed over the years? "It's funny — it seems to go round every seven years. The way I'm operating now is very similar to about seven years ago. Very basic. It sort of went very electronic for a while."

Smith recognises the impact the Fall has had on music, but is ambivalent. "I don't know — I get a bit embarrassed by it," he says, fidgeting. "I feel very responsible. Committed. There's been some right shit acts saying 'I really love the Fall' — I'm not going to name them — but it's like you want to say 'don't mention my name!'." Predictably the current fashion for boy bands leaves Smith cold, although it's a surprise to find he warms to the recently departed teenyboppers Steps. "Can't get my head round it, really. I'm not knocking 'em. I quite liked Steps. I know Pete Waterman, you know. The rest of 'em are old showbiz to me." Similarly he is baffled by the recent *Pop Idol* craze on television. He shakes his head incredulously. "Awful."



Fall glam in 1988, with Marcia Schofield and Brix E. Smith.

A lot of these people should be engineers — people who can build roads properly, buildings properly. It's like karaoke — everybody wants to be a singer. Why? I wouldn't do it now. If I was a teenager I wouldn't do it. It's too polarised now in a lot of ways. It's got to be soul or it's got to be reggae, or it's got to be dance. The Fall's got all those — a bit of all of them."

Besides touring, the Fall still occasionally play the festival circuit — albeit somewhat reluctantly. "They don't like me at festivals," Smith grins. "But last year we played the Bulldog Bash and it was fucking great. It's all run by Hell's Angels. I normally hate festivals — it's the security. Like you should be sort of grateful for playing there. They don't like you shouting at them, they don't like you drinking and they just smoke pot all fucking day. It's like if you don't play there every year your career is over."

But why, after all these years, are they called the Fall? The weather-beaten face muses for what seems like an age. "It's got a lot of meanings to a lot of people, hasn't it," he finally ventures. "The Fall . . . autumn." He smiles mysteriously, looking for a moment like a smug Yoda. "You're not going to tell me, are you?" I ask. "No!" He cackles into his beer. So are there another 25 years on the cards for the Fall? Smith looks half bemused, half horrified. "No, I don't think so!" He splutters. "No, couldn't face that. Do you want another pint?"



## Hex Enduction Hour

(Kamera KAM 005, 3/82)

The Fall classic. Double-drum line-up in place, Smith's writing reaching new levels of impenetrability, production satisfyingly dense, 'The Classical', 'Winter', 'Jaw-Bone And The Air Rifle'. *Hex Enduction Hour* is a satisfying step sideways through the Fall at their darkest.



## The Infotainment Scan

(Permanent PERMLP 12, 4/93)

Smith experiments with dance music, pillories the 'look-back bores', does a Sister Sledge cover, attacks Suede, middle-aged trendies and casts a weary eye on the ageing process, set against the returned Simon Rogers' crunchingly fulsome arrangements.

# Fall's Gold: Five Rarities

by Daryl Easlea



## In A Hole

(Flying Nun Records MARK 1&2, NZ import; 2-LP in single sleeve, with two inserts, 1983, £40)

Although finally making it onto CD in the late 90s, *In A Hole* remains one of the holy grails for Fall collectors. Marking Marc Riley's final appearances with the group, this double album in single sleeve was taken from the group's 1982 New Zealand tour. It contains 'Backdrop', which for years remained exclusive to this release.

## Live At The Acklam Hall, 1980

(cassette, Chaos Tapes LIVE 006, 4000 only, 1981, £10)

This also has appeared on CD, but this cassette represents the very best concert recording of the Fall in their early years. Would be worth a lot more if not on such a desperately unsexy format.

## Marquis Cha-Cha/Papal Visit

(7", Kamera ERA 014, p/s, B-side plays 'Room To Live', 6/82, £25)

Released and then withdrawn as the Kamera label folded, this 'scourge of Rosso-Rosso' would have undoubtedly been the high charting sales stimulus for the *Room To Live* album. Not.



## Jerusalem (Remix) / Acid Priest 2088 (Remix) / Big New Prinz (Remix) / Wrong Place Right Time (Remix)

(Beggars Banquet FALLCD 2, 3" CD, double pack gatefold wallet, 4000 copies, 9/88, £10)

Towards the end of their Beggars years, most marketing stunts in the book were pulled to keep the Fall propelled toward the Top 40. This double pack CD wallet — a companion piece to a 7" boxed set — only managed to get them to No. 59, before Christmas 1988.

## In Palace Of Swords Reversed (80-83)

(CD, Cog Sinister CDCOG 1, 11/87, £18)

Briefly available — on Smith's newly formed Cog-Sinister label — *Palace Of Swords* was the first Fall compilation on CD, collecting together their non-Kamera output from this time period. Though featuring 'The Man Whose Head Expanded', it found no room for the greatest Fall B-side of all-time, 'Ludd Gang'.



The Code: Selfish-era Fall, 1992. (l to r) Steve Hanley, Simon Wolstencroft, Smith and Craig Scanlon.