The 40 Years War

Over four decades, THE FALL’s autocrat-for-life MARK E SMITH has opened art-rock fissures in reality, passed merciless judgment on his enemies and led his legendary group to the edge of destruction, repeatedly. "It’s a constant state of battle," he laughs. But at what cost?, wonders IAN HARRISON.

Here are numerous, hitherto arcane music documents that the internet has made widely available: think The Cramps live at the Napa State Mental Hospital, 1978, or a bug-eyed Iggy rubbing peanut butter on himself in the crowd at the Cincinnati Pop Festival, 1970. And then there’s the film of The Fall splitting up on-stage at Brownie’s club in New York on April 7, 1998.

Filmed from the audience on murky video, it’s compelling viewing. In a doomed attempt to play Free Range – a Number 40 single from 1992 that prophesied war in Eastern Europe – dishevelled, kit-meddling frontman Mark E. Smith is set upon by furious drummer Karl Burns. Keyboards and amps are upturned as bassist Steve Hanley tries to maintain order. The microphone ends up in the crowd; an onlooker shouts, "Fucking play!" "I’ve been assaulted in public... bear witness ladies," answers Smith. Still, they almost finish the set. By the end of the night three of the group, including 19-year veteran Hanley, had left. Smith spent two nights in jail.

"Brownie’s," says Smith wryly. "It was a plot, and I could see it materialising. I couldn’t believe they thought I was that daft. It wasn’t very funny at all – I was physically assaulted and they went home when I was in jail, and sold all The Fall's equipment. Maybe they thought I was going down for seven years. It was serious stuff. But it was probably the best thing. It’s a penance you have to pay. I was quite all right with it."

Smith has harnessed the power of discord, tension and flux ever since The Fall began in 1976. His group is not the easiest to explain. Sparked by Krautrock, garage punk and vintage rock’n’roll, and the literature of H.P. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick, theirs is a raw noise, radical yet rooted. Smith’s cryptic speech-singing satires and filters the world in intensely imaginative ways, always satisfying the demand of 1980 single How I Wrote 'Elastic Man' that, "the should be full of strangeness, like a rich painting." His logic allows few concessions to understanding; a distorted, cold northern English psychodelia results, which repels the uninitiated as much as it delights the infected.

Over 31 original studio albums, 15 odd labels and more than 50 line-up changes, The Fall have become the gold standard of independence in music. In terms of output, you can liken them to Frank Zappa, Peter Hammill, Sun Ra or even Bob Dylan (Smith shrugs at the latter comparison). In 2016 he's marking four decades of The Fall by carrying on as usual: this year has brought: February's EP Wise Old Man, shows in Israel, Berlin and Slovenia, and UK dates including four nights at London's Garage. There's a new Fall album in the works and a 7-CD box set, The Fall Singles 1978-2016, slated for November. But if things seem stable, seasoned Fall watchers know better.
M OJO MEETS SMITH IN APRIL AND JULY IN Gulliver’s, a clean, efficient pub on central Manchester’s Oldham Street. Both times he’s straight-talking and cordial. A weathered 59, he wears his regular uniform since the early ’90s: polished black leather shoes, leather jacket, black suit and shirt, which he sticks his right hand into, Napoleon-style. He slaps his legs, cocks his head to one side and looks you in the eye. He laughs often: causes for particular mirth include how Russian football hooligans mallard-damn England fans at Euro 2016; Peter Hook’s complaints about not getting a cut from the sale of the Haçienda’s urinals — as he relates this, afternoon pub staple Sholto’s play by Joy Division comes on the jukebox — and, perhaps most disorienting to the metropolitan sensibility, the fallout from the Brexit vote.

“I think it’s funny,” says the man who still refers to the European Union as the Common Market. “What’s amazing is the reaction. It’s like they won’t accept it, will they, the middle class? Bob Geldof and Eddie Izzard — swats. It just shows what they’re like. They think the fucking people are morons.”

The superior wisdom of the working class over the bourgeois is given in The Fall universe. Born on May 5, 1957, to parents Jack, a plumber, and Irene, Mark Edward Smith grew up in Prestwich, north Manchester. As a kid, people say he was “12 going on 60, they’re the exact words they used,” he says. “I didn’t actually feel that. I would’ve thought it took me a long time to grow up. I don’t think my voice broke till I was fucking 16.”

A sharp-witted and self-contained youth, the use of his middle initial began at Stand Grammar School in Bury, alma mater of Clive of India. There was also the example of science fiction authors, like Philip K. Dick. “I had to do that because there were about 10 Smiths in the year,” he says. “And there’s a lot in a name. That’s why authors originally had their initials, to differentiate themselves. I knew it had to be done. You have to stand out a bit don’t you…” from the other droogs in the group, he he he!

At 16 he went to work on Salford docks, and in 1976 Smith and friends Tony Friel (bass) and Martin Bramah (guitar) founded the group that would become The Fall in Smith’s Prestwich flat. “It was like a club,” recalls Smith, whose tastes ran to Can, The Velvet Underground and Van der Graaf Generator. “You didn’t expect to actually do it, ever. He [Friel] liked jazz, Martin’d like Television, and I liked garage and I’d do poetry. Actually, Martin was the singer and I was the guitarist, ha ha! I was into that — avant-garde, no drummer. Mid-’60s American garage, that was the only music I sort of liked, The Seeds, The Standells and The 13th Floor Elevators. It was sort of exciting when punk came along because I thought it might be like that. And of course, it wasn’t.”

On May 23, 1977 The Fall — named for Albert Camus’s 1956 novel La Chute, and linked with the Manchester Musicians Collective — first played their “anti-music” in the basement of the North-West Arts Association, joined by keyboardist Una Baines and the first of many drummers. A December 1977 tape from Stretford Civic Centre reveals a speedy garage punk racket and Smith’s declamatory vocal attack in full spate, and tracks including key statement of intent, Repetition, and Oli! Brother, which went unreleased for seven years. Where did that voice, and the urge to air it publicly, come from?

“I’ve no idea,” says Smith. “I’d never sung. The first time I did it, I just came out. There was no practise. Weird innit? I got heckled for years. I was surprised by it, yeah. I’ve never told anybody that! I remember the group later told me, they were laughing behind my back.”

Considering Smith’s dictatorial repeat, it’s odd to think the group began on a kind of democratic footing. “Well, off and on,” says Smith, cautiously. “It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in it, the mistake I made was thinking, if we’re all in it, we’re in it. [But] then I was of the opinion that you’d sell out if you signed to a label and made a record.”

T HE FIRST OF 24 JOHN PEEL radio sessions was recorded in June 1978, while the inaugural Fall vinyl appeared that August. The three-track 45 Bing-Master’s Break-Out! — its title track concerned the suicide of a bingo caller — was followed seven months later by the ecdycth debut LP Live At The Witch Trials. Friel and Baines had already left; one month later, Bramah, Smith’s main songwriting partner, would also quit. “You’re just one out of five,” reflects Smith of his assumption of executive power. “It’s a good job I was a bit of a fucking hard nut, y’know. I said, I’m the fucking Fall, you do what you want.”

Joining promoted guitarist Marc Riley — better known these days as a BBC Radio 6 DJ — bassist Steve Hanley and guitarist Craig Stanion came from support band and roadie ranks, while drummer Mike Leigh arrived from the north-west rockabilly scene. Such personnel changes became routine, as expected as The Fall’s relentless work rate: in the three years following October 1979’s Dragnet album, there would be 12 more releases, including indie smash hits Grotesque and Her Enduation Hour LPs, the barbed Slates six-track 10-inch and the Live Dream Of A Casino Soul 45, a surprise Number 17 hit in New Zealand in August 1982.

“You listen to some of the old stuff and some of it’s fucking weird,” laughs Smith. “Repetition for in-
Hex Enduction Hour

**Karmen, 1982**

Icelandic "scapes inspire The Fall's (would be) "big fuck off"...national address: lacerating, monumental.

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Room To Live

**Karmen, 1982**

Seven songs of Papal visits, rural insanity and fugitive Nazis. But a bit short on running time.

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Perverted By Language

**Rough Trade, 1983**

Two drummers on lengthy vignettes of video rental and demonic visitation.

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The Wonderful And Frightening World Of The Fall

**Beggars Banquet, 1984**

Krautilyly rumble with increasing accessibility.

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This Nation’s Saving Grace

**Beggars Banquet, 1985**

Dorked riffs, basilisk lyrics, not so fixated on the grotesque: a Fall zenith.

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Bend Sinister

**Beggars Banquet, 1986**

Retreat to a dark corridor after TMG’s airy mansion. A gothic step back to cultdom.
SLANG KING

MARK E SMITH decrypts his lyric-writing regime:

"I'm not fucking short of words. There's too many."

How do you compose the texts for Fall songs?
First thing in the morning at home, believe it or not. Sober as a judge. Before 12. About half of it I'd like to say. I record it in the studio as well. Sometimes in an hour, sometimes half an hour, while the engineer plays a track. You wanna know my problem? (sighing into his man-bag for a green manila folder of lyric sheets visible on on one are the scratched words, "Homework right, second one today, blimey, no."

Imagine it played by Motörhead, with Pete (Greenaway's) guitar. The house is full of music. I'm not fucking short of words. There's too many.

How much are the words rooted in the real world, and how much the imagination? Not so much, actually. It's a real problem, isn't it? There's something about the Fall, how can you explain it to anybody? Or that's not normal, I do it very objectively. Like [sub-Lingual Tablet track], Venice With The Girls—that’s objective."

The words have been sparer in recent years, compared to the very dense early material. It goes round in cycles. I'm getting back to that. But I'm still trying to put it down, strip it down. Can't put down what I've got now, it's better. The music looks monosyllabic. I might go that way—ripped apart and fluffed up. I'm like a fucking word for every bit. It's coming.

I mean the last 20 years there are more lyrics aren't there, even if they are repetitive. It's, oh, there'll be four times more lyrics on the next LP: I think it should have a few extra lines cos the music's harder and better.

What do you think about the title, Couple, Mid 30s vs. Jobless?
That's a fucking great title! This fucking woman is shouting at her young son who owns a factory. And in the middle of the band, bang: "Couples of Death." That's their idea; they're nuts aren't they? Anyway, I'm giving my idea away.

Are there any more books on the way, after 2006's Renegades? I'm not sure about the Renegades. I've got about 50 copies, I use 'em as door stoppers. Believe me, I've never read more than five pages...

Extricate

(Fontana, 1990)
On Tears for Fears label. Presentable, with sharp teeth and ample moments of repose.

THE FALL

'CODE: SELFIN

(Fonterra, 1992)
Jaundice back again on stripped electronics rock. Muses on betrayal and uncertain future.

THE FALL
we'll have a joint." They were the prototype for record companies today. I'll tell you what, they had a fucking computer in there before anybody else, noseying around all the time. That was one part of the modern world they didn't like.

Despite the lack of rapport with label brass, September 1983's time travel/road haulage/football-fixated Kicker Conspiracy EP was indestructibly tough and strange, with Claude Bessy's no-budget videos granting grainy access to The Fall's world of heightened reality, everyday hauntings and affordable bitters. Did he feel Rough Trade could have pushed The Fall more? "I'd seen it before," he says. "The Step-Forward label were great — Miles Copeland would say (adopts American accent), 'This is art, buddy — fuck off.' But they got all geared towards The Police. It was like a bet, like a horse race, the one that did the most money, everybody concentrates on."

Like The Smiths at Rough Trade? "Yeah."

Things looked more promising at Beggars Banquet, whom Smith signed with for 1984's The Wonderful And Frightening World Of The Fall. Suddenly, rather than anti-glamour press and "promo" pics designed to deter, the group would be styled and posed. June '84's Oh! Brother single, produced by John Leckie, also aimed for greater accessibility. "At that time it was very important in the business," Smith says. "Beggars were insistent we'd give them an alternative fucking thing, but also a bit of pop-poppy-pop that they didn't have with 4AD and The Cult and the Cocteaus.

And I thought [1985 LP] This Nation's Saving Grace was fucking amazing, very very good. It was, I remember, completely ignored, nobody took any fucking notice. But it was a great LP."

To be fair on the world, This Nation's Saving Grace got to 54 in the UK albums chart in October 1985. And to readers of the UK music press and John Peel listeners at least, The Fall couldn't have been a sturdier fixture, having survived the post-punk die-off and the advent of less stringent, chart-aimed indie pop. Smith, who claims never to have read his reviews, may not have noticed then, that The Fall's drift into the public consciousness continued. Mark and Brix made it onto a Smash Hit sticker; ex-Sun model Samantha Fox reviewed the Living Too Late 45 in the same title, declaring it "really crappy". Wiggy videos for their 1987 cover of R. Dean Taylor's There's A Ghost In My House and 1988 version of The Kinks' Victoria — both UK Top 40 entries — intrigued the wider public.

"That was like the underground going overground, for a bit," reckons MES. "But people forgot, those videos were only on the telly once, like when you'd just see a glimpse or a mention of The Velvet Underground. It was weird, but good. I was conscious of not letting anybody down. I wouldn't do more of it, but I dunno, all of a sudden, it's like you've slipped through the net."

Chart notice notwithstanding, Smith declares himself unhappy with 1986's Band Sinister and 1988's The Pune Experiment, baring the brutal seven minutes of the latter's Bremen Nacht, an example of his intuitive songwriting abilities. "We played a gig in Bremen and I woke up with bruises. I thought I was being buried," he recalls. "Everybody's going, Oh you're taking speed, but I wasn't. I had a fit there. At that time I was up and down with my drinking, but it didn't fit in at all with anything. It was a supernatural experience. I remember what a load of work that was to get it. The sax player collapsed halfway through because I wouldn't let them loop it."

There was further lunacy at Beggars — 1987's I Am Kneen's Outcry was the soundtrack to a ballet by The Fall and Michael Clark's company, written to mark the 300th anniversary of the Glorious Revolution (it followed Hey! Luciani, Smith's bizarro 1986 play about the suspicious death of Pope John Paul I). Spurning the comprehensible, a definitive breakthrough eluded them. After six albums their association with Beggars would end, as would Smith's marriage.

"You get people with rose-coloured glasses about the Beggars years. They don't fucking know half of what went on," he says. "They didn't want to do the ballet LP. I said, You're fucking mad, fighting them to do it. And we had her, you know, Horse Rider [Brix], always going, like, 'Mark won't go pop,' behind your back. She saw The Fall as a vehicle for her own career. She basically says, 'Get rid of the fucking Irish and my drunken husband.' I remember one time she says, 'You're lucky to get a deal,' and all this. And then it was like, fucking whammo! We got a deal with Phonogram, with 10 times more money, which was the shock of her life."

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The Infotainment Scan

Middle Class Revolt

Cerebral Caustic

The Light User Syndrome

Levitate

The Marshall Suite

The Fall // The Marshall Suites
TOO SOFT WITH THE BAND. I SPOILED THEM TO DEATH. HANLEY, SCANLON, THEY WERE IN A DREAM WORLD.

S
mith would appear on Top of the Pops in 1994, as guest voice on Inspiral Carpets’ hit ‘I Want You’. The unexpected return of Brix, though, would augur years of uncertainty, with unpredictable live shows, variable albums and the proliferation of questionable compilations. ‘I can’t remember anything about [that time],’ says Smith. ‘Middle Class Revolt’ (1994) was a nightmare, really. The Light User Syndrome’ (1996), it was a miracle that was ever done. I’m trying to have keyboards and a fucking busy rock, but they didn’t understand that. They’re just gormless, musicians. But it’s worth a try, and it came out good, some of it.’

The endgame at Brownie’s was nigh. Even those familiar with Smith’s ability to pull things back from the brink wondered if the game was finally up. Less than three weeks later, however, The Fall played Dingwalls in Camden as a three-piece, aided by Smith’s ballet pal Michael Clark. The high-wire set, which included a reworking of Industrial Estate from Live At The Witch Trials, was bizarrely absorbing.

‘I thought it was all right,’ says Smith, now ensconced in the listed Crown & Kettle, with a bottle of Peroni and a Laplhaisg, ‘I said to fucking Clarky – he’s on fucking whatever it was, a sex drug – just go on and make some riffs and clap your hands. He fucking picked up this stool and fucking threw it, and it hit Damien Hirst smack in the forehead and knocked him out… ha ha ha! Michael Clark goes, “I know we’ve had our fallings out, but I’m so so sorry…” It’s the best thing you ever fucking did, Mike!’

Laying out Britart enfant terrible suited this curious, scattershot phase. Stability and artistic focus was elusive. 2000’s The Unutterable coherently merged rock and electronics, though 2001’s Are You Are Missing Winner relished the chaos, with curiously titled Reprise: Jane – Prof Mick – Eye Bastardo seeing Smith tormenting drummer Spencer Birtwistle into playing more vigorously. 2005’s Fall Heads Roll seemed to mark a new chapter, but with a woeful sense of déjà vu, that album’s Mancunian line-up fractured mid-US tour in May 2006.

‘I was left in the desert in Arizona,’ says Smith. ‘Me and Elena, we had no transport, no food, money or anything. I didn’t see it coming. I just think it was the same thing as the group before. They talk tough, but Manchester people, they just want their cup of tea.'
and bacon butty, just like ‘98. They can’t wait to get home, like the England football team. So anyway, I met these three dudes [California’s Orpheo McMor, Tim Presley and Rob Barbatto] — even they didn’t all know each other — and they learned vague songs off Fall Heads Roll. We met in LA at this club and I said, ‘We’ll do this, do that and don’t worry if it doesn’t work out. I’ve only met ‘em for 10 minutes and we went straight on stage. I thought, ‘This gonna be a fucking nightmare, but I just started singing and they were fucking right. They just fucking got it. It just shows you.’

‘The Dudes’ would be succeeded by a locally-sourced line-up — guitarist Pete Greenway, drummer Keiron Melling and bassist Dave Sprarr — for 2008’s Imperial Wax Solvent. Four LPs have followed, including 2015’s trenchant Sub-Lingual Tablet. ‘There’s something there with the group,’ says Smith. ‘They’re really fucking good. With Sub-Lingual, I thought, I’ll just do an LP where it’s a Saturday-afternoon-after-a-few-beers record. I play it a lot, actually.’

As he abides in the Saturday afternoon of the mind, and vows never to play classic Fall albums in full, MOJO prepares to depart. There is still time for off-piste chat: today’s opinions cover Guy Garvey (“a Bury fucking mall owner”), how the middle classes can get you thrown off Easyjet flights (“you don’t even have to say anything, you just have to smell of whisky”) and guys with boards and tattoos (“there’s too many of them cunts”). But how does he really look back on his life’s work?

“It’s not a life’s work at all,” he says. “Why are they playing this? [On the Crown & Kettle hit today: the Reigning Sound]. Why aren’t they playing Are You Are Missing Winner? ‘Cos it’d clear the fucking bar! That’s the fucking main part. It’s all The Fall, innit, it’s all up and down. I think Dragnet’s good, I think it reached its peak at This Nation’s Saving Grace, and it sort of went on ‘til Inflammation, and it comes back, I dunno, with Imperial Wax, Fall Heads Roll, maybe. But I don’t think we’ve attained the summit yet.”

There have to be easier ways of running a band.

“It’s still a pain in the arse. It was immediately, I mean, the amount of fucking around I had to play that All Tomorrow’s Parties thing [this April’s notorious farrago of cancellations and late-paid indie rock bands]. It’s a constant state of battle, really, that’s why people get fed up with it. Do I thrive on it? I must do, muhfu? Do you feel short-changed?

“I get this — I should have a big mansion and loads of birds waiting for me. Some people want people they don’t even fucking know to come and give them free drinks and fawn over ’em. I’m a bit fucking touchy about that. Imagine it times a hundred, it does your fucking head in. No, I’m all right.

Has there been a human cost? Have you ever deserted?

“Depression — it’s not in my dictionary, I’ve never understood boredom, and I don’t understand loneliness. I’ve never grasped it. I know people are lonely, and I know people ignore you, and I’ve had that a lot — rejection, I’ve had it all, since I was 14. Every girlfriend’s cheated on me. But I’ve never made a career out of it. And I’ve been fucking beat up a long time, it’s just nothing to me.”

You’re a hard man, Mark.

“Hey! I’m not a hard man, not at all. All I say is, I think it was good that it happened, as it was.”

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**THE FALL**

Imperial Wax Solvent

(Castle, 2008)

“I’m a 50-year-old man and like it,” goes thrashing centrepiece.

Your Future Our Clutter

(Dominion, 2010)

Seemingly connected songs find a serendipitous Smith in obsturcating mode.

Ersatz GB

(Cherry Red, 2013)

Punk’n’ synth variants on recent output, lacking standout. See MED: “I can’t fucking stand it.”

Re-Mit

(Cherry Red, 2013)

Gas is turned up, loosely, with heightened tune count and vocal clarity. Few concessions.

The Remainderer

(Cherry Red, 2013)

Another six-tracker, brevity pays off — current personnel seem to timeslip into past formations.

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Sub-Lingual Tablet

(Cherry Red, 2013)

Grooves, wires, tough rocking and new voices, Slugs Facebook and iPhones.