

A brief in men's fashion and culture in five chapters

# Fucking Young!

# OUTSIDER

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**Mark E. Smith:**  
*Outside and Beyond*

by Paul Stewart



*“Have you been to the English Deer Park?  
It’s a large type artist ranch.  
This is where C. Wilson wrote Ritual in the Dark,  
Have you been to the English Deer Park?”*

It’s easy to ask a question, if not always follow its angle of attack. Sometimes they drip from the tongue so matter-of-factly, it appears the answer is already contained in the air the question wastes. A fun tip to pass the time is to keep track of how many redundant questions you face or formulate throughout the ordinary business of your day. They arrive from every recess of the mind when interrogating and all angles in public when receiving, mounting in number like the needless apologies strangers routinely issue to one another more regularly still for social infringements too minor to warrant a raised eyebrow, let alone a wasted word.

The above epigraph – a weave through the thought process of Mark E. Smith – appears at first glance to be a question dressed up in the most indecipherable style, or one with, given its dose of literary references, an ulterior motive at least. What is certain is that it captures the attention, and was asked of the listener in the form of a chorus to a pair of songs spliced into one called *Fortress/Deer Park*, the fourth track of The Fall’s fifth album, *Hex Enduction Hour*, released back in 1982 but sounding none the worse for being an early representative of a decade generally unkind to the quality of music from, especially, those artists already recording before the 1980s mass collapse in integrity established full control. In keeping with the contrariness of Smith and the group he has led since 1976, the opposite holds true with The Fall, with their run of 1980s albums serving as the high-water mark of an acutely original body of work, a conduit for the outsider nature of its prime creator.

Scanning their bookshelf for clues is a useful character gauge of those yet to reveal themselves more fully to us, and in Smith’s case his reading habits are a device to turn a chorus into an abstractive refrain that makes plain his own voracious love of literature, whose weight he allowed to impose itself upon the name of his group, for The Fall – an oblique but suggestive statement that has come to fit the richness of their music like a second skin – are named after the Albert Camus novel. Smith’s affinity to the work of the French philosopher is an obvious cohabitation with a bedfellow, as the thinker cultivated his own persona, politics and critical perspective with the release of his first novel, *The Stranger*, also commonly translated as *The Outsider*. Here Camus and Smith are in accord with one another, as both artists allow their gaze to fall at the outer edges of existence, Smith adding layers of wonder to the non-prescriptive nature of his songs by drawing in from these margins topics alien to music of a normative persuasion.

The claustrophobic atmosphere of *Dragnet*, just The Fall’s second album but their first masterpiece, gains profoundly from his explorations away from

the conventional, its lo-fi songs – in terms of production but certainly not spirit – forming a suite of ghost stories, science-fiction allusions, horror, psychic intrigue and extrasensory perception making for a brief but vivid piece with a dominating chill as the album progresses, growing more tense and detached from the normal order of things, as Bram Stoker masterfully sustains throughout *Dracula*. Ideas gathered at the periphery of experience appealed to Colin Wilson also, to give the C. Wilson of the chorus to *Fortress/Deer Park* his full name. A polymath, the English writer and philosopher moved with ease between true crime analyses, fiction and investigations into the paranormal. His debut novel, *Ritual in the Dark* is a minor footnote – but clearly no less important for Smith – in a career forever marked by the 1956 publishing of *The Outsider*, Wilson's totemic examination of the psyche of various artists whose work, methods and behaviours found them excluded from an established canon on grounds of their combined unusualness, if not their posing a concrete threat to an entrenched and internalised culture hostile to impregnation by the challenging and external other.

Wilson's character study, including portraits of Kafka, Sartre, van Gogh, Nietzsche and Camus himself, is a broad assessment of a historical landscape nervous of how to accommodate or relate to the work of practitioners whose distance from the safety of a commercialised centre of conformity must be maintained. An existentialist himself, Wilson's sympathy to Sartre and the once controversial strain of his philosophy is not surprising, and nor is Smith's referencing in song a practitioner of a lineage of thought and practice linked to the external cultural realm The Fall feed from, for the hostile relationship to society and its customs Wilson identifies as an outsider characteristic and Smith himself possesses is redolent not just of the particularity of his music, but also his shunning of the material benefits of fame in favour of autonomy over his output and preference for relative obscurity in the public consciousness. This trait is something of a mystery to a music business without the first idea how to handle a mercurial artist incapable of living up to the preordained image that bloated business happily indulges. It is beyond their imagining why *Deer Park*, a 1955 Norman Mailer novel, should comprise the cerebral landscape to the song and substantial element of the chorus to which we have dedicated ourselves, which can only mean it must be a good idea to indeed have been to the English Deer Park Colin Wilson visited and remained inside of to write a novel, if such an activity were even possible.

Smith casts such animated imagery due to his innate talent for free-association lyrics coupled with dissociative leaps of imagination through his literary

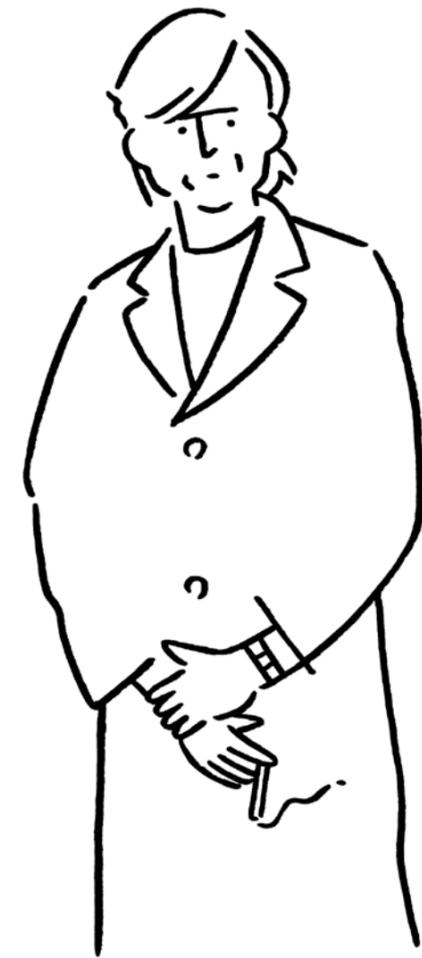
and cultural reference points, which forge new and otherworldly connections between subject matter with seemingly no relationship to the other or to where orthodox lyricists dare venture, but whose poeticism is ensured by the peculiar conviction of Smith's vocal delivery and the apparent passage to a mystical domain its alliance with The Fall's music invites. The four lines of this chorus then tell us plenty about the complexity and mental agility of Mark E. Smith, and certainly more than he would be prepared to divulge in person, for his reticence in giving away his secrets except through the vehicle of music is as notorious as his appetite for amphetamine, whisky and lager and recording album upon album at a furious rate, one bettered only by his legendary and unwavering constitution. To have remained (mostly) upright and cognisant for the length of time his personal abuse has been sustained is matched by the feat of having now fronted the same group – albeit with different members – for 40 years, especially given his inability to conventionally sing and vocal slur now a mile wide and as insistent as a tax demand, its now permanent residence brought on by his prolonged drinking habit. This alcohol dependency has weathered his features significantly beyond the anticipated appearance of a 58 year old man, giving his face a rearranged quality that belongs on a Francis Bacon canvas.

But his lifestyle and resultant appearance should not divert us too much, for as Goethe said, "...ultimately no man can be enlightened in a way not his own". Deviating from a path, regardless whether it be ruinous, has never been attractive to Smith, with the fate of The Fall resting on his own persuasions. Formerly media darlings of the independent music scene and riding high as the archetypal signing on the once crucial label Rough Trade Records, Smith's restlessness and discomfort with a cosy relationship suggesting acceptance has led to his marauding through multiple periods on esoteric, little known labels as often as he's travelled the world fulfilling a punishing touring schedule at the kind of ramshackle venues in provincial towns that never trouble the itinerary of household bands on major world tours. This is the ethic of the outsider – to resist conformity and plough a self-determined direction, producing work without compromising their code of conduct. In Smith's case, this code has been imposed by his autodidacticism in conjunction with the breadth of his enquiring mind, which has found solace in literature of all stripes and music from artists and genres matching his own extreme temperament and category-defying discography, being as he is a committed rockabilly fan as much as passionate about Bo Diddley, Captain Beefheart, Krautrock pioneers Can and trucking song compilations.

Trucking songs, or paeans devised around the whys and wherefores of

truck drivers and the long, lonely journeys they endure and which add to their own comparative social alienation are the very definition of an arcane musical interest, so perfect territory for the outsider determined to ensure no overlap between their own tastes and that of the majority when honing the distinctiveness of their purview. We can only imagine how difficult it must be to convincingly dance to a trucking song, but Michael Clark, who has also made a career from confounding expectations, would make a better fist of it than most. Classically trained at London's Royal Ballet School but with more than a passing interest in the experimental, as evidenced by his close working relationship with the performance artist Leigh Bowery and choreography of Alexander McQueen's S/S 2004 Deliverance show, the acclaimed dancer and choreographer is as much a punkish outsider to his own arena as Smith is to music. An ardent fan of The Fall and their endless innovation, 1988s ballet *I Am Curious, Orange*, held at London's prestigious contemporary dance theatre Sadler's Wells, the Barbican and the internationally renowned Edinburgh Festival, was the avant-garde collaboration between Smith and the Michael Clark Company, a production for which The Fall provided the soundtrack both live on stage and in their subsequent *I Am Curious, Oranj* album.

Loosely based around the 300th anniversary of William of Orange's accession to the English throne, the groundbreaking show indulged Smith's vast knowledge of history and urge to work with other outsider artists equally intent on asking different questions of their own discipline. His manifold interests combine with the highly distinctive manner in which his commanding voice prowls around inside the music of The Fall, adding depth, contours and mystery to a song in a range of radical vocal deliveries and accentuations without comparison or precedent. The commonplace notions of a frontman are dispatched by Smith as surely as the conventions of a song are recalibrated when one of The Fall's exceeds those limitations and arrives at some other place outside of ordinary description. That terrain is reserved for art: the finest of The Fall deserves no other designation, and nor can Mark E. Smith be considered anything other than an outsider occupying a space to which no other has been granted access. We began with a question but end without an answer, for The Fall are not a solution to anything. Instead, they are a proposition, one which must be carefully considered before being accepted or dismissed, for they cannot merely be ignored. Recalling his first encounter with Shakespeare, Goethe wrote, "Everything seemed new to me, unfamiliar, and the unaccustomed light hurt my eyes. Gradually I learned to see, and, thanks to my awakened spirit, I still feel intensely what I have gained". The Fall have equally given me vision, and bathed me in a new light. Let the outside in.



—“Being in The Fall isn't like being in another group. It isn't a holiday. A lot of musicians are really hard to deal with. They aren't as smart as me.”