

Mark's spell reached me through his records, and since always and forever I took it for granted that he would remain unapproachable – in more ways than one. "Never meet your heroes" as MES once said.

And that's how it would remain, apart from close proximity every so often (post-gig in the back stairwell at Krazy House in Liverpool 1997: just me and the man who I flew across the Atlantic to see perform in his indigenous environment. "*Up the stairs mister!*") I could practically hear MES cackle as he swerved past to avoid physical contact – I was wearing a massive winter coat (I'd imagined that he'd alluded to it derogatorily on stage: "*a jacket like that, in weather like this... HUP!*")

The Fall gripped me early in life. I didn't ask for it, it came and sought me out with smoky tendrils like the ones portrayed on the Early Years 77-79 compilation. Live at the Witch Trials was purchased for me in Salem MA - of all places. It was exactly one day after my 17th birthday. At Salem Record Exchange my uncle (a distinguished local artisan with finely honed musical tastes) held an armful of Jamaican LPs and said "The Fall are great. I have too many records, but I can't not buy this, so, Happy Birthday." Off we went to his apartment at 12 Cowell Street in Marblehead MA where I listened to the first track, Frightened. "He sounds just like Johnny Rotten" I said, unenthused. "No - he's a bit different, listen." It sounded like a bad Doors album. The first side ended on Various Times with its long fade out, and I needed to go out for air. I went off and within 10 minutes found myself walking in Marblehead's Old Burial Hill. "*The burying ground was founded in 1638 and contains many historic Puritan gravestones featuring diverse stone carving artwork from the seventeenth century. The burial ground also contains the remains of a victim of the 1692 Salem Witch Trials. It is referenced briefly in the horror author H.P Lovecraft's short-story, The Festival.*" (Lovecraft once described his first sight of the snow-covered roofs of Marblehead as "the most powerful single emotional climax experienced during my nearly forty years of existence.") Beyond that burial ground is an island you can walk to during low tide in Marblehead Bay... I went there.

I hid behind some tall weeds and had a plank.

I felt I had copulated with dark forces and held a deep conviction that

this record was going to change my life –and not entirely for the better. “...*he has visions of islands, heavily covered in slime.*” As I was traveling that summer, I brought the record around with me wherever I went, but I couldn't bear to look at it. I would flip the maroon front cover to the back, which was even worse. It was like a truth that I wasn't ready for, and didn't want to hear. I resisted it but I could not ignore it. Again I must emphasize, *it chose me, I did not choose it.* Once I arrived home in ridiculous suburban Florida that album lay dormant in my collection for months. I didn't like having albums in my collection that didn't get listened to. 1980 was the most revelatory music year in memory. I was obsessed with 50s rockabilly. I had discovered Beefheart via Doc at The Radar Station. As much as I was excited by developments in “post-punk” (PiL, Go4, etc.), these were my response to what I perceived as the generalized ethos of punk rock conformity. Months elapsed before I revisited LATWT properly. 9 months to be exact. “*No changeling as the birth was witnessed.*” I was astonished. But it wasn't the music that first assaulted me - which was in itself pretty odd.

It was the lyrics. Those words were like my own thoughts speaking to me, conveying ideas that I hadn't yet learned to fully conceptualize, but excruciatingly familiar on a subconscious level. How did the singer do that? Who is this guy again? Maddeningly, his name was Smith. How generic is that? I too had spent hours looking sideways to the time when I was sixteen. Anyone else would have said backwards. I tried parsing the lyrics to figure it out, how and where these thoughts were coming from. And, how did they manage to be elliptical while at the same time so direct? It made sense to me on a gut level, but when I would try to follow some chain of logic, they eluded analysis. Like tracking quanta, they were self-contradicting. Hearing the song Psykick Dancehall confirmed it – Mark E. Smith wasn't playing. He was self-aware and not even just an ordinary genius: he was a meta-intelligence.

And as it happened, an often rancorous and vindictive meta-intelligence. “*All the young groups know, they can imitate but I teach.*” For some strange reason, I took this as a challenge. Over the years I must have thought of hundreds of things I'd ask MES given the chance, mostly having to do with his lyrics. But I knew I never could, because even given the chance, there was a 0% probability he'd be

straightforward about it.

Each release revealed a new layer of complexity and awe. By Autumn 81 I owned them all (well, except Short Circuit). Listening to The Fall, it played out exactly like the spider's web on the sleeve of Dagnet. Words and phrases continued to spin outward as the meanings of the songs resonated not only on a metaphysical (esoteric) but a cultural (exoteric) level and often you couldn't tell one from the other. You got dragged in. In 1980/81 it wasn't easy to find Fall records in the US. You had to hunt and be proactive. There was no internet and information was scarce. The only source of information would be if you were lucky enough to get a copy of the NME. I wasn't even aware of the multitude of Peel sessions until 1990. Of course whenever I found something I didn't have, an interview, a record, or a live tape, it did not disappoint.

"But wait: there's more..." could be the watchword of The Fall's entire oeuvre. Most artists do their great work, find their niche and they're done. Not so The Fall. There was always more. It might be a new piece of music so organically weird you couldn't possibly imagine how they conceived of such a thing. Or so dissimilar to The Fall that you thought you knew, you couldn't imagine them making it work. But there it was. You could spend years grappling with a lyric. And then you'd discover a live version from say, 1983, with a changed or improvised phrase or some pre-song banter or cryptic joke, that'd unlock a fresh new meaning. And then, always, there was stumbling across whatever arcane reference from some other walk of life and having a light bulb go off. One more piece of the puzzle solved.

And so it went. I proselytized endlessly. At college I told anyone who'd listen, "Just you wait and see. This guy's vision is so vast, he'll be putting out records thirty years from now when all the other punk stuff has long bit the dust." I'd spend hours trying to explain to other music fans why I thought MES was the finest rock lyricist of all time and no-one else even comes close. Aside from the aforementioned uncle I could scarcely find anyone with the slightest bit of interest in The Fall, no less an insatiable desire to tease out every possible shred of detail about the enigmatic pop combo. Stefan Cooke said last week "He was our Dylan." I would go further and say The Fall was our Dylan, Beatles and Stones all combined into one – and then

some. For capturing the zeitgeist, that is. Over a period of 40 years, not 10.

It is slowly sinking in. My initial reaction is not grief, just numb hard shock. To be speaking about The Fall in past tense is an absolute mindfuck. Losing MES is equivalent to losing a way of life.