

# "THE FALL IS LIKE A NAZI ORGANISATION"

A quiet drink with **MARK E SMITH** in his favourite Manchester pub. There are lengthy ruminations on the current Fall lineup's excellence, and even lengthier ones on the incompetence of their predecessors. Also: the Vorticists, the BBC, Jane Austen, and the problems with Welsh people... "Come on, Mark," asks a tenacious **TOM PINNOCK**, "are you really that horrible?"

Photo by ALAMY

A man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket, a black turtleneck, and a pink bow tie, is looking upwards and to the left. He is standing in front of a brick wall with a metal grate. His hands are clasped in front of him, and he is wearing a watch on his left wrist.

ON..."



When there were five: The Fall with former Mrs Smith, Elena Poulou

**T**HERE are some fucking weird people around, aren't there?" says Mark E Smith, taking a sip of his double Jameson's in Manchester's Crown & Kettle public house. He's talking about musicians, a group of people he famously detests. "I suppose you meet a lot of 'em. I'm not one to talk, but a lot of them can't give it up, can they?"

As he admits, few artists have doggedly pursued such a singular, and lengthy, mission as that of the only constant member of The Fall. With the departure

of synth player – and former Mrs Smith – Elena Poulou, The Fall have been reduced to their core of guitarist Pete Greenway, drummer Kieron Melling and bassist Dave Spurr; they've been with Smith for over a decade, and, in the world of The Fall, that's a lifetime.

"The group are very well, actually," insists Smith. "Never been better. That's why I wanna crack on a bit [with another new album]. They're really fucking excellent. The great thing about my lads is the rhythm section, Dave and Kieron, they were brought up from 15, 16, playing '70s and '80s hits as a duo. So they can *play*. They can play 'Paranoid'. They can play 'In The Year 2525'. No, really!"

On one hand, Mark E Smith in 2017 is surprisingly mellow and friendly – during *Uncut's* afternoon in the Crown & Kettle, he drinks less than his reputation might suggest (he chooses a Welsh IPA to go with his double whiskey, before moving on to Duvel), and is often strikingly funny, whether discussing artist Wyndham Lewis or Jools Holland. After the interview, Smith even takes *Uncut* out to another pub for a few more rounds. Like the Lancashire weather, however, Smith's mood can turn suddenly: he'll talk about the past, but only on his own terms, and will happily lambast all manner of subjects, from the BBC and the destruction of Victorian latticework to today's young groups.

"My dad thought I was fucking mentally ill," he says, remembering when he first formed The Fall in Prestwich in 1976. "[But now] they've been to rock college, and you can see it in the way they play. You used to send your son into the army or the clergy, now you send them into a rock group. If I go and see bands now, there's more members of the group than there is audience. It's all their aunties and

their sisters, who've asked me to come down. You wish them well, but it's quite weird."

As the band's 60-odd former members would likely attest, Smith remains a man it would be wise not to cross, with his memory as sharp as his tongue, and his deepest wrath reserved for ex-Fall musicians and their 'tell-all' memoirs.

"If you get my curse, man, it doesn't fucking come back," he mutters, finishing his whiskey. "There's summat about The Fall, it just destroys..."

**T**HIS month, 41 years into a career of sublime turmoil, Smith's group release their 32nd studio album, *New Facts Emerge*, a storming set of heavy grooves, with their leader growling impressionistically over a barrage of guitar. *Uncut* tells Smith that it's perhaps the strongest Fall record since 2010's *Your Future Our Clutter*. "Do you like it? Ah, I'm glad," he says. "I haven't heard it complete yet, I got a bit fed up with it. I had so many arguments with the cutting engineer and all that. But I know when it's right, I've had it in my head for so long. I've got ideas for another half an LP now."

The centrepiece of *New Facts...* is the nine-minute "Couples Vs Jobless Mid-30s", an unhinged multi-part suite that veers from lumbering rock grooves complete with manic laughter to sections of chanting and detuned Mellotron. "We went to a studio in Castleford, Yorkshire," says Smith, explaining the song's creation, "which funnily enough is where we did *Your Future Our Clutter*. It's a big, fuck-off heavy metal studio. I left them in there for a week or so."

**You just left the group there and went away?**

No, not off on holiday! Stuff like "Couples..." that's them having fun. So we got about seven songs out of it [at Castleford]. "Couples..." is like three or four of their tunes savaged! They were trying to do something about Eagles Of Death Metal, and about heavy metal groups. I said, "That's not on", because they were the group in Paris, weren't they? So I changed it to all this. I enjoy it. It fucks your head up.

The more annoyed the engineers get, I tend to carry on. Especially with all this technology now, engineers always fiddle about with the filters and that, make it a bit tamer. But with something like [closer] "Nine Out Of Ten", the fucking best version is obviously the most earache one.

**"My dad thought I was fucking mentally ill when I formed The Fall"**

**MARK E SMITH**

**The version I've heard is pretty earachey.** Good, good. It's the right one, then! I love shit like that, when it's a bit painful.

**Are Cherry Red good to work with?** Yeah, they're all right, if you're not dead [laughs].

**What was that "Masquerade" single they put out for Record Store Day?** Fucking yeah, it was weird – and don't think they didn't get told about that. The fucking horrible Fall net – this bunch of old fucking fellas who harp on about the old days – they got a test pressing of it, and I didn't even know it was coming out! So I had a fucking word with them about that.

**The title of [New Facts'] "Victoria Train Station Massacre" has proved quite controversial after the Manchester bombing. Was it like "Powder Keg", a kind of precog thing? [MES claims "Powder Keg", released on June 10, 1996, was about**

**the Arndale Centre bombing, which took place five days later].** Probably, I don't know. I'm actually very fond of the architecture of Victoria Station, but it's all been trashed to fuck, and that's what the song's about. You know all that beautiful Victorian latticework, like they have at Paddington? They ripped it all off. And you know why? Because the students coming to Manchester wanted to have access to north Manchester [pauses]. We don't want 'em here [laughs]! So they put this big canvas canopy up, and about six months ago it fell on all the passengers in the rush hour. There's summat wrong with Manchester, they can't leave anything fucking alone.

**I see The Fall are off to America in September, for a New York residency. I'm looking forward to it. We've got a massive fanbase there, but we haven't been for a bit. It's more fanatical than it ever was, the fanbase – those New York shows sold out, 10 dates. They're loyal, American fans. It's a long time since we've been, last time was with the Dudes, the American group for [2007 album] Reformation Post LLC.**

**Are you still in touch with the Dudes?** Yeah. Tim [Presley]'s lost in Wales, int'he? I warned him. I bet they fuckin' ate him or summat. I saw him at the Green Man festival and he says, "I'm off to Cardiff for two weeks." I said, "Don't fucking go. The women are like fucking demons." And he was like, "Oh, Mark..." 'Cos I'm always filling them with these horror stories about Britain, but they never believe me. You can't warn guitarists, though.

**I bet your American fans are younger than the ones over here?** Yeah, they're all from this century. They're all from Reformation time, it's very strange.

**That album does feel like a watershed, in some ways. Well, thank God, yeah. I'd like to think that. I was playing it a bit back and it sounds fucking great. There are bits where it gets divisive, even for me.**

**Do you listen to other Fall records?** Not at all, no. But I played *Live At The Witch Trials* recently, the American version, I haven't played it before. They took all the good stuff off it, made it into a rock album. It sounded fucking awful. They got rid of most of the first side and put a long version of "Various Times" on. If you fucking hear that, you'll never wanna hear it again. So I got the original out, and it didn't sound too bad at all.

**A song I've been into recently is "Gross Chapel/British Grenadiers" [from 1986's Bend Sinister].** Fucking hell, you're going weird with The Fall, aren't you?



MARK SMITH

WORKING FOR THE BOSS

## GROUP SPEAK

Pete Greenway and Kieron Melling reveal what it's like being in the modern-day Fall

**PETE GREENWAY:** When we start an album, we'll all come in with fully formed songs and we spend the first day getting them out of our systems – they never work. Then the next day we'll start to do our proper work, which is very collaborative. Maybe Dave'll have a bassline and I'll have a guitar line and we'll put the two together. That's how we work best.

**KIERON MELLING:** We'll give Mark the demos of what we've been doing, he'll take them away for a listen, and advise us what route to go down.

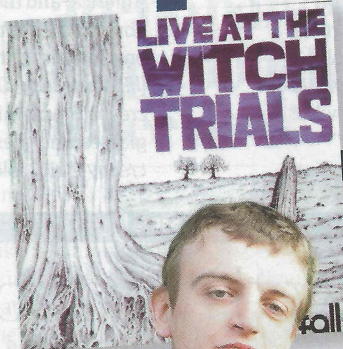
**GREENWAY:** "Couples Vs Jobless Mid-30s" was conceived in a hotel room. Mark came up with the idea to do this long, operatic thing with chanting, and we took him at his word and did it. A very odd song.

**MELLING:** I think we're all on the same page – you're there to work, and then when it's downtime you can have a good laugh. As long as you get on with it, and you're

not messing about, I think that's it. Everybody knows their place, Mark's the boss and that's that. It's interesting, we don't know 100 per cent what's on the LP 'til we hear the master – which I've just heard! So we're hearing it at the same time as everybody else, really.

**GREENWAY:** We're going through a really nice stage at the moment, where we're all good pals. It feels like a nice time at the moment. I think Mark genuinely likes us, which is good.

**MELLING:** It's the myth of this being a revolving door of musicians – we've been doing it for 11 years now, we've got a good working relationship down. Plus, he's a mate, I get on with Mark really well. I wanted to do "Totally Wired" when I got in the band, 'cos I like the song. I think we did it once in Glasgow – I'd been going on about it, and Mark said, 'Fuck it, just do it,' but he just won't entertain doing any of the bigger stuff. Anything that were popular, he just won't do it. It's the giving somebody praise thing, I don't think he likes it – he prefers to be unliked.



**[Julian Cope's Sunspots plays] I went past Tamworth on the way up here, and I thought about Julian. You two were close, weren't you?** Around *Live At The Witch Trials* – it's been that long. Sad, isn't it? For him...

**What was he like back then?** A fucking nobody [laughs]. He was our roadie, with Ian out of the Bunnymen. I haven't seen Julian since... My sister bought me an *Uncut* yesterday to check you out. She says, "He's interviewed Jah Wobble in there."

**Wobble mentioned The Fall, actually. He said "Kicker Conspiracy" reminded him of the Kickers that studio engineers used to wear in the '70s. Is that right?** It can be read like that, yeah. But it's also a big Dusseldorf/Cologne hooligans' magazine, *Kicker*. I've always liked Jah Wobble. We were doing this Peel Session [in 2004] and he was next door. He walked in and said, "Why don't I get a job with The Fall? I can do better than that cunt over there." ▶



GABORSCOTT/REDFERNS, CHRIS LEVER/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

And he pointed at our fucking bass player. And you know what, he was right, 'cos six months later that fucking cunt left me in Arizona. But [Wobble] spotted it straight away – he was a cunt. Fucking Steve Trafford.

**Wobble also told me he mugged John Leckie back in his more violent days.** He mugged John Leckie?! They are funny, aren't they... It's not the hardest thing in the world to mug John Leckie, though, is it?

**Have you got any plans after America?**

I'm doing this Wyndham Lewis thing with the Imperial War Museum. There's an exhibition, this collection they've discovered. I've been asked to do a speech. Captain Beefheart was a big Lewis fan, can you believe that? Then there was David Bowie, who said he liked everything. But of course, [now] nobody likes Lewis, 'cos he was a fascist, apparently. So [starting] from a big collection of people doing this exhibition on Lewis and the rebel art of the Vorticists in London and Manchester, there's no fucker left, they've all dropped out [laughs]. So I got the Manchester Imperial War Museum. It's old Dockland, I used to work there when I was doing ... *Witch Trials*. I'm gonna try and make a fucking hour and a half out of it, 'cos I do like Wyndham Lewis.

**That's my favourite era of art: people like Max Ernst or Paul Nash.** Me, too. This is all these Lewis World War I paintings, no-one's ever fucking seen them. And some of 'em knock the shit out of that World War I crap that was pushed as art. I'm a bit fucking fascinated by the First World War. What I didn't like was the anniversary a few years back. I thought it was handled very poorly. The parks near me, they had fucking choirs singing about the dead, and they don't know anything about it! Then you have all these BBC programmes and it's all about the Salford lads, and it's all these actors, these big, healthy fucking fellas. And they're all laughing and joking, and then they get in the trenches and they're all shitting themselves – with music from PJ Harvey over it, by the fucking way! I found that grossly insulting. I don't think it was like that at all: if you look at the old film, those fucking lads were glad to get out of the factories in Salford – in the trenches, they're like [grinning], with no arms. They were brave men. Then you have these fucking programmes, "Who Are Ya?" [*Who Do You Think You Are?*], and it's some fucking actor whose fucking great-grandfather fought for the fucking IRA. You just have to hold your tongue. So when I saw this Wyndham Lewis thing, I thought it'd be good. Picasso was a devout Communist, he supported Stalin who murdered millions, and no-one says, "Don't fucking show him." Lewis was just winding people up, that's fucking obvious to me.



The Fall with Brix Smith in the era of *This Nation's Saving Grace*, 1985

**So the group now...** It's turning into an *Uncut* interview this, isn't it? The past... working through to the present.

**Well, it doesn't have to be...** I know, I'm only kidding.

**We can talk more about the Vorticists, if you like.** Yeah.

**We share another passion – *The World At War*.** The TV programme?

**I heard you're into it.** I'd use it to get rid of people who came round to my house, especially stoners. I have a video set of it. It's good. It is mad, if you compare it to that BBC shit. It's all free trips. It's a training school for idiots. And they have these documentaries, like *Country At The BBC*, and it's fucking criminal, really. I'm fucking quite into my country, and [that programme] has like the worst country.

**I guess it's the only footage they have access to.**

If they show The Fall, it's always just Michael Clark with the bare bottoms [from a one-off performance of "*Lay Of The Land*"]. That ... *Jools Holland* show, I watched it the other week, and it was appalling. It was like the shit you see in a wine bar, some old boy from South America, and these fellas pretending to be African, and they're not! It's obvious they're not. The white ones are even worse. What are those ones, with the little fella who goes, [high-pitched] "Ooh-wee/I am creepy"? And this tall guy with glasses who goes, [deep] "creepy creepy"? He looks like the guy off



**UNHOLY MES**

**Green Eyed Loco Sounds**

**How to buy the 21st-century Fall**

**THE REAL NEW FALL LP (FORMERLY COUNTRY ON THE CLICK)**

**ACTION, 2003**



Rejigged after an early mix appeared online, MES returns with a strong offering after a few uneven albums. "Theme From Sparta FC" still features in some of their sets, and "Green Eyed Loco-Man" deserves to. **7/10**

**FALL HEADS ROLL**

**SLOGAN, 2005**



Although the cover paid tribute to Van Der Graaf Generator, *Fall Heads Roll* saw a heavier rock sound, with the powerful Krautrock chug of "Blindness" one of the group's all-time peaks. **7/10**

**REFORMATION POST TLC**

**SLOGAN, 2007**



After being abandoned in Arizona by the titular "traitors, liars and cunts", Smith recruits American musicians 'The Dudes' for this grooving return to form, a particular favourite of MES. **8/10**

**YOUR FUTURE OUR CLUTTER**

**DOMINO, 2010**



A hard-hitting set of stomping glam-garage, the group's only Domino full-length remains their most acclaimed 21st-century album. Contains the epic "Bury Pts 1 & 3", presumably too popular for Smith to bother performing live. **9/10**

**NEW FACTS EMERGE**

**CHERRY RED, 2017**

Powerful yet oblique, the group's 32nd studio album relies on rock-hard riffs and hammering drums. Yet there's also a winning experimental streak, with "Couples Vs Jobless Mid-30s" and "Nine Out Of Ten" equally funny and strange. **8/10**

*Pointless.* I wanna go and see them. We used to look at groups that were bad and fucking go and see 'em, just to heckle them. There are no groups crap enough to go and watch now.

**They're all too proficient these days.** Who wants to see that?

**I wanted to ask about Brix & The Extricated. It must be annoying for you that they're playing old Fall stuff.** I'm still on the case with it. But they've been doing their new material lately. It annoyed me about a year ago, but not anymore. I'm glad you asked, 'cos people keep saying, 'Give it up,' but there was a genuine conspiracy there which nobody would believe. I knew it.

**What kind of conspiracy?** They were delusional. It can only be proved by the fucking... it's what I was saying, there are people who retire for 20 years and think they can just come back into it. The best bit was when Paul Hanley was on *The Chase*.

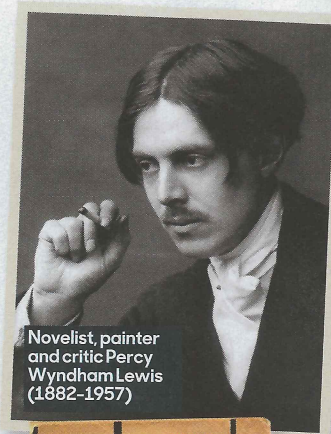
**With Bradley Walsh?** [smiles] Bradley Walsh... He said, "What do you do, Paul?" He goes, "I used to drum for The Fall, but I've been an IT operator for 25 years. I'm doing an English Lit degree with another ex-member of The Fall." And Bradley Walsh goes, "They're still going, aren't they?" [pauses] He went out the first fucking round. Who does an English degree with another ex-member of The Fall?! For a fella who was in the group for two years, it is very weird. Now they're doing all whats-her-face's material. I don't gloat, 'cos it was serious at one point.

**Does it make you think about playing more from older Fall albums?** Haha! [A man comes over, shakes Smith's hand and offers him a drink. MES firmly but politely turns it down, then turns to Uncut wide-eyed] He's another one. He's the roadie for the Extricated.

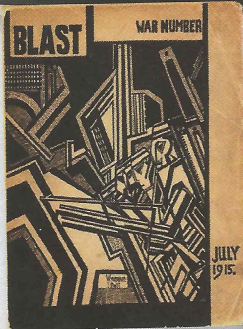
**That's a bit weird.** He used to have really long hair. He was a roadie for The Fall about fucking 1999. I knew we should have moved on [to another pub]. Word's got out, that's how sad they are. Go on.

**I guess it's a compliment that the Extricated are playing old Fall...** [sharply] No, it's not a fucking compliment. I would have gladly fucking exterminated them. My side of the story is so fucking truthful. The thing about me is I can remember everything. Everything in them books... when Brix was going on about the flat in Prestwich [in her 2016 book *The Rise, The Fall, And The Rise*], how it had no shower – people in Manchester do read that and think it's hilarious, they don't side with her. Who in Manchester, in any fucking flat of a 23-year-old person in the '80s, had a shower? I mean, that fucking Steve Hanley's book [2014's *The Big Midweek*], it's like the fucking memoirs of a psychopath. I can't read it, it's so funny. His new girlfriend who's the co-writer, she's met him at a Foxes gig, in the dressing room...

**Foxes?** [The pair met at a Fleet Foxes show] The Fall is like a Nazi organisation, I've got my working-class people, they tell me everything. So I know it all. I knew by reading his book that her favourite book is Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*... He's fucking describing how we did a tour in France, and we're at the fucking Port Of Calais – [Hanley says] we've booked the ferry, and we ran out of petrol a mile from the port. He said that I got out and got a fucking bus to the Port Of Calais – that's impossible! And then they pushed the van, all five of 'em, from nowhere to the Port Of Calais. It's straight out of Jane Austen! And I was waiting for them "red-faced" on the dock. "There we met Smith, shouting..." I mean, who would write that? So they said, "Can we have something to eat?" "You might as well,



Novelist, painter and critic Percy Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957)



seeing as the next ferry isn't for hours,' Smith said, red-faced. So we went to the canteen."

**D**ESPITE the dissenting voices of former Fall members, Mark E Smith's versions of events certainly seem plausible when he's explained them in person. After all, the most prominent ex-members of the band can sometimes seem strangely preoccupied with a man they often portray as beastly. But perhaps *Uncut*'s willingness to believe Smith is just down to his still-powerful charisma; as The Fall's cult leader, he remains seemingly all-seeing, all-knowing and all-remembering. So come on, Mark, are you really that horrible?

"We're talking about six strapping 20-year-old lads with muscles there," he laughs, suggesting they wouldn't need to ask his permission to eat. "Where do these things come from?! And [Hanley writes] about how I made his child bring speed to Ireland. Nobody's got that far in the book, nobody! We played Ireland, and his 11-year-old wanted to go to Dublin, so I said he could only come – [laughs] it's like *Mansfield Park*! – he could only come if he loaded his pockets with speed and got on the plane on his own from Manchester. I mean, Penguin wouldn't pass that nonsense!"

One more apocryphal tale to file alongside the others, perhaps: of verbal and physical violence, of Smith sacking a soundman for eating a salad ("the final straw," he once explained), pouring a pint of beer over the head of a tourbus driver mid-journey, and generally controlling his band as firmly as some tyrannical despot. Whether it's true or not, does all this stuff not add to the myth?

"Not particularly, no," says Smith. "I know what you're saying. You can't rewrite history, my group have been with me longer and are fucking 18 times better than any of that crap were. They weren't very good. It's all right saying 'Gross Chapel' [was good], but it was hard work pulling them through that. What they also don't know is the amount of hours I spent cleaning up their music with John Leckie and people like that. They actually think they played like that on the records. The amount of times John Leckie would get another musician in... I would never hurt them like that at the time, to say."

As he's been discussing The Fall's many ex-members, Smith has been gradually shuffling along the long bench in the pub's back room. He ends up practically at the next table. "In their own heads," he says, "Mark's just the drunken singer who didn't know what he was doing – he just walked in, in some drunken shit, and they had to keep it up..."

"They do seriously believe it! It is," he concludes, with something uncharacteristically akin to

understatement, "interesting." ☺

*New Facts Emerge is released on July 28 on Cherry Red*

**"We'd go see bad bands just to laugh at 'em. There are no bands crap enough to see now"**



The Fall (l-r: Pete Greenway, Smith, Keiron Melling and Dave Spurr) live at the Arts Club, Liverpool, January 21, 2017