

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**.

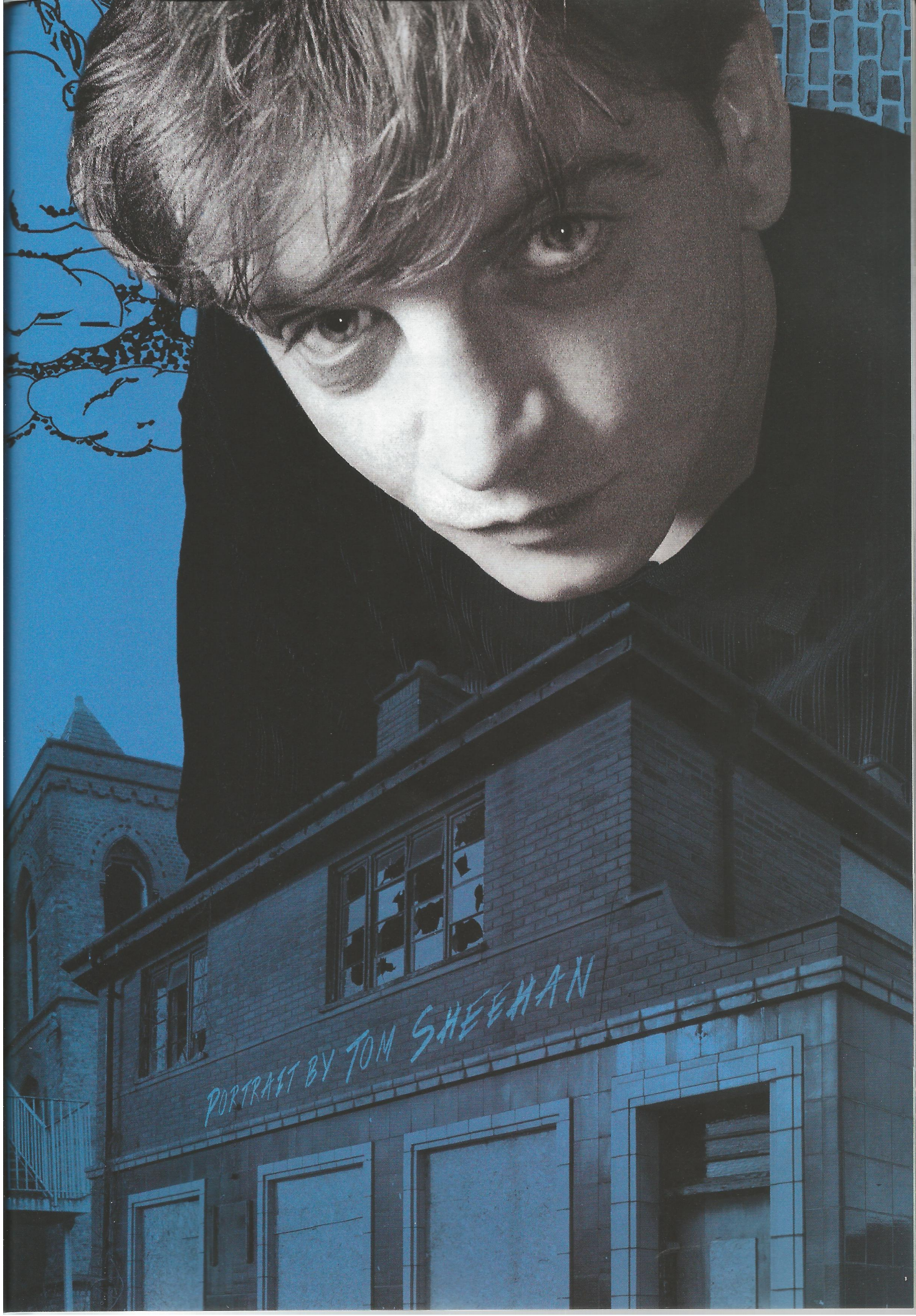
THERE ARE NUMEROUS, HITHERTO ARCAINE MUSIC documents that the internet has made widely available: think The Cramps live at the Napa State Mental Hospital, 1978, or a bug-eyed Iggy rubbing peanut butter on himself in the crowd at the Cincinnati Pop Festival, 1970. And then there's the film of The Fall 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 laddies," 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 satirises and filters the world in intensely imaginative ways, always satisfying the demand of 1980 single How I Wrote 'Elastic Man' that, "life should be full of strangeness, like a rich painting." His logic allows few concessions to understanding: a distorted, cold northern English psychedelia 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 Dinklage, Sun Ra or even Bob Dylan (Smith shivers 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 Ol' 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. ➤



PORTRAIT BY TOM SHEEHAN

MOJO 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 plays 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 marmalised England fans at Euro 2016, Peter Hook's complaints about not getting a cut from the sale of the Hacienda's urinals – as he relates this, afternoon pub staple Shadowplay by Joy Division comes on the jukebox – and, perhaps most distressing 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 – twats. 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 a 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 'til 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 be 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 drongos 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 Oh! Brother, which went unrecorded 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, it just came out. There was no practising. 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."

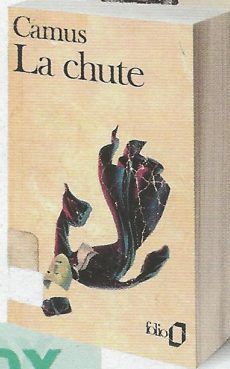
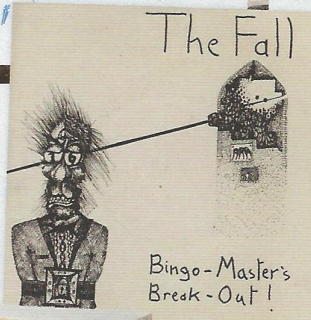
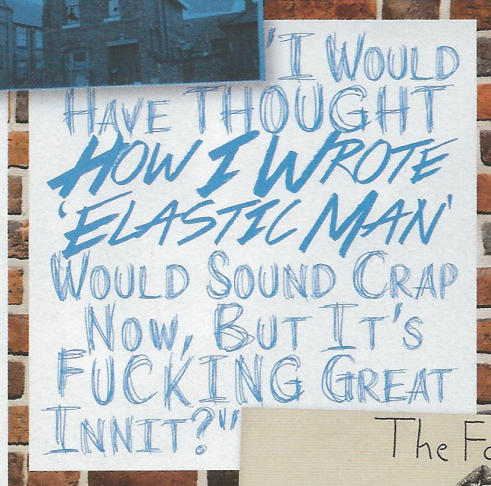
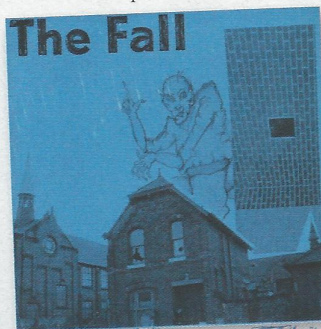
Considering Smith's dictatorial reputation, it's odd to think the group began on a kind of democratic footing. "Well, off and on," says Smith, cautiously. "It wasn't that I didn't believe in it; the mistake I made was thinking, If we're all in it, we're in it. [But] then I was of the opinion that you'd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

THE FIRST OF 24 JOHN PEEL radio sessions was recorded in June 1978, while the inaugural Fall vinyl appeared that August. The three-track 45 *Bingo-Master's Break-Out!* – its title track concerned the suicide of a bingo caller – was followed seven months later by the eldritch 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

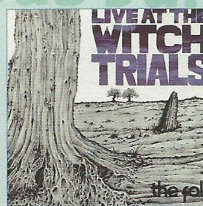
Hanley and guitarist Craig Scanlon came from Fall support band and roadie ranks, while drummer Mike Leigh arrived from the north-west rockabilly scene. Such personnel changes became routine, as expected as The Fall's relentless work rate: in the three years following October '79's *Dragnet* album, there would be 12 more releases, including indie smash hits *Grotesque* and *Hex Enduction Hour* LPs, the barbed *Slates* six-track 10-inch and the Lie 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- ➤



Rebellious Jukebox

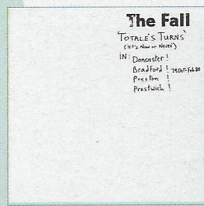
Let 35 albums by THE FALL fracture your mind beyond repair! Your host: IAN HARRISON



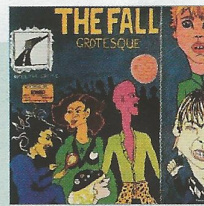
Live At The Witch Trials
★★★★
(Step-Forward, 1979)
Urgent, cerebral post-punk with spleen. Oddly smooth production.



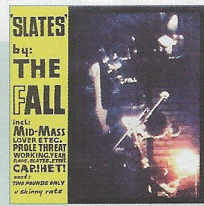
Dragnet
★★★★
(Step-Forward, 1979)
Grimy lager-can necromancy and horror stories equal debut Fall proper. Ambition, on the cheap.



Totale's Turns (It's Now Or Never)
★★★
(Rough Trade, 1980)
Playing to hostile crowds in working men's clubs, plus studio oddness. Fun.

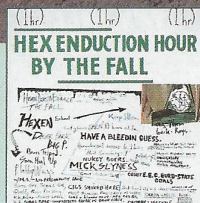


Grotesque (After The Gramme)
★★★★
(Rough Trade, 1980)
Quality brain-scambling on all fronts. Features The North Will Rise Again.



Slates
★★★★
(Rough Trade, 1981)
Six track 10-inch, yours for two quid. Prole Art Threat via raw art-drang. Value for money!

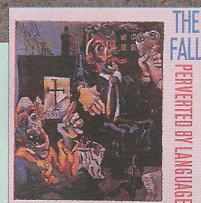
Let's be Frenz: Mark E Smith with guitarist and then-wife Brix Smith (centre) and keyboard-player Marcia Schofield, Manchester, October 17, 1987.



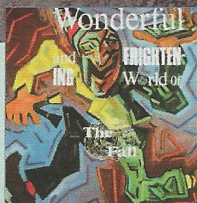
Hex Enduction Hour
★★★★★
(Kamera, 1982)
Icelandic 'scapes inspire The Fall's (would be) "big fuck off"/national address. Lacerating, monumental.



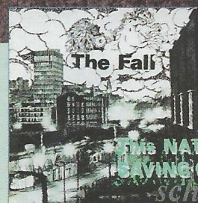
Room To Live
★★★
(Kamera, 1982)
Seven songs of Papal visits, rural insanity and fugitive Nazis. But a bit short on running time.



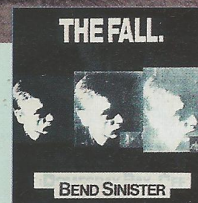
Perverted By Language
★★★★★
(Rough Trade, 1983)
Two drummers on lengthy vignettes of video rental and demonic visitation.



The Wonderful And Frightening World Of The Fall
★★★★★
(Beggars Banquet, 1984)
Krautably rumble with increasing accessibility.



This Nation's Saving Grace
★★★★★
(Beggars Banquet, 1985)
Doric riffs, basilisk lyrics, not so fixated on the grotesque: a Fall zenith.



Bend Sinister
★★★
(Beggars Banquet, 1986)
A retreat to a dark corridor after TNSG's airy mansion. A gothic step back to cultdom.



Fall heads, some roll: (left) rocking and ranting at the Ranch, Manchester, August 1977; (above) resting at Faulty Products, London; (below) Mark leads the larks in the park, 1984.

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'll do like that. I can do 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?

(reaches into his man-bag for a green manila folder of lyric sheets: visible on one are the scrawled words, "Homeric night, second one today, brillo-nilo"). It's Lee Brilleaux out of Dr. Feelgood, but this track's better than Dr. Feelgood. Imagine it played by Motörhead, with Pete [Greenway]'s guitar... The house is full of lyrics. 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?

No it's real. I hope so. It's, erm, there's one thing about The Fall, how can you explain it to anybody? Or if it's not real, I do it very objectively. Like [Sub-Lingual Tablet track], Venice With The Girls – that's objective ["Mocking mad seniors/Fed up and tedious/Long nights in Britland"]. It's every fucking young feller I know.

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. 'Cos if I put down what I've got now, it'll make Slates look monosyllabic. I might go that way – ffuuvkkgrrrraaaaaghhhh! Like a fucking word for every beat. It's coming. I mean, the last LP there are more lyrics aren't there, even if they are repetitive. It's, er, 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 the [band] sing, "Eagles of Death Metal." That's their idea; they're nutters aren't they?

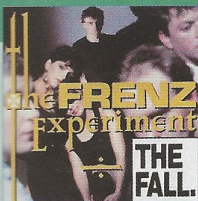
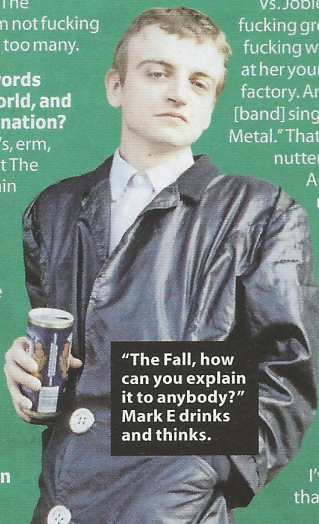
Anyway, I'm giving my ideas away.

Are there any more books on the way, after 2008's Renegade?

Funny you should ask about [Renegade]. I've got about 50 copies, I use 'em as door stops, he he! I've never read more than five pages...

"WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE TITLE, COUPLE, MID 30s VS. JOBLESS?"

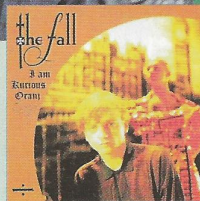
"The Fall, how can you explain it to anybody?" Mark E drinks and thinks.



The Frenz Experiment

★★★★

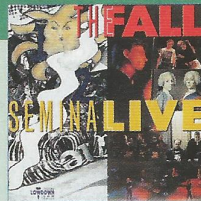
(Beggars Banquet, 1988)
Glammed up, sporadically gripping and opinion-splitting.



I Am Kurious Oranj

★★★★

(Beggars Banquet, 1988)
Nutsy religious-conflict ballet soundtrack, hits hard with Cab It Up and New Big Prinz.



Seminal Live

★★★

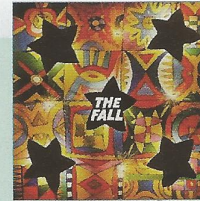
(Beggars Banquet, 1989)
Concert/studio tracks contract filler. But side one would have been a boss EP.



Extricate

★★★★

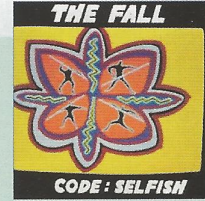
(Fontana, 1990)
On Tears For Fears' label. Presentable, with sharp teeth and ample moments of respite.



Shift-Work

★★★★

(Fontana, 1991)
Controlled grousing, collected pop insight and sentiment, even. The Fall at partial mellowest.



Code: Selfish

★★★★

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

stance, I thought, *fucking* yeah! Some of what you thought was good is shit, I dunno, some I did really quickly for business reasons. I would have thought [July 1980 single] How I Wrote 'Elastic Man' would sound crap now, but it's fucking great innit? I remember saying, Do this note over and over again, Play this note over and over and over again, you know! I didn't expect anybody to like it, but it sounds great, what I hoped it would sound like."

Another new member arrived in the form of Californian guitarist Laura Elise Salinger, better known as Brix Smith, who Smith married in July 1983. Brix entered the group's orbit weeks after the final departure of exigent early manager (and Smith paramour) Kay Carroll, who left during a US tour. Smith, rendered momentarily displeased by the arrival in Gulliver's of an extended family with baby, views the time, which coincided with their return to the co-op-minded Rough Trade label for 1983's *Perverted By Language* LP, with ambivalence.

"It was a weird time, having a group of more than three people," he muses. "They were all duos then, weren't they, like a bunch of secretive perverts, what John Cooper Clarke called 'the guitars are dead mob'. But I was positive – we'd got on this heavy metal label Kamera [for *Hex Enduction Hour*] who were fucking great actually. Everyone was out of their fucking heads. At Rough Trade if you said, Do you fancy going to the pub? It'd be like (pulls look of intense disdain), 'Oh,

Paul Slattery, Michael Pollard, Kevin Cummins/Getty Images, Getty, Steve Double/Camera Press

Business as unusual: (relatively) stable Fall line-up (from left) Simon Wolstencroft, MES, Steve Hanley, Craig Scanlon.



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, noising around all the time. That was one part of the modern world they didn't dislike."

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 bitter. 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 Cocteau's.

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 Hits 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.

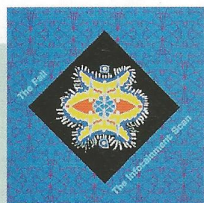
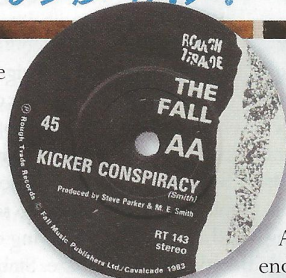
"That was like the underground going overground, for a bit," reckons MES. "But people forget, those videos were only on the telly once, like when you'd just see a glimpse or a mention of The Velvet Underground. It was weird, but good. I was conscious of not letting anybody down. I would've done more 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 *Bend Sinister* and 1988's *The Frenz Experiment*, barring 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 burned," he recalls. "Everyone'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 – 1988's *I Am Kurious Oranj* 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 bizarre 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, y'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."

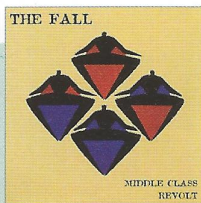
"BRIX SAW THE FALL AS A VEHICLE FOR HER OWN CAREER. IT WAS, 'GET RID OF THE IRISH & MY DRUNKEN HUSBAND.'"



The Infotainment Scan

★★★★★

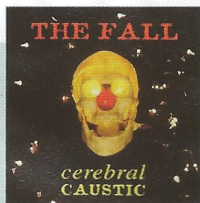
(Permanent, 1993)
A polished, programmed techno warning against nostalgia. Another peak.



Middle Class Revolt

★★★

(Permanent, 1994)
Smith seems distracted, tired songs jostle amid anti-bourgeois rhetoric. Clouds were gathering.



Cerebral Caustic

★★★★

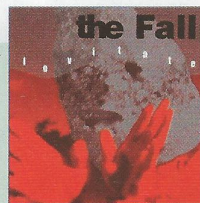
(Permanent, 1995)
Discordant remonstrations and odd reveries. Better than its repute. Scanlon's swansong.



The Light User Syndrome

★★★

(Jet, 1996)
Hurried and overlong, still The Fall, just. With IRA prophesy Powder Keg.



Levitae

★★★★

(Artful, 1997)
Hanley era death throes bring turbid revisitings of the group's past incarnations. Sick!



The Marshall Suite

★★★★

(Artful, 1999)
A reformulated Fall, antic, searing, oblique. One in the eye for defeatists.

Art for art's sake: Smith and Michael Clark, cover shoot for *I Am Kurious Oranj* LP, music for their ballet, Edinburgh, August 20, 1988.



Lennard's *Permanent* label, entered the charts at Number 9 that May.

"We did three LPs for Phonogram? Fuck me, they were quite tolerant really weren't they?" says Smith. "But I should have got rid of the group. We've left Phonogram and we've fucking got in the Top 10, and it's not like, 'We fucking showed 'em.' All they can think about is, 'How will it affect my mortgage?' I'm paying them New Order wages, the same as me.

"People say I was too soft with them. I spoiled them to death. Everybody told me. Hanley, Scanlon, they were just in a dream world. And [drummer Simon] Wolstencroft, I didn't know he was addicted to heroin... I listened to *The Infotainment Scan* and it's fucking brilliant and fucking hard. Dave Bush was ahead of his time. But it's way ahead of its time, all our work is. You are living 'Infotainment Scan' now!"

SMITH 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 heavy 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 re-working 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

Laphroaig. "I said to fucking Clarky – he's on fucking whatever it was, a sex drug – just go on and make some rhythms 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 terribles* 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 cumbrously 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

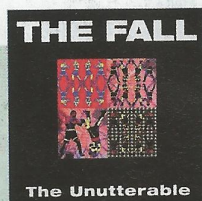
Kevin Cummins/Getty Images

"I WAS TOO SOFT WITH THE BAND. I SPOILED THEM TO DEATH. HANLEY, SCANLON, THEY WERE IN A DREAM WORLD!"

TWO DAYS AFTER MOJO'S first encounter with Smith, a Fall show at London's Garage is a reminder of the group's distinctive intensity. It's striking how calm Smith seems at the centre of this vortical maelstrom of noise, scanning the audience quizzically and even exchanging grins with the group. In addition to such recent bludgeonings as *Bury and Fibre Book Troll*, we also get a spirited *Container Drivers*, exhumed from 1980. The late arrival of Smith's keyboardist wife Elena Poulou, who appears a few songs in, apparently straight from the street, goes unremarked. At our second meeting, Smith confirms that Elena, a Fall member since 2001, has left: "She's resigned. She was very frustrated with it. She's got a very German head on her, and sometimes you've got to look at it objectively."

Who's to say she won't come back. 1990's Phonogram debut *Extricate* featured the brief return of original guitarist Martin Bramah. What brought this on? "Why? Dunno," Smith replies, tapping the table with a biro, which he then chews. "'Cos I'm fucking weird aren't I? I hadn't kept in touch with him at all. It was good, yeah. But it's like an old flame isn't it, you realise quickly that it's not gonna work."

Like *Extricate* – whose uniquely emotive *Bill Is Dead* ("But just lately seeing you... I am renewed") Smith posits could have been "Number 1" had he allowed it to be released as a single – there is superlative material on the albums that followed: the anti-Madchester Idiot Joy Showland on *Shift-Work* in 1991 and The Birmingham School Of Business School on 1992's *Code: Selfish* showed Smith's caustic edge unblunted by a major label. With electronics from ex-roadie Dave Bush, 1993's finely sculpted *The Infotainment Scan*, released on the former Fall manager John



The Unutterable

★★★★

(Eagle, 2000)

Well-produced bracing rock anomalies star William Blake, Tolstoy and nuclear test subjects.

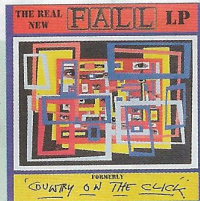


Are You Are Missing Winner

★★★

(Cog Sinister/Voiceprint, 2001)

Scrappy garage rock, songs work as stimulants or purgatives. New band.

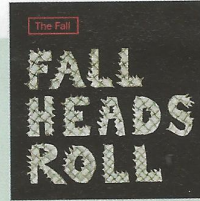


The Real New Fall LP

★★★★

(Action, 2003)

Knockout punkoid attack inside a web of electronics.

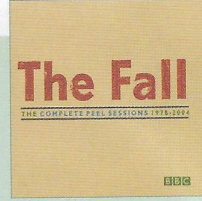


Fall Heads Roll

★★★★

(Slogan, 2005)

It all coalesces, with Pacifying Joint, Blindness and more bursting with high-tension Fall-ness.

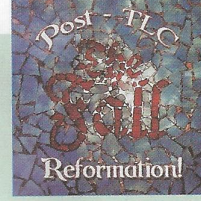


The Complete Peel Sessions

★★★★★

(Sanctuary, 2005)

Twenty-six years, 24 radio sessions, 97 tracks, six discs. Invaluable.



Reformation Post-TLC

★★★

(Slogan, 2007)

With US cavalry 'The Dudes', the chaos is varied, occasionally revelatory.

and bacon buttie, just like '98. They can't wait to get home, like the England football team. So anyway, I met these three dudes [Californians Orpheo McCord, Tim Presley and Rob Barbato] – 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 don't work out. I've only met 'em for 10 minutes and we went straight on-stage. I thought, This is 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 Spurr – 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 mill 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 beards 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 hi-fi 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 *Infotainment*, 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 is still a pain in the arse. It was immediately. I mean, the amount of fucking 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, mustn't I?"

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 despaired?

"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.

"He he! I'm not a hard man, not at all. All I say is, I think it was good that it happened, as it was."

M

CANON FODDER

In Fall world musicians are expendable, and worse still if they write books, explains MES.



I'm not a musician. There lies the rub. Maybe I'm tone deaf. I'm a bit weird like that. In the early days, they think 'cos you can't play and you can't sing, that you can't write songs, 'cos nobody can understand what they mean. They're getting advice off people like The Drones and Magazine: 'You're so great, get rid of that singer and you'll go far.' Every one of them, up 'til very recently, they all think I'm deliberately being uncommercial. It's like, 'We could do better.' So I say, 'Well, Go and do better, then.'

Later on, you get to the point where they're on the front of the NME and they're not getting any money, they expect to be getting exclusive totty and all that. I used to say what Status Quo said, You can't eat the front cover of the NME! Very funny. Take that back to your girlfriend who's pregnant. 'Course you sympathise, in retrospect, but at the time it was, You weak fucking piece of shit, you fucking disgrace, I don't know why you joined in the first place... Who do you think you are? You're like U2 or summat. Funnily enough, they were secret U2 fans, naming no names.

The numerous plots. People are leaving because they don't see a future in it and I'm getting people off the street, basically, who'd just learned to

play guitar and it all sounds all right. If I had a tenner for everyone who says, 'I'm sorry, you were right.' It takes a lot of them about two years to realise.

From what I have heard of them books [Steven Hanley's *The Big Midweek* and Brix Smith Start's *The Rise The Fall And The Rise*], they've got a distorted sense of the past, and a very boring sense of the past. That's the thing the ex-members have got. They want to be where I am. They do, they go on about the times that aren't going to come back, like the Beggars times. A

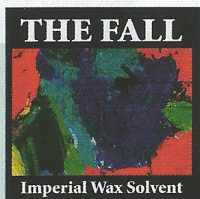
time they lived. That's why I don't like that Brix and Hanley stuff [ie, their Fall covers band The Extricated], 'cos they're corrupting it. They're in it for their own gain. I'm a big fan of The Fall, so when they fuck about with that, and they fuck about with me... You could probably fuck about with me and I'd let you off, but not with The Fall as well. I've got the best group in the world now, I sincerely have. You go 'The Smiths' and they go, 'Who?' I mean, Motörhead and you're talking with them.

There is a misconception that I am the tyrant. All the way through, it's them fucking off on me, or I've them fucking made 'em leave. It's half and half. I have fucking booted a lot of 'em out but to say it's all me... is probably true. Ha ha!"

"THEY ALL THINK I'M DELIBERATELY BEING UNCOMMERCIAL. I SAY, 'GO AND DO BETTER, THEN.'"



Remainders:
The Fall, June 12,
2013 with Smith's
third wife Elena
Poulou.



Imperial Wax Solvent

★★★★

(Castle, 2008)

"I'm a 50-year-old man and I like it," goads thrashing centrepiece.



Your Future Our Clutter

★★★★

(Domino, 2010)

Seemingly connected songs find autarch Smith in obfuscating mode.

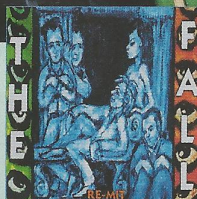


Ersatz GB

★★★

(Cherry Red, 2011)

Punk'n'synth variants on recent output, lacking standouts. Sez MES: "I can't fucking stand it."

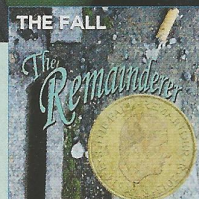


Re-Mit

★★★★

(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.



Sub-Lingual Tablet

★★★★★

(Cherry Red, 2015)

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

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