

FANTASTIC
MAN



HEY! MISTER

The legends that surround MARK E. SMITH are themselves rather legendary. When word gets out that I am interviewing the fine gentleman, people start phoning me with stories. How he developed his trademark shouty vocals by working as a bookie at the races. How he would demand to be paid for even promotional interviews. And how he would occasionally beat up fellow band members. True or not – and with many of them, SMITH himself now seems unsure – myth and mystery continue to follow the MANCUNIAN WORKING CLASS HERO around. As do the many trendy bands that he despises. Indeed with his artfully truculent air and albums that go by the names of PERVERTED BY LANGUAGE, THE UNUTTERABLE and GROTESQUE, SMITH has turned misanthropy into a stylish art form.

When the famous British broadcaster JOHN PEEL died in 2004, much was made of the fact that his favourite group of all time were Manchester's THE FALL – “a band,” he had said, “by which in our house all others are judged.” Given the mood of mourning that consumed the nation, it must have seemed a good idea to get THE FALL's frontman, MARK E. SMITH, on the BBC2 programme NEWSNIGHT. What followed was classic SMITH. Instead of paying tribute, the singer pulled faces, snarled, treated fellow panellist FEARGAL SHARKEY of THE UNDERTONES with barely concealed contempt and kept repeating the mysterious phrase “Are you the DJ?” to the disconcerted interviewer. Later claiming that he was the victim of a malfunctioning earpiece, SMITH had, of course, just demonstrated exactly why PEEL was a devotee. Unsettling, unsentimental and

unique, the 49-year-old FALL frontman has stood apart from pop music for almost thirty years. Aptly, given that his first public act was heckling PAUL WELLER at a JAM gig in Manchester in the late Seventies, SMITH has spent his life at odds with everything, wearing flares during punk, spending years playing with his back to the audience, and overturning the old romantic rock myth of the band-as-gang by hiring and firing so many musicians that more than 45 people have now passed through THE FALL.

The music that results from this is equally defiant of convention. Deliberately stripped down and lo-fi, involving elements of krautrock, garage, punk and reggae without really sounding like any of them, its defining sound is SMITH's voice: slurring, atonal and famously making every other word finish in

the syllable “ah” (“Free range-ah!”). Then there are the much admired, if often barely comprehensible, lyrics. Over an enormous body of work that spans 25 studio albums, innumerable EPs, compilations and live recordings and two spoken-word records, MARK E. SMITH has written about subjects from drugs and football to politics and the occult with a strange and sardonic pen. The song titles alone – like EAT Y'SELF FITTER, MERE PSEUD MAG ED, ROW-CHE RUMBLE and HEY! STUDENT – give a strong flavour of SMITH's warped inventiveness, while one, CEREBRAL CAUSTIC pegs precisely his combination of intelligence and bile. Step into his band's universe and you go into a place SMITH summed up in a 1984 album title: THE WONDERFUL AND FRIGHTENING WORLD OF THE FALL.

Given his proud Northern working class hatred for anything soft or pointlessly luxurious, the wood-panelled plush of the bar at the MALMAISON HOTEL, Manchester, seems a strange place to meet him. (He later says it's because it's close to the train station so journalists don't "have to wander around".) The mood is one of trepidation. Stories are legion about the man's catankerousness, unpredictability and (not unrelated) prodigious appetite for alcohol. It's only a few years since SMITH wrestled one NME journalist to the ground mid-interview and bit him on the neck; one of his many PRs once got dangled off a crane with a drunken SMITH at the controls. However, today SMITH has an emissary, a young man who looks like a FISHER-PRICE LIAM GALLAGHER in round glasses and a mod haircut called AUSTIN COLLINGS who surprisingly turns out to be ghost writing SMITH's long awaited autobiography, to be published by PENGUIN next year.

SMITH appears five minutes afterwards, wearing a large black leather jacket, a pale blue polo shirt and black slacks pulled up high round his waist. MARK E. SMITH's attitude to fashion is much the same as his attitude to music. Despite a brief period in the mid-Eighties when (possibly influenced by his glamorous first wife and fellow FALL member BRIX SMITH) he started wearing eyeliner, SMITH has always taken pains to look as unlike a rock star as possible. Nevertheless, his unique anti-style hasn't gone uncelebrated: in 1999, designer label YMC paid homage by creating a MARK E. SMITH jacket.

SMITH also has typically strong views about what his fellow bandmates should wear onstage. "If they just stumble on in T-shirts and training shoes – I don't like that," he says, ordering a pint of KRONENBOURG. "It's a sensitive issue with musos, you know. They take it really personally. And if you say things like, 'We're all wearing masks tonight, lads', they don't take it as a joke. I've got a weird sense of humour but they don't like it at all."

I guess musicians believe they're expressing themselves, and clothes are part of that, I tell him.

"Correct," SMITH replies crisply. "Express yourself in your own time is what I say. Or if you want to express yourself, write a good fucking tune."

MARK E. SMITH – whose initial stands for EDWARD – is entertaining but somewhat intimidating company. His nasal, slurred Lancashire accent masks a very sharp mind. His total intolerance for bullshit makes you watch what you say, his reputation for violence even more so. At least one FALL line-

up has ended in an on-stage punch-up, thanks to SMITH habits like dismantling his bandmates' instruments onstage. This afternoon however he's reasonably friendly, complimenting me on my jacket. (It's DIOR HOMME.) Like his Mancunian contemporary MORRISSEY, he likes to ask questions of the interviewer, which I take as a sign of his courtesy, although it's also slightly discomfiting, as SMITH surely knows. Recognising me as a fellow northerner, he asks me where I'm from ("You've got more of a Rotherham sort of accent than Leeds"), and in response to a question about his family whether I've got sisters myself – he has four, all younger. I don't, however, get "Are you courting?" – the delightfully old fashioned enquiry he traditionally makes of journalists.

There's one weird thing – the same involuntary face-pulling that bemused the viewers of NEWSNIGHT. At frequent intervals, SMITH screws up his face, opens his mouth and pokes his tongue out like an aged turtle. I'm too polite to ask why he does it but AUSTIN later agrees that it's most likely a consequence of long-term drug use. Since the age of 15, SMITH has been an enthusiastic consumer of acid and speed, though he stopped taking ecstasy in the late Eighties after it "turned me into a bloody sex maniac". An antipathy to the Catholic Church was intensified when POPE JOHN PAUL II visited Manchester in 1982 by helicopter, flattening SMITH's local magic mushroom field when he landed.

SMITH eyes suspiciously the iPod on which I'm recording the interview and keeps moving it away. No lover of modern technology, he's not keen on mobile phones – or, as he calls them, "porta-phones" – "they really puzzle me, how people walk around with them. What are they talking about?"

He doesn't own a computer either, though he points out that he had a ZX SPECTRUM in 1984. "I didn't like the way it controls the way you construct things," he says. "You get in a routine. It's a bit like when I worked in an office, everything's got to be in a business type of letter and I think computers are very much like that. Someone like me who writes in a flowing way or a very abrupt way, it's very difficult on a computer. To me, it still takes ten times longer to write something down on a computer than it does to write it down in biro. I don't know if you find that."

No, I find it quicker to type.

"Well, I use a typewriter a lot."

This is pretty much the most you'll get on how SMITH goes about writing his songs. He's fiercely protective about his methodology, believing fervently that other musicians

"If you want to express yourself, write a good fucking tune."

will read the interview, adopt his songwriting techniques and start making their own version of his music – hence the famous pronouncement “Notebooks out, plagiarists!” in one of his old songs. Yet his paranoia is in some way justified. While THE FALL’s dense, difficult music has ensured that they have never had any significant commercial success, SMITH is an object of fascination to fellow musicians from DAVID BOWIE (who SMITH says asked to collaborate with him, and was turned down) to JACK WHITE of THE WHITE STRIPES, who made a point of watching THE FALL’s recent show at the Reading Festival from the side of the stage. And people do rip off THE FALL, from Nineties indie heroes PAVEMENT, whose American take on THE FALL’s sound particularly displeased SMITH, to LCD SOUNDSYSTEM’s open homage.

SMITH doesn’t like to talk about his song lyrics, either, once grimly joking that he was “plagued by graduates” trying to analyse them. He never reads his own reviews, relying on his bandmates or wife ELENI POULO (who also plays keyboards in THE FALL) to feed back the general verdict. The reason seems to be bound up in SMITH’s considerable pride – he doesn’t want to be demystified, or to admit that anyone else’s opinion would count compared to his own. Nothing can shake his utter single-mindedness. 1999 saw him appearing onstage in Leeds with bloodstained clothes after a fight with one of his band members. In 2004, he slipped on some ice and broke both his knee and hip, necessitating the insertion of a metal rod. Given the alcohol-ravaged state of his body, SMITH was lucky not to have his leg amputated – yet despite this, he completed an American tour, delivering his vocals sitting at a table.

This total commitment to what he does, coupled with a very Northern work ethic, is what makes SMITH so admirable. Managers and band members come and go, but come hell or high water THE FALL will release at least one album a year, to artistic standards beyond most young bands, never mind ones over a quarter of a century old. (Last year’s FALL HEADS ROLL was one of the best of their career.)

MARK E. SMITH is very proud of being working class, and – again, in defiance of romantic rock ‘n’ roll clichés – to him, work is exactly what THE FALL is. He enjoyed the World Cup not because of the football, but because the fact that everyone was watching it meant he could get stuff done. “Saturday and Sunday,” he says, “no phone calls, nobody’s ringing me up, nobody’s mithering me,” – a Northern dialect word whose meaning lies somewhere between moaning and

worrying – “neighbours are all quiet, it’s great. Get a bit of business done, get a lot of writing done.” He laughs. “It’s a bit like the Royal Wedding or something. It’s all silent.”

Manchester is utterly central to what MARK E. SMITH does. Just as JOY DIVISION’s music captured the atmosphere of late Seventies Manchester’s desolate mills and deserted underpasses, THE FALL’s music embodies the rough, dogged quality of the place and its inhabitants.

SMITH still lives in northern Manchester, where he was brought up. He once described his sensibility as distinctly “North Mancunian”, but when I ask him what this means he clams up suspiciously: “Who said that?”

You did.

“Oh right. I would think so, yes. It’s more Salford, really.”

Weeks later TONY WILSON, founder of the iconic Manchester record label FACTORY (and once witheringly described by SMITH as “the poor man’s RICHARD BRANSON”) helps out. “In South Manchester,” he says, “you’ve got the Wilmslow Road, and that reminds you that ten miles away there are footballers with HUMMERS and the most champagne per head consumed in the UK, but North Manchester is completely industrial and working class.”

SMITH’s first job was as a shipping clerk at the Manchester docks: according to local indie lore, he would often ride past JOY DIVISION’s IAN CURTIS, a contemporary, on his way to work. As a teenager, SMITH had been top of the class despite being disliked by the teachers. A classic autodidact, he taught himself to read before he even went to school: “I was one of those clever dicks”. THE FALL are named after the novel by CAMUS, but SMITH’s favourite authors are gothic novelist H.P. LOVECRAFT, RAYMOND CHANDLER (“very succinct and straight to the point”), and modernists like WYNDHAM LEWIS – whose paintings SMITH also admires – and EZRA POUND. POUND’s writing, says SMITH confusingly, is “rubbish, but it’s good. I just like the approach. What the hell’s he talking about? One minute he’s talking about the I CHING, the next he’s talking about Notting Hill Gate. I like that. You don’t get that a lot any more.”

There’s also a very strong mystic strain to SMITH’s work which makes comparisons with WILLIAM BLAKE (whose poem JERUSALEM THE FALL covered) not altogether far fetched. “That’s the real stuff,” he says approvingly. “You’re talking proper writing now.” Just as BLAKE believed he literally saw angels sitting in trees, SMITH believes he has encountered ghosts. His scerp-

ticism has not precluded a considerable interest in the occult. “He was very interested in witchcraft and believed himself to have powers,” revealed BRIX SMITH in SIMON FORD’s FALL biography HIP PRIEST. “He wasn’t a devil worshipper or anything like that, but he definitely thought of himself as an empowered person and able to control things.”

Since THE FALL has also been compared to a cult with SMITH as the leader (not least for his habit of going out with the female members) I ask him whether his intuition runs to knowing which musicians will last the distance with THE FALL when he hires them. “I don’t know,” he laughs. “Like THE TWILIGHT ZONE, where the ones who are going to die have light round their eyes? It’s always surprising, the ones that go and the ones that stay. Contrary to opinion, it’s not my fault that they go. They might crack on that it is.”

Given that SMITH’s working methods include giving musicians the address of the wrong studio so that they’re furiously angry when they finally get to play, this remark seems rather disingenuous. Is being in THE FALL really such a good life?

“I think it’s too good – that’s the problem,” says SMITH. “It seems a lot of 25 to 35 year old blokes have a lot of stress in their lives. These Seventies babies. The last lot were going through midlife crises at 30 and 31 and I can’t really relate to it, you know? I mean, how old are you?”

Thirty-two. He laughs. “It’s the prime of your life, innit?”

Yes. How were your thirties?

“Alright, yeah,” says SMITH. “Bit rough, but I wasn’t getting miserable about everything like a lot of people seem to.”

SMITH’s musical ambitions were galvanised on June 4 1976 when he went to see the SEX PISTOLS play at Manchester’s Free Trade Hall, along with such later Manchester music luminaries as MORRISSEY (who SMITH claims used to give him “dirty phonecalls”) and JOY DIVISION’s BERNARD SUMNER and PETER HOOK. “I would have a marvellous job in shipping if it wasn’t for the SEX PISTOLS,” he once joked.

THE FALL received music press acclaim pretty much right from their first gigs in working men’s clubs, the only places that would put them on. Though they’ve always struggled to accommodate their resolutely uncommercial vision within the music industry machine, getting through ten managers and multiple record labels, THE FALL have been consistently revered.

JOHN PEEL’s patronage is only the start, and THE FALL has been influencing bands ever since. “I’ve said this before, but if I was very rich and had a lawyer I’d put up a

thing saying you can't mention THE FALL as an influence," SMITH says. "It's very misleading to young fans. American kids go, [he imitates a Southern drawl] 'What the god-damn hell has FRANZ FERDINAND got to do with THE FALL?'" He laughs. "They go, 'If they sound like FRANZ FERDINAND, who wants to see them?' But if they go and see us they're converted."

As well as his distaste for their music, it's clear that SMITH resents having the kudos that comes from three decades of not giving an inch to commercial pressures assimilated by bands much more amenable to compromise. Instead, SMITH prefers to work with people like German post-techno duo MOUSE ON MARS ("they're more of a pop band in Germany, quite a teeny band," he says improbably) and the Icelandic electronic artist GHOSTDIGITAL. "A lot of the groups today are like business units," he says. "THE FALL were never like that."

Unusually for a rock band, THE FALL have been embraced and used as a reference point by artists like PAUL HOUSLEY and GRAYSON PERRY, British comedians FRANK SKINNER and STEWART LEE, TRAINSPOTTING author IRVINE WELSH – even CALVIN KLEIN has professed himself a fan. "We've got fans in strange places. I think it's a lot more important than some daft group saying they like us," says SMITH proudly. "Some artists have said to me they can only paint to THE FALL. I think it's because we're on a different rhythm to a lot of other groups. It gives them a kick in the head, that's what I've heard from painters."

SMITH doesn't have an art collection. "I get sent all this stuff, get a lot of artists writing to me, giving me pictures and that," he shrugs, "but I'm one of those people who has a big spring clean. I spend most of my time chucking shit out. I haven't got copies of my first singles. Front covers of magazine and that, long gone." To SMITH it seems, nostalgia is just more pointless self-indulgence, antithetical to the relentless modernism he promotes in his work, while expensive personal possessions bog you down and make you comfortable and self-indulgent.

THE FALL's intersection with high culture flowered in the mid-Eighties, when they began to collaborate with ballet dancer MICHAEL CLARK, performing on British TV show THE OLD GREY WHISTLE TEST together in November 1984. The show concluded with the dancers, in arse-revealing costumes designed by LEIGH BOWERY, force feeding a pantomime cow with cartons of milk while THE FALL thrashed away in the background. BOWERY also starred dressed as "a clerk on acid" in the macabre

video for 1985's CRUISER'S CREEK directed by artist CERITH WYN EVANS, and appeared in SMITH's one and only play, the 1986 work HEY! LUCIANI, described at the time by NME as "incomprehensible". Given his plain-speaking dislike of pretension you might suppose that SMITH would avoid such arty endeavours, but there is a side to him that admires the flamboyance of someone like CLARK, as well as identifying with his backbreaking work ethic and proud outsider status.

The high-water mark of THE FALL and CLARK's collaboration was a full ballet, I AM KURIOUS, ORANJ, which premiered at the Stadsschouwburg in Amsterdam in June 1988. A snippet on YouTube reveals that it looks amazing, BRIX SMITH whirling across the stage on a giant hamburger to the strains of CAB IT UP. Would SMITH do another ballet? "Yeah, I would actually," he admits. "That was good. But half the people who did that are dead, you know, like the guy who choreographed it. But that was great. Hard to do them things in Britain, money-wise. That's one thing with rock music, you can be a bit autonomous."

The question about MARK E. SMITH is where he gets this drive and this fury from. SMITH believed when he was starting THE FALL in 1977 that he was doing something both important and totally original, saying two decades later that "there were no groups around that I thought represented people like me or my mates. No-one was speaking to the clerks and the dockers. If I wanted to be anything, it was a voice for those people. I wanted THE FALL to be the band for people who didn't have bands."

Twenty-nine years on, the urge is undimmed. "I never feel like I've said enough. If I ever get fed up – and I've had times when I was fed up of the business – then you see some crap on the TV and you think you just can't leave it."

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WWW.BBC.CO.UK/RADIO1/JOHNPEEL
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