

Formed from the chaotic marriage of The Fall's Mark E Smith and Germany's Mouse On Mars, Von Südenfed is avant music's most dysfunctional family, but their first album is a compelling mixture of smart and tatty. David Stubbs meets the threesome to hear about the creative argy-bargy that led to *Tromatic Reflexxions*, bringing funk to the academy and opening the trapdoors of chance. Photography: Leon Chew

Mark E Smith is in jovial, cackling mood, beginning to relax after completing an 18 date tour with The Fall, whose demise seems somehow less likely now than at any point in their 31 year history. That said, Von Südenfed, the Anglo-German alliance he's forged with Jan St Werner and Andi Toma of Mouse On Mars is one of the most significant working partnerships in which he's been involved since The Fall's inception in 1976. It's a genuine melding of musical minds, hence the decision to create a separate name for the project. Chromium-sleek, yet with a bruising, rock 'n' roll earthiness and coated with funk sweat, Von Südenfed's debut album *Tromatic Reflexxions* has excited comparisons in some quarters with LCD Soundsystem. Yet the very mention of their name causes Smith's joviality to evaporate. LCD's single "Losing My Edge", some felt, paid Smith affectionate homage. James Murphy's delivery is a deadpan take on Smith's singular vocal style, sheer, scabrous Lancastrian vitriol, with a strange touch of the WC Fields in the way he lets the last word of every phrase dangle. If it's not exactly a statue erected in his honour, it has been heralded as the apotheosis of post-punk revivalist rehabilitation. Smith, however, is having none of it.

"What a rip-off that is!" he spits. "I'm very insulted. I went into my local shop a few weeks ago, where I go for groceries. There's an Irish bloke in there, very nice, and he was playing this ["Losing My

Edge"]. I said, 'This sounds exactly like me, are you trying to take the piss?' At which point, the bloke's getting a bit paranoid, because obviously he's no idea who I am. He says, 'It's just a record I like, that's all.' I mean, this bloke [James Murphy], I've met him, he doesn't even talk like that, he's New York, New Jersey, or whatever. Just some New York arsehole. And it's the same rhythm as I was using with Mouse On Mars, the same one we laid down..."

There was a moment, several years ago, when The Fall appeared to be on the point of disintegration, held precariously in place by rickety props Smith himself seemed wantonly and drunkenly bent on kicking away. The saga of the onstage fights and New York arrest which very nearly put paid to his long, unwavering stand has been told many times. Instead of finishing him, however, it has become a part of his legend. That Smith has survived all of this, his bullhorn vocals still blaring, has lent him an iconic, as well as aesthetic air of indestructibility. There is no reason now not to believe that, health permitting, he won't still be around for decades yet.

Smith's iconic status has been ratcheted up by such bizarre events as his 2004 appearance on BBC television's *Newsnight* in the wake of John Peel's death, in which his somewhat disconnected body language and refusal to join in the effusive gush of tributes to his DJ champion further bolstered his cult



Shotgun wedding

House on Mars's Andi Toma and Jan St Werner
with Mark E Smith in Brighton, March 2007



status. Then there was his still stranger, one-off reading of the football results, again on the BBC. But beware – pat Smith on the head and he will bite. He will not easily be drawn into the vortex of postmodern hipdom, celebrated for his own sake as a preserved specimen of antique punk belligerence. Nor should he be. Smith remains a vital going concern and a working artist of a deceptively clear vision, who remains, in Peel's famous phrase, "always different, always the same". And always active.

Enter stage right Mouse On Mars. After emerging on the great, silvery tide of early 90s Ambient/Techno, they gradually distinguished themselves as specialists in metamorphosis, integrating a variety of genres and approaches into their sound while rebelling against their Techno origins and extolling the values of live instrumentation. Even so, for many, there is about them the confectionery whiff of pop and kitsch which makes their merger with Smith as Von Südenfed appear all the more unlikely. Indeed, the resulting album, *Tromatic Reflexions*, is likely to provoke the same initial reaction as Leftfield's collaboration with John Lydon – smooth meets rough, smart meets tatty, sweet meets sour. Von Südenfed, however, are far more complex than that. Mouse On Mars's Toma and St Werner and The Fall leader get in among each other, strangely and stunningly revealing each other's strengths of adaptability and bloody-mindedness.

Regarding "Wipe That Sound"/"Cut The Gain", the 2004 Sonig 12" on which he and Mouse On Mars first collaborated, Smith vaguely recalls "hanging round Düsseldorf at the time", and that his wife was more familiar with Mouse On Mars than he was. However, he recalls the first mix having been made "mostly in Salford" in Lancashire, from where Smith hails. "It was just a straight vocal overdub over a mix they gave me." Certainly, on this single, you sense both sets of artists working in parallel with one another, tracking each other's movements without making physical contact. But it was a start.

I meet MOM's Toma and St Werner (their touring drummer, Dodo Nkishi, is not involved in this collaboration) at their high ceilinged studio and loft apartment in Düsseldorf, which until recently they shared with a Greek artist. Over cappuccino and cakes, St Werner recalls the genesis of Von Südenfed. "It started in London when Mark came into a gig," he remembers. "I think he was aware of our music but not so sure how interested he was in it. But then, the concert he saw, something worked well for him – it was a very noisy, very heavy gig, which sometimes people find hard to relate to. But still there was a rhythm, a concreteness to it. For him it worked well, so we connected and we asked him to work on the 12" on Sonig, just as a limited edition. And then Mark said, 'Well, that can't be the end of it.' He suggested we carry it on, try something else. It so happens that Mark has a friend in Düsseldorf whom he occasionally comes to visit. He came to the studio and we had a gig the next day, so we decided to do a session and see how it worked out. And it worked. That was quite a long session, from which we took bits to make the first sketches for tracks. Mark wanted to have that on tape and work on the lyrics. The next day, he came back and so we went on. It was quite casual. It was not really clear which plan or sketch we would have for this project, or what it would become."

Initially, suggests Smith, the working relationship took a while to gel properly. He was also a little wary of what he saw as Toma and St Werner's "sex symbol" status. "It was like a German lyric factory!" he grumbles, amusedly, of the early stages, in which roles were demarcated. "So I said to them, 'You have to get organised. It shouldn't all be laid onto me.' I said, 'We're part of a three man group.' The next thing was, they couldn't get a deal, so that delayed things. But then Domino picked it up."

If Toma and St Werner knew of The Fall, they weren't so cognizant, fortunately, of his formidable reputation – Mr Prole Art Threat, Fiery Jack, The North Will Rise Again and so forth. "We were aware of The Fall but not really Fall fans in that sense," confirms Toma, while St Werner adds, "I certainly appreciated them but I was aware that beyond that there are real Fall obsessives who know everything about them. I think it's as well that we were not super-fans because we would have been trembling in his presence and not been able to make a record."

The notion of collaborating with a Techno-oriented group was hardly new to Smith – as long ago as 1990, he was working with Tackhead on a track that became "Repetition", although his contribution sounds, in the very best sense of the phrase, telephoned in – spectral and disembodied. Prior to that he worked with Coldcut and later with distressed beats unit DOSE and Inch (featuring DOSE's Simon Spencer and Keir Stewart), in the mid-to late 90s, on 1996's "Plug Myself In" and 1999's "Inch" respectively. With the latter's Fall-type riff, you can hear Smith bringing himself to bear on Keir and Spencer – one of the mixes includes an audio clip of Smith aggressively and profanely laying down his ideas of how the track should sound, with a series of human beatbox-like "doosh" sounds – before the track segues into the realisation of that oral sketch. He had previously signed Dave Bush to his group, credited with "machines", to introduce a more Technoid element into The Fall's sound. By now, Smith was proclaiming himself bored of guitars, while reminiscing about clubbing expeditions and boasting of the German and Italian dance records in his collection. More recently, he appeared on a track on ex-Sugarcube Einar Örn's Ghostigital project.

All the same, for Smith the Von Südenfed experience was a novel one, having to hang back from his accustomed, imperious studio presence. "It went from me being a guest vocalist to a collaboration," he says. "Thing is, they didn't know me at all. And I'm used to calling the shots. I was taken by surprise by the way I work, I suppose. I'm used to being the boss, standing over the engineer, and in this situation I really had to hold back. You have to, really, otherwise you might end up getting sent back home on the next plane. Lufthansa! The thing I really had to change, though, was their original titles." Here, Smith refers to Mouse On Mars's predilection for slightly mutated, multi-syllabic creations, à la Autechre, of which he took a dim view. "You should have seen them," he groans.

To those with a passing acquaintance with Mouse On Mars, or who have only a glimmer of one aspect of their diverse oeuvre, they might well seem diametrically opposed to Smith. From playful outings like *laora Tahiti* to more recent submarine voyages into electronic experimentalism, they might seem

spritely, restless, skipping from genre to genre like pebbles skimming at random tangents across the water. If Mouse On Mars are changelings, with all the virtues that implies, then Smith is more of a 'sameling' an undersung quality that has the value of predictability, of returning again and again to labour the same essential point with invincible defiance.

Of course, that's to do full justice neither to the bludgeoning but subtle tool that is Smith's voice, nor to Mouse On Mars's embrace of live, rock instrumentation. The great thing here isn't just the intriguing synthesis of polar opposites that was the aforementioned Leftfield-John Lydon one-off. What's immediately evident, listening to *Tromatic Reflexions*, is the way MOM and MES merge into each other, revealing how much they actually have in common and how much they were prepared to absorb from each other. The electric keyboard stabs and compact, sawn-off riffs of the opening "Fledermaus Can't Get It" are Fall-like in their temple-throbbing insistence, while the familiarly disconcerting dry, scathing thrust of Smith's vocals submit to a brief moment of studio treatment, as he gags on a 'g'.

"It wouldn't work if we just swapped ideas over the Internet," avers St Werner, "because he was very influential on the way we work. There was a sort of 'vice versa' method of production. We'd maybe want to elaborate on something and he'd say, 'No, leave it like that, leave it that raw, don't fiddle around with it, it's all there.' But sometimes he had to get used to the things that we did, the way we edited and cut his voice. It's very chopped up, stop and go. He didn't like it at first but now he does. He came around to getting our way of looking at this stuff."

The same, cut-up treatment is meted out on "The Young, The Faceless And The Codes" but wisely it's minimised, just the occasional, token acknowledgement of what is theoretically possible. "Mark's voice is one which is already processed," says St Werner. "So for both of us it was new, but we both had the confidence that we both wanted the same thing, not just to fulfil some mental preset that we were dragging together on the same rope to find out what we knew we wanted. Mark has very definite ideas about the sounds he wants. It comes from listening to things. He imagines sounds and knows what he wants. In that sense, he's as much a producer as we are."

If anything, however, you suspect it's the more impervious Smith who has got about Mouse On Mars like knotweed. On "Flooded", he's the one who brags of "flooding the disco", drenching the electrical circuits. It's a metaphor for *Tromatic Reflexions* as a whole, with Smith's creative disruptions staining, bending, distressing and enriching Mouse On Mars's sturdy mesh of loops and beats. They tweak with him but he knocks them into red-raw Fall shapes on the likes of "Duckrog", which sounds like the clutter and rattle of the contents of a kitchen utility cupboard, or the cheap, gnarly acoustic piano stomp of "The Rhinohead". Or, there is the 'field recording' interlude, in which Smith appears to be having an argument, summoning all his famous Mancunian truculence, with someone operating what sounds like heavy machinery, while they're trying to record. This, says Smith, was actually a fictional scenario, with Toma playing the part of a Polish worker.

"I think people who play instruments, virtuosos, trick themselves into thinking that their technique is

a substitute for the real rush you really want from music. Then again, Mark is a sort of virtuoso himself," says St Werner in tribute to Smith. "He is incredibly precise and quick in the way he realises his ideas. He's not like, 'Ah, oh dear, I don't know, can I have some tea, can I do that again later?' Either he does it – zrooop! – and it's down. Or he says, 'No, I can't relate to it.'

"We're much more into sound," he continues, "although we like what he does lyrically – there is so much in his voice that is amazing. To have an a cappella version of the album would be great for us, because there is so much in his voice – the dynamics, the tension between the repetition, the loops, the beats lends a distance, an abstract view on the music – the way he channels his voice into tracks, the way he 'places' them with an eagle eye."

If there is a virtue in Smith's smithness, the way he applies himself with such acuity to the anvil, Von Südenfed is a tribute also to St Werner and Toma's powers of absorption and compulsion to shapeshift.

"There are a lot of people who know what they do in music," says St Werner. "It's a sort of super-selfconsciousness. And we're not like that. Every track has to feel like we're doing something we've never done before." This means that their relationship with electronic music is an ambivalent one. Says Toma, "We started off disliking uniform Techno bands – we didn't want to be [part of that]. It was more practical to work live, it was more comfortable for us. What's good is that with technology you can drive it to its edge, get rid of all the presets, ask, 'Is there more it can do?' You can drive machines like that in a way that you really can't with human beings – it's not very nice!"

Mouse On Mars's artistic success has been in fighting against the tides that bore them to success in the first place. "We were drawn into this movement. At the time of our first record, it was easy to equate what we were doing with this other Ambient/Techno scene," says St Werner. "The thing was, we didn't care. Whether playing to 20,000 people at a rave in Japan or a rock festival, or the event we're playing tonight in Germany, that's fine. We are us, regardless of the context. I dislike the word but don't have a better one, but it's 'idiosyncratic' – something that comes out of itself, with the urge to follow an idea which can only be explained or fulfilled by that particular unit of being. Of course, as you move along, you bounce off this genre here or that trend there, or some technological innovation. You're part of history, which you can't escape. But those things don't matter – what your work is about is to comprehend what you are after yourself. The reason some people don't make great art is that they look around too much, look for gaps or a place where they feel they can belong. That's dysfunctional. It's not the way to set your controls – with clichés and presets. In art, the attitude should be all about your own work. Once you've got a product, forget about it, either sell it or put it in the bin."

This comment recalls the late Derek Bailey's comment that no one should play one of his CDs more than once, and helps you realise that Mouse On Mars, for all their chromium poppish surfaces, are closer to the avant garde, one of whose undersung virtues is that it is actually far

more ephemeral and disposable than even the worst of pop, whose pillars of naffness can endure for decades, long remembered, albeit with a grimace. "Yes," nods St Werner, "the way we work, we go back, over and over when we're making records, to find things, hear mistakes, but that's not to say we're looking to make work that has some infinite value, it's not like that."

Mind you, when asked how he feels hearing old Mouse On Mars records, Toma coolly replies, "I must say that most of the time I'm pretty happy."

St Werner's highly personalised sense of musical theory resulted in his 2005 appointment as Artistic Director at STEIM in Amsterdam, the "centre for research and development of instruments and tools for performers in the electronic performance arts". "The idea of STEIM is to have intuitive interfaces, that is to say, whatever is best suited to the artist's specific purpose, and get that to the artist," explains St Werner. "It's partly academic and of course there is quite a bit of programming and engineers involved – but I think they asked me to get involved because they want someone who has an 'immediate' idea of music."

"One new thing they are developing is this little board which can read data. So you can attach to it a controller, something you twist, a slider, or scratching, or ultrasound. This device reads the data in a very precise resolution and sends it to software, which translates this data to MIDI – and then, whatever software you use, you can take this as a source and play with it. It frees you up."

That said, in the course of his work in Amsterdam, St Werner finds himself coming up hard against the surprisingly ramrod values of the experimental music academia. "The academic world has a horror of the beat, the steady rhythm," he sighs. "In music academia, the beat is the lowest form of art, enslaving you to an automatic process. You surrender to the animal, mechanistic instinct of your body and this is unacceptable to the intellectual. But I must say, I like that there are people thinking like this, that there are unbridgeable differences, that you have resistance from that school of listening, which says, 'No beat. Convince us why we should have a beat. Why do you need that grid underneath? What is it good for?' It's good to challenge that. And, although our music is totally beat-driven, it's actually something we ourselves oppose, within the music. You break it, you twist it and you find a different version and you always try to escape it as much as you use it. It's there to build a tension. That's what funk is about – the break, the holding back, the letting go."

Indeed, that's very sexual. "Yes," agrees St Werner, "it's a very bodily thing, and academics and sex is a very sad story. It's very hard to explain to intellectuals about the need to incorporate the body."

On Von Südenfed's "Speech Contamination/German Fear Of Österreich", Smith stabs out a hard to decipher, syllable-by-syllable German intonation, the origins of which might confirm St Werner's suggestion that The Fall singer has "some kind of ambiguous obsession" with Germany. Smith scoffs at the notion, repeating the phrase over and over with satirical relish. "Ambiguous obsession! 'Mark, you have an ambiguous obsession with

Germany!' See, I don't think that's true, really. A lot of people say that, but I don't see it. A lot of Northern people, when they go on holiday, they end up in Germany or Amsterdam, but I don't think it's anything beyond that. I do have friends in Düsseldorf, yes, they're British, used to work in the Army Signals Corps."

That said, Smith has a strong musical connection with the great Krautrock tradition, that primitive, looping, attritional drive which he also finds in his beloved rockabilly. "People like Charlie Feathers, they didn't need 48 track studios," he says. He still feels now that Von Südenfed should have issued the original raw live/studio recording from which the final tracks were wrought. This was an idea that tempted St Werner and Toma as well, but they eventually decided against it. "You can't just hope to press a live session onto record and hope that it will recreate the excitement you felt as you played," asserts St Werner. "So we went into production – and that was a little bit tricky because our way of producing is profoundly different from how Mark works."

"I was looking for that Can/Faust feel," says Smith. "I was trying to get them into that groove, you know, get them to realise their heritage." However, neither member of Mouse On Mars regards themselves as part of the Stockhausen/Can/Kraftwerk/DAF/Neubauten continuum. Post-war reconstruction is long since complete – theirs is a new sound environment in which the metaphors for the state of the nation undergirding the work of their German predecessors are obsolete. "In reality, we were listening much more to Anglo-American stuff. But then much of the 'Anglo-American' stuff we heard was probably very influenced by the groups you mention."

"Ultimately, we play ourselves," says St Werner of Mouse On Mars. Smith, it could be said, 'plays' other people. In Düsseldorf, St Werner and Toma show me a brief excerpt of filmed studio footage. Smith is prowling around, as is his wont onstage. To the casual observer he might look shambling and incompetent as he leans over and prods intermittently at buttons. He might look like some confused old dad wandering into his son's bedroom and meddling curiously with hi-tech equipment he doesn't comprehend, to disastrous effect. But he knows what he's doing – switching the colours, cunningly opening the trapdoors of chance and opportunity. "That's just me, David," he confides. "I see a button and I trigger it off. 'Live dubbing'? Yeah, that's it."

"There is something in the human brain that can't do certain things in parallel," states St Werner. "Like 'experiencing' and 'judging', it's impossible to do both at once. We get an incredible number of demos sent to Sonig [MOM's label] and Frank [Dommert, in MOM's office] has to sift through them all, plus the ones we get handed on tour and I try to help out and listen to some too. So often my response is, 'Wow, if you could just *hear* what you did there and not just feel it.' You can sense that they were too caught up in producing it. I think it would be ideal if they didn't touch any of their instruments and 'listened' to what it should be, or visualise, or even smell it. Mark is very able to do that," he concludes. "He somehow sees what he wants and that's it, that's the secret." □ Tromatic Reflexions is released this month on Domino

