

Mark E Smith in conversation with Michael Stewart – Huddersfield Literature Festival
2009

Lawrence Batley Theatre

MS Thanks very much for coming along Mark. Welcome to Huddersfield. I know I've already spoken to you before about this, but I think a lot of your fans will want to know, so let's get the hip out of the way first of all.

MES The hip ?

MS The hip yes. How is the hip? How did you break your hip? And how is it now?

MES The hip priest. Have you bought any records in the past twenty years ? [the intro music was The Hip Priest].

Audience laugh.

MS No I just download them.

MES Oh right. No, it's fine now. I'm just glad to stand up.

MS Because you had a theory about this didn't you. Because you've broke your hip before.

MES Yeah, five years.

MS And you have a theory don't you about why you keep breaking your hip. What's the theory?

MES I don't sit down.

Audience laugh.

MS So it's your body telling you to sit down ?

MES I think so, yeah.

MS It's quite a clear message really... Now, thanks for coming along this evening but I must say I'm surprised a little bit because I know you don't normally do events like this. What was it about this particular event that appealed to you Mark ?

MES You wrote me a letter saying that I'd changed your life.

Audience laughs.

MS And that's what it was?

MES Well, I've done a few others. This seems to be going alright.

MS So far... Let's wait and see shall we.

Audience laughs.

MES Why are you playing Fall records from 1982? [he is still having a dig at me for playing Hip Priest].

MS I thought it was appropriate... Now we are going to talk mainly about your autobiography if that's ok. We've got Borders outside, with copies of your book which is now available in paperback. [To audience] Mark has kindly agreed to stay behind after the event to sign copies. Before that, I'd just like to show you a short clip which I was going to say, I hope you enjoy, but I hope, in a strange way, that you don't enjoy it. I think that will make sense once you've seen it.

The Country Life Butter advert is played featuring John Lydon. Audience laugh immediately.

MES That's a person off the telly.

MS Now, I don't want to denigrate John Lydon, I've got a lot of respect for the Sex Pistols and for early Public Image Limited, but tell me what do you think and feel when you watch that footage?

MES What are showing that for ?

MS I have got a serious point believe it or not. Which is this, the sheer longevity of The Fall is perhaps one of your greatest achievements. We're told that rock bands should burn out or fade away, you seem far away from doing either.

MES So you had to show a commercial ?

Audience laughs.

MS What I'm saying is, what do you think it is about you, when say John Lydon, well practically every one else in the business, decline creatively? You're still going after 33 years and Lydon is making butter commercials.

MES What's Lydon? Do you mean Johnny Rotten?

MS Yeah.

MES I think Rotten was always... He had no ideas of his own. You know, pinched.

MS And is that the difference?

MES Probably, yeah... He's a lot older than me you know.

MS Is he ?

Someone from the audience shouts out, 'he's a cunt', which gets a laugh.

MS Didn't you say about his autobiography that it was 'middle class propaganda'?

MES Who said that?

MS Didn't you say that?

MES I've never read it.

MS Have you not?

MES No.

Get's a big laugh.

MS Well I misread that then.

MES I have this problem with people going round pretending to be me.

MS Apparently there's someone on FaceBook.

MES I know, yeah.

MS Maybe it was him then.

MES I track them down in the end. It just takes a year or two.

MS Let's talk about your autobiography.

MES Renegade, yeah.

MS You say in your book that you want it to be 'Mein Kampf for the Hollyoaks generation', it's a terrific aphorism, but what does it mean?

MES I never said that.

Get's a huge laugh. Someone shouts, 'liar'.

MS It's in the book.

MES What you've got to remember right is that the ghost writer, he's a good kid and he meant well, but it happens a lot to me this, the more I get to know people, the more they try and be like me. Why I don't know but, it's like when you see those fellas who write about Cromwell and they've got Oliver Cromwell hair and all that.

MS So he said that, not you ?

MES He was possessed by my spirit. There's nothing you can do about it because if you worry about it you end up going mad.

MS I'm not sure that answers the question but...

MES Mein Kampf – as if I'd say that ? Mein Kampf ? [laughs at the absurdity of it]. One day with him I was looking through this bag and I came across these lyrics and I thought who's wrote that ? Some kind of weirdo ? Then I realised it was me.

gets big laugh.

MS I read somewhere that you wanted to set the record straight with this book. That's understandable. A lot has been written about you that's unauthorised or inaccurate. What were the main things you wanted to set straight then?

MES I wanted it to be more a sort of cheap crime novel and one of those footballer's biographies, I always thought they were very funny. So a cheap crime novel with a footballer's thing. I wanted to do it like, 'I remember my first gig 1979' but it got out of hand because the publishers who did football biographies like Ian Wright wanted to do it but then Penguin stepped in.

MS So did that spoil your plans ?

MES No, it was better.

MS Forgive me Mark, but in that case, I think the book is very far away from your intention. You wanted it to be a list of the best hotels and the best drinks didn't you ?

MES Who told you that ?

Big laugh.

MS You told me... Now the opening chapter, talking about setting the record straight, the American tour in 2006 with Ben, Steve and Spencer – for those who've not read the book, do you want to just explain what happened on that tour?

MES Well I sat down and told them that there was going to be two or three months away from home. Very typical Manc musicians. No problem, no problem. They all sort of cracked up after a few weeks. People seem to crack about three weeks. People tend to crack up when they're around me.

MS Why is that ?

MES I don't know.

MS Do you think you put them under pressure ?

MES Well, I don't get on very well with musicians.

MS That comes across, why do you think that is ?

MES I just thought it would be a very interesting read really. Things don't change with the music business or with the literary business or the acting business. There's a lot of arse lickers. They say things to your face... I'm very lucky in a way, touch wood, I can detect that. They bear me no grudge. I wanted to call the book, 'The Two Year Gap'. People seem to realise after two years, what they've done wrong and they come back.

MS Ok, well I'll tell you something else I enjoyed about the book Mark was the early anecdotes about your childhood. My favourite is a game you played with your sisters called Japanese Prison Camp – can you just explain what that was?

MES I always had to babysit four or five girls. I was the oldest child. My parents were working, it was the only solution. So I used to say you can't go out till yer mam and dad get back. Then I used to go out. They didn't have babysitters in them days.

MS But it's almost like the first Fall group. The Fall in embryo, because that's how you rehearse isn't it ?

MES Don't get clever.

Big laugh.

MS Have your sisters forgiven you for that game.

MES Oh yeah.

MS No lasting traumas ?

MES Well, they are married to Hell's Angels [he laughs at the irony of this].

MS They got off lightly then... I tell you what else interested me in the book. You say that when you were 12 you couldn't stand music. That you hated it. And you say later that when you left school you just wanted to sign on get a flat, take drugs, and avoid work. But then two years later –

MES I haven't read these bits.

Big laugh.

MS Well two years later you've got a vision to put primitive music with intelligent lyrics. In other words you had a strong vision of what you wanted The Fall to be. What happened in between to change you?

MES My vision was to leave the house as quick as possible. Which is probably unusual for you innit ?

MS What is ?

MES Leaving the house ?

Gets a big laugh.

MS Well, yeah.

MES No, my ambition was to leave the house because it was too crowded.

MS But it is a big gap though to say you hated music and then to have that vision.

MES It is the ironical thing but that's what kept me going on. I never thought rock music was of the quality I wanted it to be.

MS You say about your own writing that you get very frustrated with yourself if you've not written on a particular day. You also say that you find it hard to motivate yourself sometimes, as a writer. What type of writer are you? I mean, do you sit down at a desk for say 3 hours a day, or are you more sporadic?

MES Yeah, I write every day. Yeah. But a lot of it is rubbish. I'm a very serious self-editor.

MS I think a lot of people think of you in terms of a beat writer, very spontaneous, valuing the rough hewness of something, getting it out as a first draft, but I guess you're a more disciplined writer than that. Do you go through a lot of drafts ?

MES I think there's a bit of a disease in English writing. If it's a really thick book, it's good, which is strange. What I found, doing that book is that it's a lot tougher than doing a record. A record can be a pain in the arse, especially in the studio, especially the musicians, but a book, it goes on for ages and the end product isn't particularly good. I don't think there are really any smashing British films or good British books.

MS Are you still as avid a reader as you once were?

MES Very much so, yeah.

MS What have you read that's good recently.

MES I think it's a bit sad when you have to start reading Evelyn Waugh and all that crap. You know what I mean, go back to Raymond Chandler just to... Cos I do like reading.

MS Ok, well let's go to the formative moment, of seeing The Sex Pistols at the Lesser Free Trade Hall in 1976, and thinking, I'm not as bad as that. But if you hadn't seen the Sex Pistols, do you think you would have formed The Fall?

MES I had a group from 76 anyway. I just read poetry and played guitar. That's how it came about. We used to have poetry readings with the mental nurses.

MS This is Prestwich Hospital ?

MES Yeah.

MS Which is now a garage or something.

MES Tesco.

MS I worked there many years ago.

MES Where ?

MS Prestwich Hospital.

MES Did you ?

MS Yeah, as a care assistant. They had cats in the cellar.

MES Not nurses ?

MS No it was run by cats.

MES Funny you should say that, because when I lived opposite it, I found the patients more sane than the fucking staff. Started a lot of our songs off, you know, Psycho-Mafia, stuff like that.

MS And that song was based on those people ?

MES Sort of, yeah.

MS I used to take them to the pub on a Sunday, some of the patients. The Church pub. And punters used to get confused as to who were the nurses and who were the patients.

MES It happened all the time, yeah. The nurses used to sit down cross legged listening to Pink Floyd and they used to attack me because I didn't want to listen to it.

MS The cheek of it... I suppose what I'm saying with the Sex Pistols, a lot of your songs, are more like short stories. There's a narrative and they're peopled by intriguing characters and unusual points of view. In other words, there's a literary quality about them. What would you be doing now then, if the Fall had never happened do you think? Would you be writing short stories, plays, novels, films?

MES I've thought about this, master of all trades, I don't think it works really.

MS Do you think you were destined to be in The Fall then ?

MES Yeah, I do, yeah. People say I'm a control freak...

MS But what you do, it's collaborative, you can't control all those elements.

MES I agree.

MS You say in the book that The Fall are about the present, and that's it.

MES Yeah, I wanted it to be topical but not dated. So that in years to come it would still mean something. I mean all that stuff you were playing from 1982, a lot of people younger than you can relate to it, but at the time we were scum. What you say about Johnny Rotten, we couldn't get work because some of us had long hair, all this crap, and we didn't play heavy metal so I don't really empathise with what your saying, because you were only ten or something.

MS Well, I discovered The Fall when I was eighteen, 1989.

MES: I know, I've got the letter.

MS [To the audience] he's brought the letter with him.

MES: [Singing] I was walking down the street and I went past the venue and I heard this thumping...

Audience in uproar.

...sorry I shouldn't have done that.

MS It's alright Mark. It was The Venue next to The Hacienda.

MES Was it.

MS Your sister was in there in fact.

MES [To the audience] so he's nineteen and he walks past a club.

MS What's wrong with that?

MES: Nothing.

MS: Good... Now you've written about the look-back bores, people who are unduly obsessed with the past. There seems to be a lot of it about at the moment. Bands getting back together. You wrote Reformation –

MES Reformation was about the reformation of The Fall because I keep having to do it, it doesn't matter how young or old the musicians are it's just something that I have to keep doing.

MS It's why bands fall apart though, if you don't do that.

I didn't catch what MES said here.

MS I like what you say about writing about place in the book you say that writing about Prestwich is just as valid as Dante writing about his inferno. That's an interesting comparison...

MES The ghost writer wrote that.

Big laugh.

Dante?

MS But you write about place often in your work don't you but you're not a realist writer even though your work is firmly rooted in your environment. There's a strong fantasy element. I'm thinking of a song like 'What about Us'. Which seems to be about an East German rabbit that comes to Manchester as an immigrant and is happy until the

day it finds out that Harold Shipman has been giving out drugs to old ladies. Every time I hear that song it makes me laugh. But is it just a comedy song or do you mean something more by it?

MES No, it's true.

MS Is it satire ?

MES No, a lot of these Eastern European fellas you meet are grossly disappointed. That's why they're plumbers. They're crushed.

MS So what's the rabbit got to do with it then ?

MES What do you mean, what's the rabbit got to do with it ?

MS You wrote it, I'm just saying what's there.

MES Did you actually think it was about a rabbit ?

Gets a huge laugh.

MS You've spoilt it for me now Mark.

MES You thought it was a rabbit ?

Another huge laugh.

MES East German, drug dealer, Shipman –

MS Well, yeah, I know who Shipman was.

MES Not Shipman, that's the doctor. The main character is an East German.

MS Who comes over to Manchester –

MES Not Manchester, why Manchester ?

MS Well, north Britain. Quite likes it, then finds out Harold Shipman –

MES That he can get drugs from his surgery.

MS And the moral of the story is ?

MES I don't know.

Big laugh.

He feels disappointed.

MS He does feel disappointed – I feel for that rabbit.

MES Did you actually think he was a rabbit ?

MS I did Mark, yeah.

MES shakes his head in pity and disbelief.

Big laugh.

MS The writer who seems to have had the biggest influence on you from Dragnet onwards really, you quote Blake in Dragnet, 'I must create a new regime or be enslaved by another man's'

MES Is this from the book ?

MS No, it's from Dragnet. And then on a more recent album, The Unutterable, you have a song all about William Blake. What makes him so important as an artist to you ?

MES I like his writing more than his art.

MS I'm a big fan myself. He writes in aphorisms and sometimes you write in that mode and you like Nietzsche as well, is that right ?

MES Most of his stuff.

MS And it's that quality again, of aphorisms.

MES Blake wrote things that people didn't really understand. I don't understand a lot of it. He said, '200 years from the day I die the selfish smiling fool and the selfish frowning fool will both be thought to be wise...' 200 years from my death. And that is incredible, for someone to write that. Think about it.

MS He's a visionary writer, at least that's one way of describing him.

MES But he was writing during the Napoleonic wars. He was beaten up by a bloke from Waterloo... It's still relevant today.

MS What about contemporary lyricists then. It's always been the case I think that lots of lyricists don't really bother. Oasis and Coldplay just seem to be interested in finding words that rhyme. Do you think there are good contemporary lyricists out there ? Are there any people you're interested in ?

MES I don't know really.

Very long pause.

MS I mean, for example, I like a lyricist called Nigel Blackwell. Have you heard of him ? Half Man Half Biscuit ?

MES I haven't no. I don't really keep up.

MS So are there no contemporary lyricists you like ?

MES Yeah, there are some good ones.

MS You say in the book that Bob Dylan can't write for toffee. Is that a joke or what ?

MES No, it's not. I wasn't criticising him. To me Dylan is bible.

MS There's a lot of religious imagery in there.

MES That's right. But it's disguised as deadbeat. That's the only thing I find offensive.

MS Because he's another writer who uses aphorisms.

MES That's right, he gets them from the old testament. If you think about it. I'm the sort of person who looks at things like that. Don't think I don't enjoy something like this [the event] because I do. Because people in the music business just think I'm off my nut. You know what I think, there's a lot of pseudo-poetry. People who just get rhymes out of books. I don't think that's poetry at all. That's the problem.

MS Well, I still think that's the problem with groups like Coldplay and Oasis.

MES Why ?

MS I just think finding words that rhyme isn't –

MES How do you know that ? You don't know that. Maybe that's how their brains are.

Gets a laugh.

MS Well, yeah, I'm sure that's the case.

Gets a laugh.

Is there anything missing out of the book that you wish you'd included.

MES There's loads of stuff, but I haven't got time.

MS You left stuff out about Tony Wilson, out of respect for the family.

MES I left a lot of stuff out.

MS Has enough time passed now ? Is it fair to talk about it ?

MES The main thing is, I'm just glad people enjoyed it.

MS It's had good reviews.

MES That's not the main thing. I wouldn't like to live in the book world. The book's coming out May, then it's coming out in November. Then it's coming out June. It's understandable, why there aren't a lot of good writers. If you relied on that, you'd be starving to death.

MS There's too much stuff being published for starters, that's not of sufficient merit.

MES Well, I agree with you on that.

MS We're coming to the end of this part of the evening and we're going to open it up to the audience but I just thought I'd show you another clip.

MES Oh I, what's this ?

Big laugh.

MS Wait and see.

The sequence from Ideal is played where MES plays Jesus Christ.

MS It's a great clip that Mark, how did it come about ?

MES The main thing about Ideal is, it was supposed to be about drug dealers and stuff, and they made that character up –

MS The reason I showed that was for a serious point.

MES What's that ?

MS Well –

MES It's a strange thing. Most of the film scripts I get given, I just get rid of about 90% of the script. Like 24 Hour People, I was in there for 9 pages. By the time I got through with it, I just said, 'Hello'.

Big laugh.

'Tony can you get us a key.'

MS What do you think about Tony incidentally...

MES To get back to the question. I said I'd do it because I used to know people vaguely like that. I get offered a lot of films but by the time I get through with it... Where some people tend to write more for themselves –

MS You right less.

MES Yeah.

MS The reason why I showed it is simply this, have you read the book The Fallen by Dave Simpson ?

MES No, I've seen bits of it.

MS He seems to want to put you across as a David Koresh-style cult leader.

MES Do you get that impression ?

MS Yeah, to a certain extent... [to audience] actually, is he here tonight ?

Audience shouts out, 'he wouldn't dare'.

Well, maybe he's not then. But there's a lot of it about, the deification of rock stars. Bono thinks he's the second coming.

MES What's that got to do with me ?

MS Well, if people keep saying something about you, is there a temptation to believe the hype ?

MES Well the thing about Fallen, the thing about books, you've got no control over them. It's not like records, slap them down, by fair means or foul. What made me laugh was the amount of time and energy he spent doing that.

MS I think he cracked up towards the end.

MES They always do.

MS He blames you I think.

MES Of course he does. They always do. Same with producers. It happened last week.

MS What happened last week ?

MES Engineers crack up. I don't know what it is. But the first time I met that fella [Dave Simpson], he was working for The Guardian, I got him drunk, which is an old trick, and he's asking me all these questions about 1982, and I said, yeah, we've got a new LP out called Reformation, have you not heard it ? And he said, yes I have, but what about when you said in 1983 – a bit like you really.

Gets a laugh.

And this went on for an hour or two, then he started crying.

Gets a big laugh.

After four pints. He said that he'd been given a contract. If he could get the dirty on me he'd get his office back which he'd lost.

MS And that was the deal was it ?

MES Yeah, if he got the dirty on me... So I got into a taxi and I said 'see you later' and he ran up to the taxi and said, 'I'm going to ruin you' and all this. And I said, 'go back to Toplip' or where ever it is he comes from, and I thought that would be the end of it.

MS Well, you thought wrong then.

MES Well, it's interesting, I know that.

MS Ok, well I think we should open it out to the audience. Now, I think you know, when this event was originally planned, I put something on one of the Fall websites for fans to send questions in, which they did. I have to be honest, most of them were mad. I

wish I'd brought it with me but the strangest one was something like, 'can you ask Mark where he gets his hair cut, how much he pays for his haircut, what he asks for when he gets his hair cut, and what he talks to the barber about.'

MES I was going to ask you that.

Gets a big laugh.

MS I do it myself Mark... Right, the first question, Chris Goodhead.

Chris Alright Mark. My question is, do you believe in God and if so, is he a Fall fan ?

MES I can't see where you are. Where are you ? Do I believe in God ? Yeah.

MS Why did you ask the question incidentally ?

Chris I wanted to win a free ticket.

Gets a laugh.

MS This next one is a question from Peter Lazell but he's not here so I'll ask it. 'Mark, some lyrics appear to be inspired by dreams. Some authors (eg. Clive Barker) have claimed to keep a notebook at the bedside so as to be able to quickly note anything vivid on waking. Is this a technique/method you have ever used? A no or yes will suffice but would appreciate detail! Regards Peter.' Do you do that? Do you have vivid dreams?

MES Do you ?

MS I do yeah.

MES What kind of dreams do you have?

MS Well, I had a dream the other night that there was a civil war in a South American country and there were two tribes : The Dimblebys and the McGanns –

MES The brothers off the telly ?

MS Yeah, they were genetically modified.

MES I think you've got a problem.

Gets a huge laugh.

What country in South America ? Bolivia ?

MS Somewhere like that. It was a dream. It was an invented country.

MES An invented country ?

Big laugh. MES shakes his head.

MES I have the usual dreams. You know the ones, where you're going to school. Or going to a show and it's been cancelled.

MS I have dreams like that.

Gets a big laugh [Mark cancelled the first literary gig arranged in March as he had broken his hip].

MS You must dream about being on stage a lot. Does that happen ?

MES Not really no.

MS Do you still get just as big a buzz being on stage ?

MES Yeah I do. But only because you can spend two months in a recording studio, then you get it in ten minutes on stage. Even if the audience is walking out. [audience laugh] I feel sorry for groups that do the same set all the time. I don't know how they do it. It must be a lot of physical and mental strain.

MS This next question is from Rik Neace in Chicago, a lot of the questions came from America. You must have a big fan base there. When you tour America, do you notice that?

MES Yeah, there's a big following.

MS Anyway, this is from Rik and he asks, 'what is the meaning or idea behind the album title, 'Imperial Wax Solvent'?'

MES I did Reformation, and I did Fall Heads Roll, and the album before that, and I wanted something that would glue it altogether, the fourth LP of the tryptych.

Couldn't here the rest of the answer here.

MS Ok, next question is from Max Cole, Loveland, Ohio, 'Hello Michael, I'm a huge fan from the states... seen the Fall 3 times here and warmed up for them in the early 80's and almost got in a fight with the drummer –

MES This is why the internet should be closed down.

Gets a laugh.

There should be a cull every 5 or 7 years.

MS Well, this is the question. If Albert Camus had never been... what would the band's name be?

MES A lot of these people, they're just repressed Gang of Four, like yourself probably. You know, 'I remember 1985'. They're clogging the net up. There are people who are genuinely interested in The Fall. I don't read it often but I think it's a bad thing.

MS But isn't that a valid question?

MES What?

MS To want to know what you would have been called if not The Fall? [MES mumbles something – I'm not going to get an answer] Ok, well let's open it up to the audience. Any questions out there?

AUD How did you write Elasticman?

Gets a big laugh.

MES I hear what you're saying. It's a joke. I appreciate the joke.

MS Ok, good. Has anyone got a question they want an answer to ?

AUD Do you ever worry about becoming a national treasure ? Like Tony Benn 30 years ago, everyone hated him.

AUD I wish you were my granddad.

Gets a big laugh.

MS There you go, he wishes you were his granddad. I'd be very careful Mark.

MES I get that a lot as well. I get fellas who pretend that I'm their father. Sorry, no, I wouldn't want to be no.

AUD Do you not feel that's already happening.

MES Maybe a bit too much, yeah. What's your name ?

AUD Dave.

MES Hello Dave, I know what you're saying but I try and gaurd against it.

DAVE I've been a Fall fan for donkey's years. Someone gave me Dragnet and Live at the Witch Trials years ago and I thought, what's this weird shit, then gradually I came to love it. Don't get me wrong, I still think you're ace, but these days you get mentioned on Radio 4 and you never did years ago.

MES It's the last thing I want.

MS That's true though isn't it. Radio 4, the broadsheets.

MES Yeah, yeah. 12 years ago we couldn't even get a show. It's a very weird thing. I find that when times are hard people start getting more interested in The Fall.

MS So now is a good time for you, in a recession.

MES [Laughing] half of my mates think that the credit crunch is a new type of snack bar.

Gets a laugh.

MS Ok, can we have another question.

AUD Mark, those brown bottles...

Tape is inaudable after this point. The final question was something like, 'have you ever wanted to quit?' To which he answered, 'yeah, some time in the 90s'.