

5 MARCH 1957 - 24 JANUARY 2018

MARK E SMITH

*“When I’m dead and gone
My vibrations will live on
In vibes on vinyl through the years
People will dance to my waves.”*

Psykick Dance Hall by The Fall, 1979

In 1988, Mark E Smith of The Fall made a request. On his song *New Big Prinz* he implored listeners repeatedly to “check the record, check the record, check the guy’s track record.” The song was a reboot of *Hip Priest*, which his band had released in 1982, and Smith, a decade into his career, felt that he was still “not appreciated.” And so, on the occasion of his passing aged 60 from causes as yet to be revealed, we should afford him that basic courtesy.

The bald facts of his career are alone striking: 31 studio albums in 39 years, plus 30-odd live albums, several LPs that mixed live tracks with studio work, a ballet, hundreds of live dates across the globe, and the employment of dozens of young men and women from the North West (and beyond) in The Fall, the greatest group of their generation. Possibly ever.

And those are just the details. That’s merely the skin scraped from the surface. Get into the forensic detail of Smith’s career and soon you are asking questions not just about your own achievements in life, but the careers of all your other favourite artists. Smith started The Fall in 1977 in Manchester as a teenager with four friends, his mission, as stated to Q in 2015, to tether “primitive

music to intelligent lyrics” and one he remained steadfastly loyal to throughout. As a teen during the punk years, he took on board the DIY ethics of that youth explosion, but not much else. He instead admired The Velvet Underground, The Stooges and Can, voyagers between rock’s darker stars who’d struggled for recognition during their careers, but exerted increasing influence with time. Smith wanted to form a group that could compete on those terms. He died having recorded more music than all three of those acts combined, with a group whose singularity and legend can be filed on that top shelf alongside his teenage idols. He succeeded.

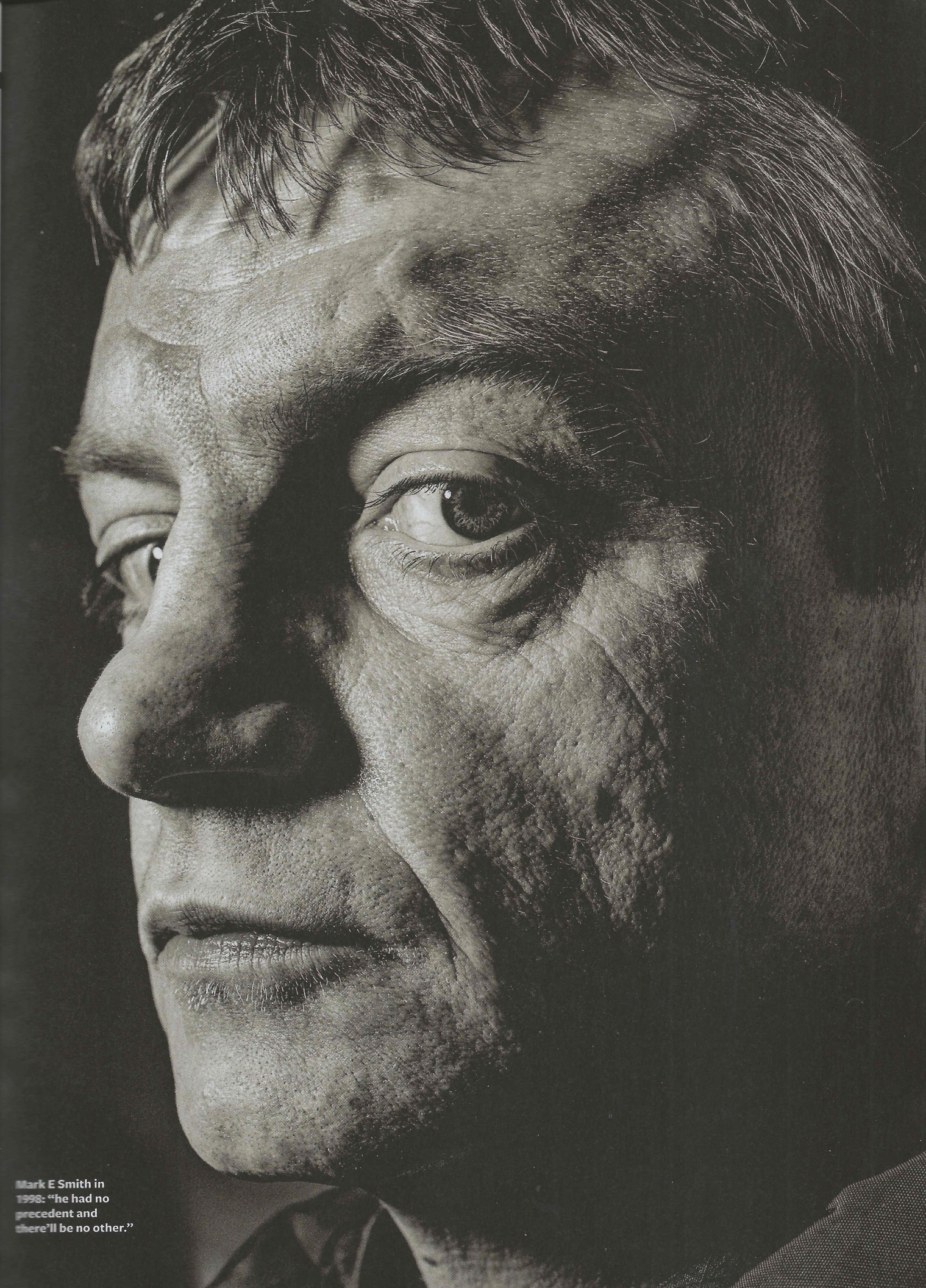
Smith’s genius was in his mastery of language and originality of thought. He looked at the world differently to all other musicians, to most people too, and thus he coined a new musical lexicon that was misanthropic, insightful on a near-psychic level, often hilarious, and full of dialect that had until that point been refused entry to rock music. He did not write pop songs about chocolate and girls. He wrote about hobgoblins and gremlins, hooligans and hauliers. He wrote about Walt Disney and iPhones. He wrote about the church, about

the masons, about Pete Tong. He wrote with supernatural power about the mundane, and with dead-eyed authority about the other-worldly. He was the first and last name in his own personal rock family tree. He had no precedent and there’ll be no other.

It is, however, very hard to write about the death of your favourite singer and songwriter without making it personal. So be it. Mark E Smith’s greeting to me when I nervously interviewed him for the first time for a fanzine in 1991 deserves a wider audience. “Kessler?” Smith repeated slowly, rolling my surname around his jowls. “Jew or Nazi?” It’s an anecdote that’s worked as an ice-breaker with many of my subsequent interviewees, and served my father (a Jewish refugee from Nazi Austria) well at his weekly poker game too.

But it’s something else that Smith said to me during our last encounter, in 2015, over the course of a long afternoon in a Manchester pub for an interview with Q, that’s lingered with me in the days since his death.

I’d asked him if he thought about his legacy when he died and he’d bristled. “I’ve already got posterity,” he said. “There’s always some c**t who wants to ask me about a masterpiece I made in 1982.” But that job, he added, was not his. He only ever looked forward. Everyone else was welcome to check his track record. **TED KESSLER**



Mark E Smith in 1998: "he had no precedent and there'll be no other."



Mark E Smith,
Bury, 1984.

The Hip Priest: An Appreciation

Illustrious fans, friends and former colleagues remember the music The Fall gave them and the times they shared with **Mark E Smith**.

“He could be a ct, but he was never a wanker.”**

John Cooper Clarke, poet

“Mark was from the same area of Manchester [Broughton] as me, his mum worked in the post office. I’d known him for years so I was a fan right from the start.

“The NME would often print the lyrics to punk songs, so Mark’s were there in black and white. You could see what an original approach he had. It was very poetical. He never put it on a plate for you. He avoided the obviously political in a masterful way. It seemed to be critical and oppositional, but avoided any ideological clichés. We were always bumping into each other. We never spoke about work, it was usually about

mutual pals or what was happening in Manchester, places that had been knocked down I might be interested to know about, for instance. The number of people who view the world through the prism of The Fall is remarkable. **Last Orders** (1978) off Short Circuit, I love. Last orders – those two words must have haunted Smithy like a nightmare!

“I’ve written an obituary for Mark just for Q: ‘It has been said that he could be a c**t, but he was never a wanker.’ There’s a big difference. Everyone can be a c**t from time to time but a wanker is a wanker, you can’t do anything about it.”

Poets’ corner:
John Cooper Clarke
and Smith in 2008.



“You just don’t hear words like that any more.”

**Nicky Wire, bassist,
Manic Street Preachers**



“More than anything it was his lyrics, his words were just extraordinary. He invented his own language, fused so many references...

it was really dense at times.

“You wouldn’t think to look at him that his mind was working in such an amazing way. It’s the glory of that era, really. You could have the most ordinary-looking, working-class person coming up with these amazing stories and words. He was one of our greatest lyricists, you just don’t hear words like that any more.

“I’d listen to **Couldn’t Get Ahead** (1985) an awful lot, I love that song, it’s the best phrase ever for life as you approach 50. ‘You just cannot get ahead! No matter what you do!’ James always used to play **Industrial Estate** (1979) when we were 15, he’d just be shouting, ‘Industrial estate! Industrial estate!’ A brilliantly raw-sounding band.

“There’s a list going round that he did in 1987, ins and outs of what he loved and hated. I don’t know if you could get away with it now. On the ‘outs’ it’s stuff like ‘all Welsh bands’, ‘France’ brackets ‘permanent’, ‘brown bread with bits in’. What’s ‘in’? He’s got ‘white bread’, ‘Wakefield?... Just brilliant, I laughed out loud. It was 1987 so he wasn’t referring to us yet, I guess he was raging against... The Alarm.”



“Mark gave me six months’ paid leave, because my lad was poorly.”

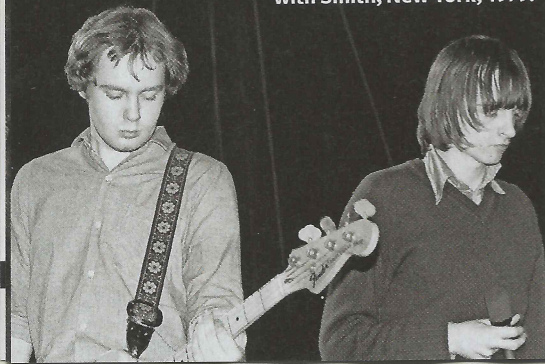
Steve Hanley, Fall bassist, 1979-1998

“The first time I met Mark was in the pub before going to see The Passage at Band On The Wall in Manchester in 1978. The original Fall bass player, Tony Friel, had already left to join The Passage – so you could see the signs were there already. Mark didn’t have a reputation for being difficult to work with back then, we got on really well and became friends. We had a lot in common in the music and bands we liked. To be honest, it looked a bit bad for me with the rest of the band members because he never really gave me a hard time, apart from at the end. The other band members would go to him, ‘But you never shout at Steve!’ When I left the band in 1984 to have my first child, Mark gave me six months’ paid leave, because my lad was poorly. The Mark of reputation wouldn’t have kept that position open for me, but he did. It’s been unbelievable the reaction to [Smith’s death]. Sure, he was difficult, but I’ve been shocked with just how much real affection for him is out there. There’s been so many people, not just bands, but journalists, comedians and artists who seem to have been influenced by The Fall.

“Picking one favourite Fall song is impossible. I was a fan of the band before I joined, so I’ll choose something I’m not on – either *Stepping Out* (1977) or *Psycho Mafia* (1977). Actually, I heard *Venice With The Girls* (2015) recently and that’s a great song. A track I did play on that I really like is *Hey! Luciani* (1986).

“Mark was complicated, to say the least. But my lasting memory of him is just seeing him sitting in the pub. That was his favourite hobby and he did it a lot. Somebody said to me, ‘It wouldn’t be fair on the rest of us if he’d lived to 85 after the way he lived.’ But it’s sad, very sad.”

Ace of bass: Steve Hanley with Smith, New York, 1979.



“He was a really funny fella”: Smith with Shaun Ryder and Bez, 2005 (five years before Shaun says they first met).

“We got on like a house on fire.”

Shaun Ryder, singer, Happy Mondays

“At the Hacienda there was an indie night on a Thursday and you’d get all these musicians coming in, complaining about Mark E Smith. He’d either thrown a pint pot at their head or he’d hit them with a walking stick or he’d sacked them or he’d taken a load of whizz and sat there for hours shouting at them. It was a constant slugging. But the first time I actually met him was with Gorillaz at Glastonbury in 2010. I thought he was going to be difficult but we got on like a fucking house on fire. He was a really funny fella. After that we used to bump into each other now and then and have

a drink and just got on really well. We both have a similar sense of humour. Growing up, I wasn’t really a big Fall fan; I was listening to different music and was on a totally different trip. *There’s A Ghost In My House* (1987) was the first Fall song I heard and I thought it was a great cover. As a lyricist I’d hear about the stuff Mark was writing about – if you’re writing songs about bingo callers and Australian tourists in Munich you can’t be going wrong. I’m really surprised he got to 60; I thought we would have lost him in 2010. I’m sure they say the same thing about me.”

“My brother threw a drink over him.”

Lias Saudi, singer, Fat White Family

“I went through a phase where I was listening to The Fall non-stop, everything else just seemed mundane. He’s got a real prescience with language, it just becomes another thing to play with. Making sense out of what should be complete abstraction and then following it through to the end. *Fantastic Life* (1983) is probably my favourite song. It’s nice to hear misanthropy distilled in such fine style. It makes all the dog shit feel almost worthwhile. He claimed he never heard our song *I Am Mark E Smith*, but I find that hard to believe!

“We had a run-in with him at Glastonbury. He was on after us and was sat at a table with a bottle of Champagne and my little brother [Nathan, Fat White

Family keyboard player] approached him and said, ‘Mark, can I have some of your Champagne?’ Mark poured it for him, my brother sat down and Mark tossed it in his face. I was star-struck just seeing the guy, but watching him throw Champagne in my brother’s face was the most surreal thing ever. Because he’d done it in front of everybody Mark said, ‘I’m sorry, do you want a glass of whisky?’ My brother picks up the whisky and throws it back in his face. There was this massive beef with The Fall and our crew, but we all sat down and had a drink after. My mum was there and chastised Mark for his bad manners; she didn’t have a fucking clue who he was. When he went onstage there was a story circulating that he’d pissed himself, but it was because he’d had a drink thrown over him. It was all Nathan’s fault. Mark was backstage demanding new trousers. It was the weirdest possible way to meet your idol.”



Lias Saudi: “star-struck.”

“He’d go on for hours about Panzer tanks.”

Vic Reeves, comedian

“ I was a Fall fan from day one. For me, it was the imagery within the songs. If you take **Wings** (1983), for instance, it’s like looking at an abstract painting, which you pick out your own storylines from. One of my favourite tracks is **Garden** (1983), which is just packed with imagery. It’s like picking out a little portion of a Hieronymus Bosch painting – you can listen to tracks and hear things from 30 years ago and hear a bit of a lyric that you’d never noticed. I remember once at the Phoenix Festival I was backstage and Mark was lying on a dirty mattress round the back of his Portakabin and he said, ‘Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?’ He unfurled this piece of tin foil with some speed in it and said, ‘Would you like that in your tea?’ I declined.

“We became mates over the years. He was always very good company. We’d have lots of historical chats, which would end

enjoy a “historical chat” in 1991.



up being really quite absurd quite quickly. He’d go on for hours and hours about Panzer tanks, of which I knew very little. An evening down the pub with Mark would end up as a blur quite swiftly. It was Boddington’s and a whisky chaser, always. He’d always surprise you. The last time I was out with him he

delved into his carrier bag and fished out something that he’d been recording at the studio. I took it back and played it, there was a lot of scratching and sort of muffled talking on it. It was brilliant but I don’t think it was supposed to be a record.

“We had a fantastic chat about Coronation Street.”

Lawrence, Felt/Denim/Go-Kart Mozart



“ When I heard **Bingo Master’s Break Out** (1978) it was a revelation. There was no precedent for it in the history of music. Nick Gilbert, the first bass

player in Felt, wrote a letter to Mark asking about the meaning of the lyrics on *[second LP] Dragnet* and, without my knowledge, put a copy of *[debut Felt release] Index* in with it. Mark Smith wrote back and said, ‘Why don’t you come and support us?’ It was incredible. None of us had been on a stage. We played a 15-minute set and The Fall ran up to us en masse and said, ‘You were amazing!’ We were like, ‘Really? Wow!’

“If you caught Mark at a certain time he could be really friendly but sometimes he’d walk straight past you. One time we were in the back of a van on the way to The Marquee *[in London]* and had this fantastic chat about Coronation Street.

Soaps weren’t a very hip thing to name drop, but we both really liked them.

“**City Hobgoblins** (1980) is my favourite song of his. It was a short, beautiful little pop song which they weren’t known to do. It paints a picture in your head of being in a city but it’s got something very pagan about it as well. It’s such a great meeting of old England and modern England. In his lyrics, he has all these great ideas coming through. The gems that came through, the one-liners, were so good, that was part of the beauty of it, that was part of the mystery.

“Mark’s attitude was a massive inspiration to me to constantly change. People come up to me saying, ‘Why don’t you play old songs? and you think, ‘You’re just not getting it, we’re trying to do something different here.’ There’s not many people who are still trying to not rest on their back catalogue. There’s only a handful of us left and Mark Smith was one of them.”

“Mark E Smith may understand me more than I do.”

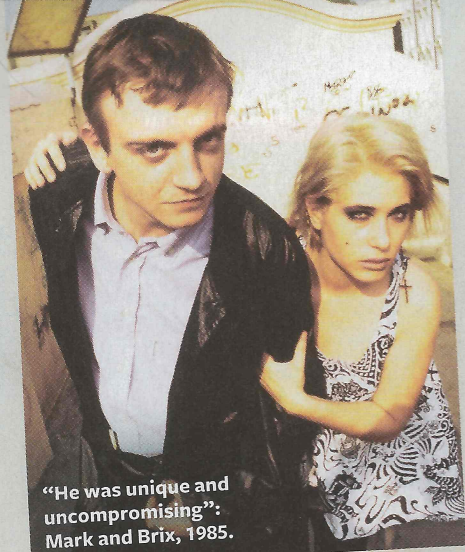
Damo Suzuki, singer, Can



“ When I heard there was a song called **I Am Damo Suzuki** (1985) I thought, ‘There must be another Damo Suzuki,’ When I heard

the song, I thought the imagination of *[Can song] Oh Yeah* was so strong in it. It’s a special feeling that someone wanted to connect with me.

“I met Mark around 1986. I was curious to know who wrote this song. One day, The Fall performed in Bonn so I went to see their show. Afterwards I talked to Mark and Brix in their hotel room until sun up. He was a young exciting guy, had respect for the man in front of him talking about old stories. I met him again in May 2005 in Lyon. He looked much older and dark. Still, he was so friendly. Mark E Smith may understand myself much more than I do.”



“He was unique and uncompromising”: Mark and Brix, 1985.

“He was creating something so far outside what anybody else was doing.”

Brix Smith Start (Smith's ex-wife), Fall guitarist, 1983-1989

“I always suspected that when he died people would finally realise how important Mark was as a true artist.

“I wasn't personally prepared for the onslaught of my grief, though. It was overwhelming and I felt horrendously sad because of the deep connection that we had. There are so many ways in which he changed my life. Even though in the last few years we didn't see each other, we didn't really communicate, the intensity of what we had made me very emotional. I still am. I'm really, really struggling.

“In terms of Mark's poetry and his lyrics, he's a genius. The social commentary going on in his words is unbelievable. He wasn't classically educated – he was super working class in every fibre of his body and the fiercest Mancunian I've ever known. But he read a lot. He was creating something so far outside what anybody else was doing. He was unique and uncompromising.

“I actually don't think The Fall's legacy can be calculated at this point because I think it's going to grow. I think The Fall are one of the most influential bands of all time. Mark was a pure, great artist who never wavered from his singular vision. He was so brave on every level.

“Mark stuck to his guns his whole life and went down fighting. Those pictures of him from his last show, being hoisted onto the stage in his wheelchair, singing for the last time with his broken body and his swollen face and in obvious pain and distress... It might've been uncomfortable to watch, but he still fucking did it, and that's the most rock'n'roll thing of all.”

“I devoured The Fall.”

Sharon Horgan, actress/writer



“I was introduced to Mark E Smith and The Fall by an angry boyfriend around 1989. I hadn't really listened to music like that before. I was more David Bowie, Kate Bush, Cocteau Twins, bit of folk and Irish trad, some basic punk. But hearing The Fall changed everything. It was the greatest gift angry boyfriend could have ever given me. I got heavily into them. Devoured them. Went to see them live whenever I could. Got a bit fed up once when he only played tracks from a brand-new album and didn't play any favourites. ‘What a bastard,’ I thought. But I still kept going to see them live.

“There's an excessive amount of great

Fall songs. It's too hard to pick one. I remember being so excited hearing **Hip Priest (1982)** on the *Silence Of The Lambs* soundtrack because that was a favourite for a long time. But then I went looking for something less dark. I get emotional thinking about The Fall and Mark. That snarly voice was sometimes gentler, vulnerably off-key. And so many gorgeous melodies. **Bill Is Dead (1990)** makes me sad/happy; **An Older Lover (1982)** makes me want to fuck; **Totally Wired (1980)** makes me want to dance in a field until it's light; **Dktr Faustus (1986)** makes me want to shout and hit a drum; **New Big Prinz (1988)** makes me feel all those things combined. You don't just listen to it, you feel it in your gut, it sinks into your organs through your skin. I'll never stop listening to that one.”

“Charming and honest, and a bit rude at the same time.”

Sarah Cracknell, singer, Saint Etienne

“I love **Choc-Stock (1979)**. In fact, **Bob [Stanley]**, **Pete [Wiggs]** and I loved it so much that we played it live with Saint Etienne in the early '90s, I think there's even a flexi-disc version floating around. The Fall's humour, independence, their less-than-obvious lyrical subject matter – and, eventually and unexpectedly, their endurance – has been a big inspiration for Saint Etienne since we first got together. Never stand still. Make each album different. Don't be afraid of losing fans if you do something different, because you'll always pick up new ones. Bob met Mark E Smith at a show we did, a few years back. He was standing at the bar afterwards, and Bob introduced himself and asked what Mark thought of the show. He said, ‘I didn't watch it, I'm only here for the late bar. But we should jam together some time!’ Charming and honest and a bit rude at the same time.”

Saint Etienne's Sarah Cracknell: “He was a big inspiration.”



“Mark could be hilariously funny.”

Paul Hanley, Fall drummer, 1980-1984



“I'll always be grateful to Mark and Kay [Carroll, former Fall manager and Smith's ex-girlfriend] for making me do my A-levels when I was in the band, though I wasn't happy about it at the time. As is obvious from his interviews and onstage banter, Mark could be hilariously funny, especially telling a story. Of course, it had to be on his terms. He was like most bosses in that respect – even when they're having a laugh it's always with the unspoken understanding that it's their joke. Because he was my boss, we were never really friends, but that was OK. I had massive respect for him when I was in the band, and though that was severely dented by the circumstances surrounding Steve's [Fall bassist, Paul's brother] departure, I still thought the way he kept the band moving forward was astonishing. My favourite Fall song that I'm on is the Peel version of **New Puritan (1980)**, because that's the song that got me the gig. If I had to pick one, **Bill Is Dead (1990)** would probably be my favourite Fall song. It's one of the few Fall songs you could call ‘lovely’ – it shows a side of Mark that rarely made it onto record.”

The Fall's final incarnation
(from left, Pete Greenway,
Keiron Melling, Smith,
Dave Spurr), 2017.



“He was the gaffer, we were the workers.”

The Fall's final line-up was its longest-serving. **Victoria Segal** finds them in shock, but remembering the good times.

When ill-health forced Mark E Smith to cancel a show in Bristol last November, The Fall's long-serving members knew things were bad.

“Mark never cancels gigs,” says drummer Keiron Melling, like bassist Dave Spurr and guitarist Pete Greenway still sometimes slipping into the present tense as they remember the man they worked with for a decade. “For him to cancel a gig, it really did bother him.” Yet despite recognising the situation's gravity, all believed Smith would rally. “He was always optimistic – he would always say he was on the mend every time we'd see him,” recalls Melling.

“I never thought he'd go,” says Spurr. “I thought he'd outlive me. We thought, ‘We'll do the gigs when he's better.’ Unfortunately, he didn't get better.”

Bedrock of The Fall's most stable line-up, the three have earned their place in the group's volatile history. They were hired via Smith's no-nonsense recruitment policy. Spurr was found playing in a “jam band in a pub” by a friend of Smith's; he had no idea who The Fall were. Greenway was promoted from a support band, while Melling got the call when a predecessor couldn't make a show.

“He was the gaffer, we were the workers,” says Melling. “That's how it felt it should be. I've worked in factories and that's how it works – you've got your boss, you do as you're told. And that's how it worked in The Fall.”

A business relationship at first, their bond grew. They were, in the final stages, “a really nice family” says Spurr. “It got to the point – especially when he broke his hip in 2009 and he was wheelchair-bound – he could see that we genuinely cared about him and wanted to

help him,” explains Greenway. “In the last couple of years, when he had trouble with his marriage or whatever, I think he realised who his real friends were and we became closer at that point.” All three's fondest Fall memories involve being sequestered in hotel rooms with Smith in the early hours, discussing ideas for “jazz explorations” or “rock operas”, faces hurting from laughing so much. “Mark was always at his best at that time,” says Greenway. “The years just came off him the earlier it got in the morning.”

The band were also his defenders. Smith – “not a very large gentleman” says Spurr – would, for example, tell a “seven-foot-tall bouncer” in Brooklyn to fuck off. “He couldn't care less, which was great. Well, not great when you were there but great afterwards. You always had to be ready for something.” Greenway was teased relentlessly for coming from Birmingham; sometimes the torture was subtler. “That was the bane of my life, getting in the car and Mark going ‘here you are, cock, just stick this on,’” laughs Melling. “It'd just be a wind-up – the Best Of Country LP, a four-CD collection. I've still got the CD that I pretended to lose. Now I don't feel like throwing it away.”

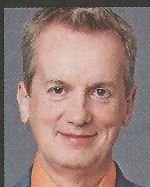
Yet they also recall Smith being nervous before shows, being “loving” to friends, paying support acts from his own pocket if “they deserved more”. Melling also wants to stress the importance of The Fall's fans to Smith. “I don't know if people realise how much the crowds and people who gave time to Mark meant to him. It was like an extra member of the band.”

The group remain, quietly his defenders. “He was very charismatic,” says Greenway, pondering how Smith has been discussed since his death, “but I'd like to see more on how he influenced people, the greatness of his songwriting and ideas, rather than the fact that he left his teeth in Badly Drawn Boy's car.”

“It's nice to know that he was loved,” says Spurr, “because he was loved by us.”

“Listening to other bands feels like drinking decaffeinated tea.”

Frank Skinner, comedian



“I was a late adopter of The Fall. It wasn't until 2004 when I bought 50,000 Fall Fans Can't Be Wrong. Four tracks in, I turned to my girlfriend and said, ‘This is the music I want to listen to for the rest of my life.’ You think that

sort of thing only happens when you're 17. I never ever missed a London Fall show. If they played Brighton or Oxford or the West Midlands, I would drive to watch them on my own. I got to interview Mark 10 years ago. He was an hour late and said, ‘How are you, Stewart?’ **Dr Bucks' Letter** (2000) off The Unutterable would be my favourite. It's a fucking masterpiece. It's this dark,

brutalist nightmare about a murderer in the 1950s, but then halfway through he starts reading out this interview from a magazine with Pete Tong, saying things like, ‘I never leave the house without my sunglasses.’ The single worst thing about being a Fall fan is that listening to other bands feels like drinking decaffeinated tea. There's The Fall, and then there's the rest.

For further tributes and a full Brax Smith Start interview, head to Qthemusic.com