

MARK E SMITH

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SARKY STREET POET IN LOVE-TUG RIDDLE!

**He's split up with his wife.
He's lost his record label.
He's spent 18 months in
solitary confinement.
But THE FALL's fatalistic
frontman is back with
another booze-fuelled
attack on ye olde corrupte
Englande.
Oh, and it's his round...**



Mark E Smith with Brix, in happier times before they split up...

The unlikely venue is a pub full of lunching suits on Shaftesbury Avenue, in the heart of London's theatreland. Mark E Smith, wearing one of history's greatest scowls, slouches at a table outside, nursing a bottle of Pils and a large Glenmorangie. There is no place in the pub for a 33-year-old Northern poet such as he. He gazes icily at the empty Perrier bottles cluttering a nearby table. When he said, Let's go for a pint, this isn't really what he had in mind.

A tramp weaves from table to table, hassling for money. "He looks like fuckin' Willie Nelson," laughs Smith. As the man finally zigzags over to the great leader of The Fall, Smith smirks in anticipation. "Are you going to give him owt?"

"Excuse me interrupting," says Willie Nelson. "But have either of you two lads got £284,000 on you? Only I want to buy one of them midget submarines before the shops close, and I ain't got no change."

Smith gives him a quid. He seems happy enough.

"Must be a fuckin' musician," mutters Smith into his beer.

Fifteen skint, fearless years into a career that knows no tramlines, The Fall have just released their latest triumphant attack on ye olde corrupte Englande. The LP is 'Shiftwork' (Select Album Of The Month for May) and Smith is of the immutable opinion that it's ten times better than anything they've ever put out before.

Long-term Fall fans had freaked out at the last round of UK gigs, the

first with the new slimmed-down four-piece. The best Fall ever, it was solemnly decreed. Now comes this new, unexpectedly personal look at the world from their man with the megaphone. It's still the mighty Fall, of course. Still the unique clash of the subversive and the surreal. Still a cool, cynical scything of the vines. Still a thrilling collision of poetic and primitive.

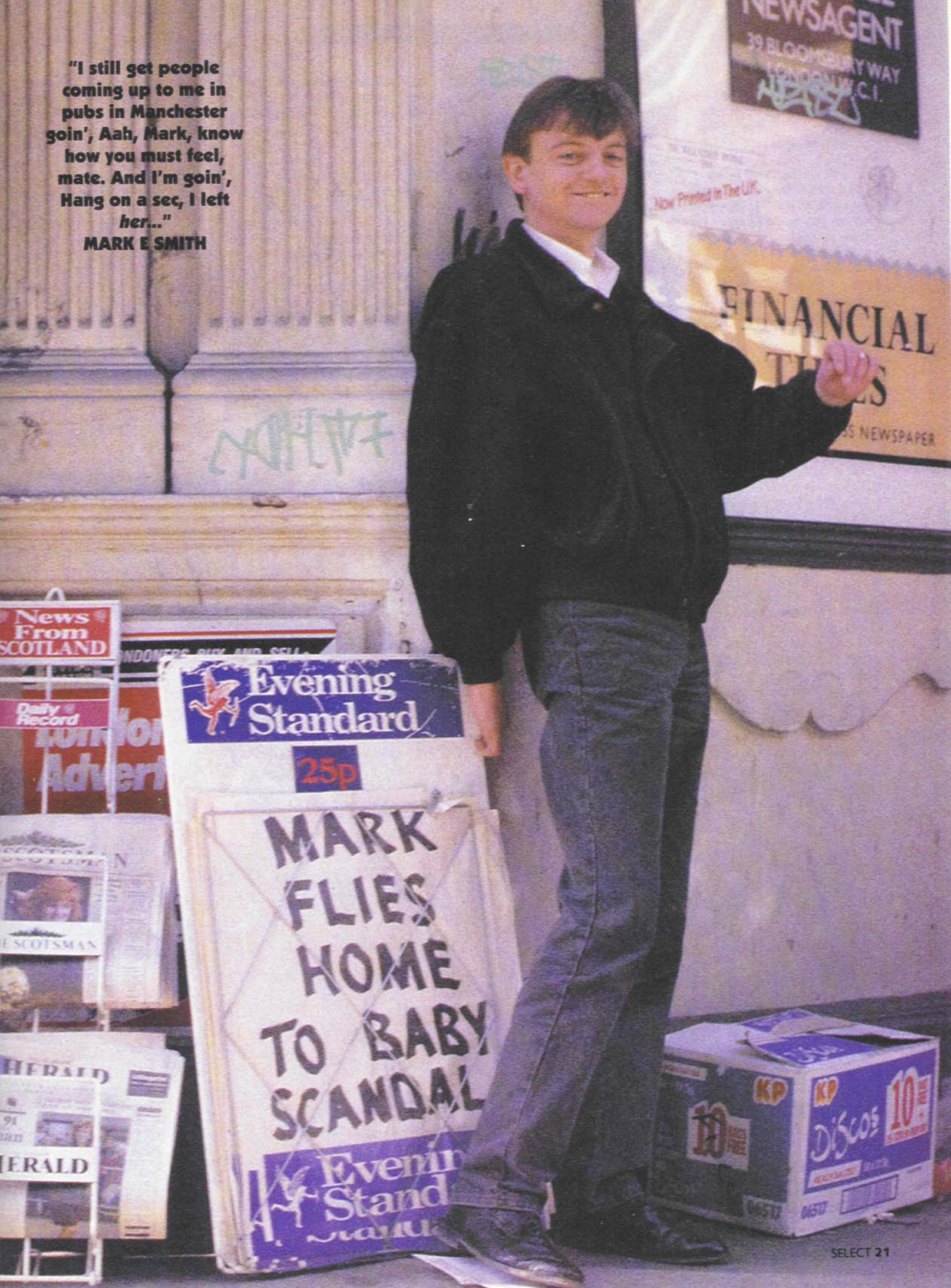
But what's new is the worldview. Mark Smith, after being plagued by doubts at the end of the '80s on shedding his wife, his city and various band members like so much snakeskin, finally manages to "get his shit together" (as he puts it) on 'Shiftwork', and extend a strong branch of communication.

He nods thoughtfully, squinting into the sun. The man is a tricky interview today. Financial pressures have just forced him to wind up his pet label, Cog Sinister, and every second utterance seethes with indignation about the music business. His mood throughout the day will veer from whiskey-fuelled good cheer through gloomy fatalism to stark melancholia – and back – several times.

"I get really fuckin' fed up sometimes," he says abruptly. "Basically, I'm in a business of fuckin' phonies and idiots. I was dead nervous about this LP and I was serious about it: if this doesn't work, I'm out. I mean that. I really did look at it that way. Like, when you've got huge debts and shit, and there's Manchester groups coming round your house looking through your windows to see what clothes you've got on...you just think, What the fuck am I bothering for?"

"I still get people coming up to me in pubs in Manchester goin', Aah, Mark, know how you must feel, mate. And I'm goin', Hang on a sec, I left her..."

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What else would you do? "I wouldn't mind being on the dole," he shrugs. "I wouldn't mind being on the buses. I don't give a shit, you know what I mean? Get my drift?"

His drift is punctuated by terse drags on a B&H, swigs of beer and sips of whiskey. He's in pretty good spirits, but you wouldn't guess it from the profanities that riddle his conversation and the faintly menacing way he keeps asking if you've got his drift.

"You gotta remember, young people today are complete fuckin' idiots," he says, with typical throwaway deadliness. "So the ones that are into The Fall tend to be very smart people. The Fall are more imperative than ever, really. Surprises me. I went to a club in Manchester the other night and I got *mobbed*. Couldn't believe it."

He reckons the gulf between The Fall and the rest of Manchester has never been bigger.

"The whole thing's gone to the dogs, if you ask me," he snorts. "They don't know what they're doing. There's no poets. They're all soft as shit. Fuckin' girls with skirts down to their ankles sitting cross-legged listening to Deep Purple. They're like their fuckin' mams and dads. Beards and shit, ha ha."

"It's good stimulus for me. Cos I've had to get my shit together, artistically, this last year. Not anything personal but *somebody's* got to have their shit together. Don't you think? Get my drift?"

But *'Shiftwork'* is personal, very personal and, in among the inevitable swipes and snarls at other bands, TV personalities and music biz toadies, this album is going to intrigue seasoned Smith-watchers with its shy songs about girls and its poignant visions of a man painfully reconciling himself to solitude.

"Yeah, it is very personal," he admits. "A bit *too* personal, actually. The title track's about a bloke who's on shiftwork and he splits up with his wife, like."

He must see the look of inquiry, because he adds, quickly, "It's not about me or owt. There's other songs on the LP are about me and the wife."

The wife – Brix, as was – is a touchy subject. Smith wants, and can't understand why he hasn't yet got, a divorce; he also wants folk to get hold of the right end of the stick.

"I still get people coming up to me in pubs in Manchester goin', Aah, Mark, know how you must feel, mate. And I'm goin', Hang on a sec, I left *her*. I left her in January 1989. But she was still in The Fall then. She didn't leave the band till that autumn, when she met her new bloke. But I'm not talkin' about that. That's nobody's fuckin' business but mine. I'm not saying owt. Fuckin' good luck to him, you know what I mean? That's all I'll say. Did me a fuckin' favour..."

We're at another pub now, quieter and more conducive to the

sort of slurred interrogation that comes with steady drinking. The tittle is bottles of Diamond White cider, two at a time, chased by large scotches, and the topic is 'Edinburgh Man', one of the loveliest songs The Fall have ever recorded. It's about Smith's year-long exile in Edinburgh, unloved and unknown, and it's full of the gruff sentiments of someone unused to showing his feelings in public.

"I really wanted to say it," he nods. "And I mean it, what I say. I was living up there in Edinburgh for a year and I was on me tod. I'd no fuckin' money, no fuckin' nowt, and no fucker wanted to know me. I spent 18 months on the words to that song, trying to get it right." It's a very emotional song.

"For sure. For sure."

He had gone there to escape the fallout from his marriage and the encroaching horrors of the Manchester scene. He rented a room, got some writing done and spent a year watching and drinking.

"I'm a Smith," he stresses. "I'm an observer, you know? I go everywhere and I sit at the back. I'm the guy at the back of the classroom. Always have been."

No one knows a lot about you.

"That's right. That's good."

It's easy enough to work out what pisses you off, what gets you riled. Not so easy to suss out what you like.

"Nobody ever asks me, you know, er..."

Well, we're asking.

"I..." he inhales deeply, and blows out his defence along with the cigarette smoke. "I'm a fuckin' singer and a songwriter, right? There's a lot of fuckin' shit in the media about what you like and what you don't like. What food you eat. What fuckin' films you like. Who cares? *I'm* not interested. You interested in what films Paul McCartney likes? What're you talkin' about..."

One of the finest songs on 'Shiftwork' is 'Idiot Joy Showland', a typically brilliant verbal incarceration of sundry young Mancunian candidates that even compares one band unfavourably

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to Freddie And The Dreamers. A laudable sentiment to be sure.

"Fuckin' great song, man," he enthuses. "Best song on the album by a mile. You name me *one* song that's better than that. You like that one, then? It's a good song, innit? Yeeaaaahhhh, go on, mate. Put it there."

Regrettably so. It's getting on for that you-and-me-against-the-world-pal moment. A mere five minutes later, an upstairs table at a Kensington pasta house is feeling the sting of B&H ash as Smith tries to make sense of the menu. His meal is not what he ordered, but he's far too drunk to remember what that might have been. There are no waitresses around to relay the grievance to. Not much food is going down his throat as a result. In fact, he's spitting it out all over the place – on the plate, on napkins, on the table, on the floor. He is very perturbed indeed.

"This is fuckin'..."

His arm reaches round his chair as if from habit, grabs his jacket and spins him down into the street. It wasn't what he ordered, get his drift? And Mark E Smith is gone, never coming back, haranguing waitresses and hailing cabs into the night. ■

Mark E Smith: a pillar of Manchester nightlife...

