

NEED TO KNOW

THE LEGEND OF  
**THE FALL**

THE RISE, FALL AND RISE OF MARK E SMITH AND THE FALL

Dig out a copy of the first independent charts from 1979 and it's all comic obscurities with names like Splodgednessabounds, The Vibrators and Lene Lovich. While such acts eventually got bored and rejoined society, one group from this period never stopped. Immune to fashion, uniquely self-reliant and quite possibly the snottiest band ever, The Fall and their implacable dictator Mark E Smith endure.

After 23 years, 27 line-up changes, 33 members, 16 different labels, and nearly 60 official albums, their story is an immense one. "There's no word to describe how great and important they are," opines Elastica's Justine Frischmann, who, like Bush's Gavin Rossdale is an obsessive fan. "It's a shame that this world's so stupid. The Fall aren't deemed to be more important, because they're incredibly important and almost every good band will quote them as an influence."

"Life should be full of strangeness, like a rich painting", sang Smith on 'How I Wrote Elastic Man', "but it gets worse day by day". This antipathy to the mundane is what makes The Fall. Though one wag described their single-minded rockabilly-Krautrock as the perfect anti-aphrodisiac, they tread a genius line between being prole-art coshboys and artsy experimentalists. A uniquely anti-showbiz form of brain stimulation, the unwitting may be perplexed or repulsed at this crabbed, ridiculing sound.

Praising The Stooges, Can and reggae years before it became fashionable, Salford Docks clerk Mark E Smith formed The Fall in late 1976. Previously called The Outsiders, they released their first EP, 'Bingo-Master's Breakout', in 1978. A freakish story of an ill-fated bingo caller, with a band who couldn't play and a singer who couldn't sing, it remains brilliant. A year later there

was 'Live At The Witch Trials'; on their own the speedy drumming, tuneless cheap keyboards and scrawling guitars would have made this a majorly disturbed record: with Smith barking horror stories and psychotic comedy over the top, it said more about punk rock than any number of Clash records. Similarly, wearing mad clothes of the kind even Jarvis Cocker wouldn't wear, a lasting anti-fashion stance was established. With 'Dragnet', 1979's second LP, guitarist Craig Scanlon

and bass player Steve Hanley arrived, and a core of sorts formed. Two albums in a year also set a standard for relentless productivity.

A popular refrain was that The Fall had more ideas on their record covers than most bands had on a whole LP [see the vandalised cover of 1982's 'Hex Enduction Hour']. This abundance of material was continued in the lyrics that are the brain-scrambling essence of The Fall. Non-sequiturs, tangential views, social satire and a loathing of metropolitan sophistry, US writer Cintra Wilson described Smith's style as "that inspired stiletto-slur, that drunk Oxford Nazi methadrine peep-show barker voice, as if coming from elsewhere in the universe and using Smith as a perverse telephone."

Smith explains it in more prosaic terms: "If in doubt, sing out of the corner of your mouth in a high-pitched voice - that's what I do," he said of his bitter-marinated oratory. "You can sound good on an instrument until you get familiar."

In 1983, when Smith married a Chicago-born guitarist called Brix, the sounds began to soften into more recognisable pop forms. For roughly a decade after, The Fall pursued more commercial routes than before, excepting the 17th Century political ballet 'I Am Kurious Oranj' [1988] and Smith's murdered

Smith's citizens: The Fall '81 [l-r] Mark Smith, Karl Burns, Paul Hanley, Marc 'Lard' Riley, Steve Hanley and Craig Scanlon



AT THE 1999 READING FESTIVAL, THE FALL GOT THE CHEMICAL BROTHERS' MANAGER TO PLAY DRUMS AFTER THE REGULAR DRUMMER HAD A FIGHT WITH SMITH. IN THE SAME YEAR, SMITH APPEARED ON *THE ADAM & JOE SHOW* [ABOVE], WHERE HE BEGAN HIS INTERVIEW BY BATTERING THE TWO CHEEKY CHAPS.

BACKCOP: MERRI FROM A PAST; GONNE: MAO; THE FALL: 1990-2000; AVAILABLE ON AFRONT; RECONSTRUCTION: STEVE DUNNAN / GIN



RECENTLY, MARK SMITH HAS PUT OUT A SERIES OF LIVE ALBUMS, ALL OF WHICH FEATURE THE SAME PICTURE OF HIM FLICKING THE V'S ON THE COVER. 'LIVE 1977', IN PARTICULAR, IS OF UNLISTENABLY POOR SOUND QUALITY.

Pope conspiracy stage play 'Hey! Luciani' [1986]. Band members came and went and often returned – drummer Karl Burns in particular.

By the late-'80s, The Fall were incorporating the methods of programmed dance music. These machine-based experiments reached their high point with 1993's 'The Infotainment Scan'. By 1995's 'Cerebral Caustic', however, it became clear some kind of rot had set in. Long-time members left, live shows became increasingly erratic and the music, though still bracing, began to deconstruct. Then, at an April 1998 show at Brownie's in New York, the group split onstage, with fisticuffs. Bassist Steve Hanley, who was arguably as crucial to the group as Smith, was gone. It looked like the end of the group. The only members who would not disappear into obscurity were those who'd left for more successful posts: namely early guitarist Marc Riley [now Radio 1's 'Boy Lard'], keyboardist Dave Bush [now in Elastica] and Ian Brown's drummer Simon Wolstencroft.

But just as diehards are wrong to cite the early-'80s as the only glory years, one lesson is never to

expect anything from this band. Soon a new Fall was formed [drummer Tom Head was a regular extra on *Coronation Street*] and the touring and recording resumed. Their latest album, 'The Unutterable', is the sound of a band in full, inspired flight. At a time when the underground is harder than ever to identify, Mark E Smith is the godfather of it. But how does he feel about The Fall now?

"There's times I wished I'd been a plumber like my dad," he said earlier this year. "I'd have been a lot happier. But there's something about rock music that hasn't been explored yet. When I feel like packing it in, there's always so much crap about you have to carry on. What I'm trying to do is like keep a fucking cultural thing going on a level. I know what I'm doing. There's no easy route you can take. Full stop, man."

STUART MUIRHEAD

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TRACK 08 ON COVER MOUNTED CD



WHEN ASKED WHAT HE'D DO IF HE WERE PRIME MINISTER, SMITH ANSWERED, "DECLARE WAR ON FRANCE AND IMPRISON ALL VEGETARIANS". HE HAS ALSO ARGUED THAT A "GOOD DOSE OF PATRIOTISM AND MILITARY DISCIPLINE" WOULD IMPROVE MOST OF THE UK'S BANDS.

**"IF IN DOUBT, SING OUT OF THE CORNER OF YOUR MOUTH IN A HIGH-PITCHED VOICE – THAT'S WHAT I DO"**

MARK E SMITH



By 1988, Smith had recruited a couple of Kajagoogoo's backing singers: The Fall (l-r) Simon Wolstencroft [now Ian Brown's drummer], Marcia Schofield, Mark Smith, Brix Smith, Steve Hanley and Craig Scanlon

# LET'S DO PLUNGE

THE FALL'S TOP TEN RECORDED MOMENTS – AND THERE'S ANOTHER 47 ALBUMS TO COME...



**DRAGNET** [Step Forward, 1979]

The second LP. Treats include the acid skiffle 'Flat Of Angles' and 'Psykick Dancehall' [the Happy Mondays a decade early]. The sound of snotty amateurs scouring your nerves.



**GROTESQUE (AFTER THE GRAMME)** [Rough Trade, 1980]

What Pavement based their act on. Here's grooving psych-pop and evil gloom – even then The Fall could be catchy or repellent at will. Best track: 'The Container Drivers'.



**HEX ENDUCTION HOUR** [Kamera, 1982]

Dense and scrambled. *The Sunday Times* music critic allegedly said it was "music invented for the torture of imbeciles". 'Hip Priest' was on *The Silence Of The Lambs*.



**THE WONDERFUL AND FRIGHTENING WORLD OF...** [Beggars Banquet, 1984]

The Fall inch to pop normality. With Smith's wife Brix on board, the marvellous 'Disney's Dream Debased' is here, as is the blood and soil bombast of 'The Lay Of The Land'. Superb.



**THIS NATION'S SAVING GRACE** [Beggars Banquet, 1985]

As trad-rocking as they ever got, but still far removed from pop, here was the splenetic 'Spoilt Victorian Child', the prescient 'L.A.' and 'I Am Damo Suzuki', a tribute to Can's vocalist.



**THE FRENZ EXPERIMENT** [Phonogram, 1988]

When you realise you're being mind-controlled by this album, it's too late. Here was smoothness ['The Steak Place'] and fury [the occult evil of 'Bremen Nacht']. Included the Number 35 hit cover of The Kinks' 'Victoria'.



**EXTRICATE** [Phonogram, 1990]

More synths and drum machines seemed to re-energise The Fall – 'Sing! Harpy' rips off The Stooges' 'Little Doll', while the fabulous 'Bill Is Dead' showed subtlety. Ace.



**THE INFOTAINMENT SCAN** [Permanent, 1993]

Heavily synthetic, this charted at Number Nine. Therein 'Glam Racket' pasted witless nostalgia and Suede, and 'Paranoia Man' was oddly autobiographical. Their finest album? Likely.



**THE LIGHT USER SYNDROME** [Jet, 1996]

Sprawling and rancid, scabby songs like 'D.I.Y Meat' and 'Oleano' showed a band starting to fragment in earnest. Still brilliant, as is the following year's terminally sick 'Levitate'.



**THE UNUTTERABLE** [Eagle Rock, 2000]

The formula – visceral rock'n'roll sketched over with abstractions – is fully implemented. Produced by Grant Showbiz who did 'Dagnat'. There's a song on here about William Blake, just like 'Dagnat'. SM