

really thick, lacquered acetates, like they did for Augustus [Pablo] and Lee Perry. I love Trojan, all that old reggae stuff, don't you? Big Youth and all that. Brilliant."

The second sheet of paper I hand to Mark contains an article published in the April 1995 issue of the Manchester listings magazine *City Life*. It is a ham-fisted and derivative riff on the commodification of culture which references Roland Barthes's theories of 'jouissance' and radical texts, as well as the films of Serge Eisenstein. But in the midst of the article, inserted like a whoopy cushion, there are a couple of paragraphs about cheese: Camembert, Cheshire, Stilton. Perplexingly, the article is signed: 'Mark E Smith'. "It was written by this mature student who worked in the [Cog Sinister] office for a bit," says Mark. "He was always writing dissertations and theses." Did you write any of it? "Yeah," he smiles. "The bits about cheese." "Blue cheese contains natural amphetamines," wrote Mark. "Why are students not informed about this?"

"I've cut down on them a lot," Mark says when I ask him if he enjoys the interview process. "You wouldn't believe it, the stuff that's asked. I'll do *Wire* and that, but I won't talk to them a lot of the time, I get a bit upset. You get people like Mark Radcliffe [the Manchester-based presenter of Channel 4's *White Room*, whose Radio 1 show is co-hosted by ex-Fall guitarist Marc Riley], who want to find out what you wear. It's always the same thing, no matter how academic. You'll get annoyed at this, but I miss people like [former *Wire* editor] Richard Cook, who used to ask: why do you have two drummers? Or, why is the bass always out of tune? I'm not a muso, but I really miss talking about things like that."

But later, when I ask Mark about these things which are never discussed, he says, "The thing with me, I can't talk about my work. I find it very difficult." So we end up talking about tangential episodes, which might anyway amount to the same thing for a writer whose work coheres fragments of a stilted life into an arching vision of withering complexity; a cantankerous soothsayer spinning tawdry metaphors for a present gone mad.

"I find it all unreadable," is how Mark refers to the current UK music press. "It reminds me of *The Daily Mail*. You see, I hoard things. If you pick up an issue of *The Daily Mail* from 1981, it's totally the same as an issue of *The Daily Mail* from 1996. You pick up an *NME* from 1982, you're clearing your house out, I've done my spring cleaning, you pick up an *NME*, if it didn't have the date on the bleeding top, apart from the print is different and the photos are a bit different, you wouldn't actually know that it was a different issue. Which always upset me very much, do you know what I'm saying?"

The fact that it hasn't changed?

"Well, they still get things wrong."

— We talk about the streamlining process that seems to have occurred across a broad spectrum of the music media — press, radio, TV — in recent years.

"Do you not reckon that at the end that is bad business?" Mark asks. "Do you not think that is a really bad way to approach business? I'll repeat this and I'll repeat it: people aren't as stupid as people think, as the middle class think. It's like middle class revolt, it's going on at the moment, I think. I know this. The Fall will always do all right; people always come and see us, they always pay their money. And you talk to 18 year old people, they haven't had any education, but they do know. They don't buy the *NME* anymore because they can read their mam's *Sun* and it's the same crap. It's my job to think about these things."

Mark has lived in the same area of North Manchester all his life; excepting a two year stretch when he relocated to Edinburgh.

"I'd just had enough of it round here. I was just so fed up with Manchester. It was brilliant. *Trainspotting* was like my life. I haven't seen *Trainspotting* the film, but it was like that. If a place is really nice, you can't really work. You just want to have a good time. There's a lot to be said for London in that respect, because you can't have any pleasure in London. [Laughs] We did the last LP there, in Brixton, The Dairy, off Coldharbour Lane."

This Heat used to have a studio in Brixton.

"Did they? I used to love This Heat, they were great. Miles ahead of their time. This is what we were talking about before. You get The Chemical Brothers, something like

that, it's like third rate This Heat. If some US group had come out with what This Heat were doing... You're always ignored on your own doorstep."

*The Wire* did an Invisible Jukebox feature with Peter Hammill (issue 138), and we played him one of your tracks: "Paranoia Man In Cheap Shit Room". He said you used to correspond with him, and that there was even talk of doing some recordings together.

"The collaboration never happened. It would have been good, wouldn't it?"

Do you like studios?

"No, fucking hate them."

Why? Mark pauses, shifts uneasily along the bench seat to the far end of our table.

"The thing with me... I can't stick musicians. I've thought about this. I can't stand them, and being stuck in a studio with them... I think that's my strength: I can hear what they can't."

"Say you get together with the group, and we're all trying to be friends with each other, they'll all put like Pavement, Sebadoh, REM on; I'll put bloody Bo Diddley on, or an old rockabilly track that is completely out of tune. They go: 'It's out of tune.' 'So fucking what? Chuck Berry is out of tune. And if Chuck Berry didn't do that, you wouldn't be in a job.' This is how far I go. But musicians don't actually see that. Not out of malice or sloth, they really don't see it. They don't have an objective eye. All they see is that Pavement have sold a million records in America. Their heads are in a different dimension."

"You talk about Pete Hammill. What I love about Pete Hammill, Pete Hammill *never had a guitarist in his group*. That's what I loved about Van Der Graf: they didn't have a guitarist. And there were a lot of Manchester guys who worked in the post office and the docks who thought the same thing. They didn't have bloody degrees in fucking music. Van Der Graf were fucking brilliant. They just knew that."

"There are too many groups, there are too many musicians," he says later. "And they're all in it for the wrong reasons. I'm sorry Tony, but they are. I saw this documentary on BBC2 about Pulp or Blur. They're going, 'We're in it because of women or drugs.' 'What you fucking talking about?' They're saying, 'We always wanted to be like The Beatles: get women.' Imagine saying that to This Heat. [Mark laughs, hysterical] It's always: 'Jarvis Cocker would never get a woman unless he was in a group.' So who cares? Good for you boy. Well done. I got more women before I was in The Fall. I had more money before I was in The Fall."

But you don't want to go back to working on Salford docks?

"No, because it's shut down. It doesn't exist. It's not there anymore, Tony." And Mark laughs once again.

On the night that Germany knock England out of Euro 96, The Fall play live in London. The support act is Coldcut, who invited Mark to contribute vocals to the track "(I'm) In Deep" on their 1989 album *Ahead Of Our Time*. If Mark is driven to distraction by the inability of groups such as Pavement to see beyond the seductive surface detail that describes a Fall record, Coldcut offer a more creative line of descent. "British rappers could learn a lot from listening to Mark E Smith," Matt Black once said, and the deathless riddles and ciphers which accompany the releases on Coldcut's Ninja Tune label represent splinters of Smith's afflatus reborn in another distant corner of the caustic city.

On stage, Mark brushes into a monitor speaker, eyes it disdainfully, runs a hand across a keyboard to produce a sudden, startling cacophony of notes, coughs, head cocked to one side, meanders off stage halfway through one song, reappears halfway through the next, slurs words into the mix from the wings, and all the while a great roar, detuned and distorted, emerges from the barely perceptible motions of the remaining members of The Fall. The atmosphere is electric.

"They've got three different types of currency in Brazil," Mark tells me. "They have like a scumbag currency, ie people who work in shops. And they have a currency for people who are like lecturers, journalists. And then they have a rich man's currency."

It sounds like a strange way to run an economy.

"Yeah, but maybe it's honest. Maybe that's the way Britain is going. We're like India now, a part of the Third World."