

I'm going, 'Yeah, yeah, get off the phone, I've got things to do, I've got my life to lead. I don't want to talk to you.' So then the fucking *Daily Star* gets in on the act: 'Oh, you're the man who knew about Terry Waite and the Manchester bomb... I just said, 'Well, I'm a fucking psychic, fuck off...''

For the record, an extract from the lyrics of "Powder Keg": "*You better listen/You better listen to me/It's a powder keg/Retreat from Enniskillen/I had a dream/Bruised and coloured/Manchester city centre/It's a powder keg/Sickening in its infection/Bad luck/Confined to the university and the town/Retreat from Enniskillen/I don't want to go/Take me home/Take me back to the safe/I can't get the bus/You better listen to me/Don't you know, Mark, don't you know? Town is a powder keg!*"

"Pre-cog is a Fall word," wrote Mark Sinker all those years ago.

The first sheet of paper I hand to Mark contains a riddle in the form of a text entitled "The Fall Song Title Story". Set in Croatia, the anonymous hero is an alt.American abroad, and the story has had certain key words removed. These have been replaced by asterixes. The asterixes equate to song titles by The Fall. Insert the correct song titles and the narrative will fully reveal itself. The story originates in the US and is signed: 'Chief Saddo: "Unbelievable," muses Mark. "But at least he knows what he is." Then he adds: "This one will be going in the file."

The Fall begins and ends with a great sound surging and reverberating inside the skull of Mark Smith. He once described it, with blunt economy, as "raw music with really weird vocals over the top". Every Fall record, from the "Bingo-Master's Breakout" EP in 1978 to the new album *The Light User Syndrome* — a brilliant, dense, hilarious, quizzical monster of a record — has been an attempt to transport this sound, this garbled ghost transmission, out into our own world. And as each Fall record is replaced by yet another, not so rapidly now as they once were, but still in relatively quick succession, we must assume that each attempt has been a 'failure', at least on Mark's terms. Otherwise, why bother to release any more?

"I'm just never getting there," he tells me, his words punctuated by vast, aching pauses. "I'm getting round to it. I'm beginning to understand it a bit more."

Where does this sound come from? Is it an as-yet-unheard alchemical amalgam of all the music that leaks into Mark's head — The Velvet Underground, Can, Captain Beefheart, Peter Hammill, Big Youth, Lee Perry, relics from the original texts of 50s American white trash rock 'n' roll and 60s American white trash R&B? Or does it approximate to the inchoate scratchings of 'organic' non-musicians forging audio revelations from kazoos, violins, cheap guitars and organs? Or does it emerge from a stranger place still? "Clairaudience, the hearing of non-physical reality, is used to inform the mind of psychic information," explains Craig Junjulas in his guide to the rogue and vaporous realm of psychic tarot. "When inspired thoughts pass through the mind, they register their higher vibrations as tonal qualities." Inevitably, "the more spiritual the source of information, the more beautiful and subtle the auditory experience." But, "if you are tuned into a negative vibration, you will be picking up on those frequencies." The process of clairaudience, suggests Junjulas, "is analogous to playing a recorded tape through a tape player. In both cases it helps if the speaker system is on, or the headphones plugged in."

"The problem I have at the moment is that technology has changed," explains Mark Smith. "I've been through six tape recorders in six months. They keep breaking, exploding on me. Because they're all assimilated into this computer rubbish. I've got a really good one that plays things about ten times faster than they should be."

"When I was a kid," he continues, "I used to have watches explode on me. The watches used to blow up and break. It's very disturbing. They'd get water in the middle, and they couldn't work out how the water got in it. But the thing about psychics is that they always have bad luck, if you study them. One thing I noticed with psychics, and I used to hang around with them when I was on the docks and before, they're all psychic and clever, and their watches explode, and they can say he's going to die over there, but they can't back a horse, can they? I was saying to my mam, because my mam is really into all this shit, I go, 'Look, mam, they can tell you [and at this point the cassette in the tape player I am using to record our conversation starts rattling about noisily. Temporarily spooked, I switch the machine off and then on again, but Mark has carried on talking] but who wants to know that? You're better off not knowing."



Vignette # 2

Halfway through the journey he had to instruct the taxi driver, who was ferrying him to the designated meeting point, to double back to his house so he could change his shirt. He brought a cup of tea out to the taxi driver while he waited, but the taxi driver refused it, claiming the tea had been poisoned. He still had the cup, tea bag and all, in the large white plastic bag that he carried with him.

"Notebooks out plagiarists" — one of two subtitles for *Shift-Work*, 1991

The cover of *The Light User Syndrome* is free of all but the most mundane information: two photographs of the current line-up of The Fall; track titles; a personnel listing; publishing details; a perfunctory note by John Peel. But track back five, ten, 15 years: Fall album sleeves crawl with garbled messages, conundrums, rebus-like snapshots, biro hieroglyphs, heraldic retentions, poison pen letters — shards torn from the squalid recesses of the demented city.

"People were plagiarising it so much, I just stopped," explains Mark, when I ask him about this shift in the packaging of The Fall's music. "My idea was just to get people's heads going, because they don't fucking read. But also, with computer graphics coming in, it became quite impossible to do that. If you're on a major label you can't do this [he arranges the contents of our table — notebooks, scraps of paper, fag packets, beer mats — into a hasty collage], you can't do that and say: that's the back cover. The computer graphics and the art department can't handle it, because it doesn't fit on the bloody computer, does it? That was half of it; the other half was why bleeding bother anyway, because people are going to pinch ideas. I remember one guy from Liverpool, this fanzine guy, once said to me, 'There are more ideas on one of your inside covers than there are on three entire Echo & The Bunnymen albums.' I thought that was cool, you know, it made me think."

The dilution of original subject matter via the processes of appropriation and plagiarism is something which causes Mark considerable upset, and not only when applied to his own work. As an example, and in the midst of a discussion about writers and novelists who might have impacted on his own ferocious and unique lyric imagination, Mark offers: "Stephen King, who ripped all his stuff off HP Lovecraft who ripped all his stuff off MR James [the mysterious Victorian ghost story writer and antiquarian]. It's a very British scenario really. People pay money to watch Stephen King films but when you look back a bit, they're just like MR James stories. Arthur Machin as well, a Welsh guy; all Stephen King's stuff is ripped off from them. I mean completely: whole pages, entire chapters, just watered down."

"There are a lot of American writers who are a lot better than British writers," he continues in very measured tones. "It's like anything else: why are the Germans better at football? *Because they care about it.* They're not in it for the money. Britain and England is going to pay for all this, I think. Does that sound too esoteric? England is going to pay for that. They've always had the inventors and the creators, and they just don't fucking appreciate them. Jim Thompson worshipped Raymond Chandler, who was English. But he was treated like scum here and had to go to bleeding America. One of the best writers I like is Malcolm Lowry, who was from bleeding Warrington, or somewhere. He's one of the *best* bloody writers, he wrote the *best* books: *Under The Volcano*. But some bratpack idiot writes a bloody book that is some complete rip-off of *Under The Volcano*, about a guy who goes to Mexico and gets fucked up, and he makes a million dollars."

"It's just like music when you reckon it up. It's like listening to Pavement: it's just The Fall in 1985, isn't it? They haven't got an original idea in their heads."

The Fall used to be signed to the same label as Pavement in America. They left when Mark discovered that one particular executive was having e-mail discussions regarding the group's contract and Mark's "personal habits". "He told me I didn't understand, that we were from the bleak industrial wastes of North England, or something, and that we didn't understand the Internet. I told him: Fall fans *invented* the Internet. They were on there in 1982."

The Fall are now signed to Jet, a subsidiary of the reggae reissue specialists Trojan, and Mark seems happy enough with this unlikely relationship. "They produce these