

The Fall #1

USA: New York Coney Island High

Great. I give The Fall a duff review and end up on the next Fall album in a song called "Yank Wax": "Man with frog name/What's in his ears?/What's in his ears?" Or end up on the business end of one of MES's cigarettes, or get fired. Ah, but one advantage of not being in The Fall is that Mark E Smith can't fire you, as he has done Craig Scanlon (the tersest guitarist in rock), Marc Riley and a host of others. If 1997 and 1998's personnel trends are any indication, MES's hanging jury is giving way to a hanging judge, as he announces to the world, "If it's me and your Granny on the bongos, it's a Fall gig". Doesn't exactly make for a fun ride in the van for the group, or much of a show, as seen at Coney Island High (which is neither in Coney Island, nor a high school).

After interminable opening sets by local groups, The Fall 98 ambled out and worked up an intro for The Marquis. Arriving with a welcome "Ah-eh!" and sporting a shiner on his right eye, Smith started as he meant to continue, the anti leader who drew the eye but rejected any responsibility for putting on a show. With a twitchy gravitas copped, it seemed, from both Johnny Cash and John Quincy Adams, he chewed air, blinked and checked that his mic was plugged in about 1000 times. The tics even enhance MES's profile as one of Rock's True Somethings, number one in a field of one: the dissolute rock librarian. Looking some ten years older than he is, MES still managed to exude menace while he stood there wobbling. Again, not exactly a rock show, but definitely worth a trip out of the house.

Shedding his tweed jacket after a sort-of rollicking "Ten Houses Of Eve", MES revealed a dark shirt with big red roses woven into each shoulder, a nod perhaps to Country stoics who also like to alternate brilliant vocals with no-show performances. He earned his stoicism, moving in time with the music only twice, pounding the microphone during "I'm A Mummy" and shimmying, a little, during "Lie Dream Of A Casino Soul".

The Fall's implicit musical manifesto has always embodied a touch of "What chords?" mulishness, an anti-technique belief in the power of garage rock's grimy thunk to raise up the visceral rock moment to defeat filigree and Steve Hillage both. But this group was, more plainly, just at odds. MES's voice, *that* voice, held the crowd's respectful attention for a good while, as the group struggled through what sounded like a live rehearsal. Karl Burns thundered and Steve Hanley tried to lock with him while guitarist Tommy Crooks played inaudible power chords from other songs and keyboardist Julia Nagle fought to stay awake, yawns and all. The group

transformed (or mulched) stormers like "Masquerade" and "Scareball" into endurance tests, caning the main riff to death without working up any steam. Two chestnuts, "Hip Priest" and "Lie Dream Of A Casino Soul", saved some face, allowing Burns and Hanley to lessen the burden of figuring out what to do, ie get soft here, stop here, then get loud. The mighty "Inch" devolved into power chord mush, stealing what could have been the evening's finest moment as MES woke up to yowl "The house is falling in!". The key to the disarray was probably the obvious, seen best halfway through the set when MES announced that the group would take a ten minute break. With grim fury, Hanley threw down his bass and stormed off, while the rest of the group followed, no happier. After a crisp four minutes, they returned, maybe happy to have their pep talk over with, but no more primed to rock. As someone in front of me said, "It's going to be a short tour".

Even if he hadn't dragged everyone off stage for reorientation, dictatorial flourishes abounded. When things got especially lost, MES would drop his fist onto Nagle's keyboard for some Sun Ra clusters, turn up Tommy Crooks's amp and occasionally leave the stage, directing Crooks to finish singing the song at hand. To add to the general discomfort, his directions were right; Nagle was well south of rocking (or present) and Crooks was never loud enough, until he gave in for the final number, "Behind The Counter", and let his amp work a bit.

The Fall seem to be running on inertia, the primal rock 'n' roll dream materialising in the studio, ironically, but chased from the stage by one too many hip lectures.

SASHA FRERE-JONES

The Fall #2

USA: New York Brownie's

We think we've come for a Fall show: riff, repeat, rant, repeat... We don't know that we're about to witness a theatre of cruelty extravaganza the likes of which don't often grace a group's performance more than once.

Like the shows at Coney Island High a few days earlier, the first date of the group's two night residency at the tiny Brownie's club begins with "Spencer Must Die". And again like the Coney Island shows, the group have been vamping the song's central riff for a long time before Mark E Smith wanders on stage, looking like he's got one foot in the grave and the other in the nearest bar. He seems less interested in singing than in annoying the rest of the group as much as possible, by leaving the stage and twiddling all the amp dials. The group is sharp, tight, loud, and pretty clearly about to snap. Smith is not exactly unwilling to goad them into it. During "Hip Priest" he absents himself again, sings a few lines, hands the microphone to an audience member (who knows the words), gets back on stage and mimes along. The end vamp is drawn out until Smith finally gets bored with it. The group's patience is being tested to the limit.

In the middle of "Free Range", Smith starts messing with Karl Burns's drum kit. It's the last straw. Burns stops playing, leaps over the drums at Smith and pins him against the wall, knocking over the bass rig in the process. Steve Hanley separates them. Burns makes "Fuck you, I quit" gestures and stalks off stage. Somebody from the audience grabs a mic and starts yelling, "Come back here and play, you fuckin' coward! I paid 12 dollars for this! Get back up here and play your fuckin' drums!"

Meanwhile, the rest of the group is, a little ludicrously, attempting to keep the song going.

After a few minutes of chaos, things settle down again. Burns is back; Smith gives a completely incoherent speech about how a cab driver pulled a gun on him earlier and "these three fuckin' Scotsmen were talking backstage about it". Now it's his turn to leave. The group plays "Levitate". No Smith. They start "Lie Dream Of A Casino Soul". Our boy reappears, launches into the song and nearly clocks Hanley with the microphone. Hanley somehow keeps smiling gamely. Smith manages to completely mangle Hanley's and Tommy Crooks's amp settings. Now Crooks seems to be kicking Smith hard.

After a few more songs in this vein — Crooks inaudible, Hanley way too loud and bassy, everybody slightly out of sync — the two of them down their instruments on "He Pep" and head off, followed by Burns. But Mark isn't done yet. He gets keyboardist Julia Nagle to play "Powderkeg", and improvises a monologue about how "words are the ultimate means of self-expression, I saw it written in *The New York Times*... and the owner of the Brownie's club just hoped it made three figures...". Smith picks up Crooks's abandoned guitar, lets it drop — WHUNK! — picks up the bass, stares at it, and tosses it into the drum kit — CRASH! — drops his mic on the floor — WHUNK! — and leaves. Less than 24 hours later, he will be arrested for allegedly beating up Julia Nagle.

On the way out, my friend says, "I'm coming back tomorrow, and I wanna see some *blood*." The next night we find a sign on Brownie's door: "FALL SHOW CANCELLED — MARK E SMITH IS IN JAIL."

DOUGLAS WOLK



Mark E Smith at Coney Island High

PHOTOS: CURTIS HARVEY