

# Mark E Smith

Irascible, mischievous and, above all, contrarian frontman of the post-punk band the Fall who was dubbed 'the grumpiest man in pop'

Among the ranks of recalcitrant, irascible pop stars, Mark E Smith was in a contrarian class of his own.

Never a man to look on the bright side, he was dubbed "the grumpiest man in pop" and the songs he wrote for the Fall, the band he sustained for more than 40 years, were abrasive and bleak, leavened only by a cynical and sometimes vicious sense of humour as he railed bitterly at the hypocrisies of life and the injustice of the world. He didn't so much sing his lyrics as rant, bark and snarl them, and off stage he was as caustic and as confrontational as his music.

Famously uncooperative, he was every interviewer's worst nightmare, turning the simplest question into a battle. Inspired to form a band after seeing the Sex Pistols play in Manchester in 1976, Smith made Johnny Rotten seem as benign as Barry Manilow.

His love of confrontation was often destructive, but at its best could be deliciously mischievous. Ever keen to bite the hand that feeds, when the *NME* gave him a Godlike Genius award he declared that it should go to "the people who buy the *NME* and can manage to read it".

Yet his acerbic and often disturbing music, which drew on influences as diverse as the Velvet Underground, Captain Beefheart, Iggy Pop and Can, was in turn hugely influential on other bands and made him a cult figure, much

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admired by connoisseurs of rock's more maverick extremities.

John Peel was the band's most ardent supporter and noted in his autobiography that the Fall were the only act to have a shelf all to themselves in his record collection — although in the 2004 documentary film *The Wonderful and Frightening World of Mark E Smith*, even Peel admitted: "You can never be certain what you're going to get and sometimes it may not be what you want." When Peel died that same year, Smith gave one of the all-time horror interviews when he was asked to pay tribute to his "close friend" on BBC Two's *Newsnight*. His enthusiasm for unlicensed chemicals was reflected not only in the way his eyes bulged and tongue lolled, but also in his inability to form a coherent sentence.

His normally suave interviewer, Gavin Esler, was left visibly shaken by the encounter and the producer pulled the plug. With characteristic perversity, Smith subsequently said that he had met the Fall's biggest fan on only a handful of occasions and that he and Peel had never been friends.

His most memorable songs, such as *Fiery Jack*, which profiled an ignorant, brawling, beer-swilling yob, *Totally Wired*, about the rush of taking drugs, and *The North Will Rise Again*, painted a nightmarish vision of Britain, which one critic praised for "depicting, in Hogarthian detail, the underbelly of poverty in English society". Another described

him as "a strange kind of antimatter national treasure", while Simon Reynolds in his book *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock'n'Roll* described "a kind of Northern English magic realism that mixed industrial grime with the unearthly and uncanny, voiced through a unique, one-note delivery somewhere between amphetamine-spiked rant and alcohol-addled yarn".

The Fall had minimal chart success, although those unfamiliar with their albums may recognise the song *Hip Priest*, used in the film *The Silence of the Lambs*. Smith's music also featured in TV adverts for such unlikely products as the Vauxhall Corsa. "I needed the money. We're not all Elton John," he noted acily.

His songs came at a high cost to himself and those around him, because he believed creativity came from confrontation and chaos. Not an easy man to live with, he sought stimulation by picking arguments with girlfriends and partners and recording their fights to play back for inspiration when writing.

"I like to push people until I discover what they really think," he said. "Push them and push them and push them."

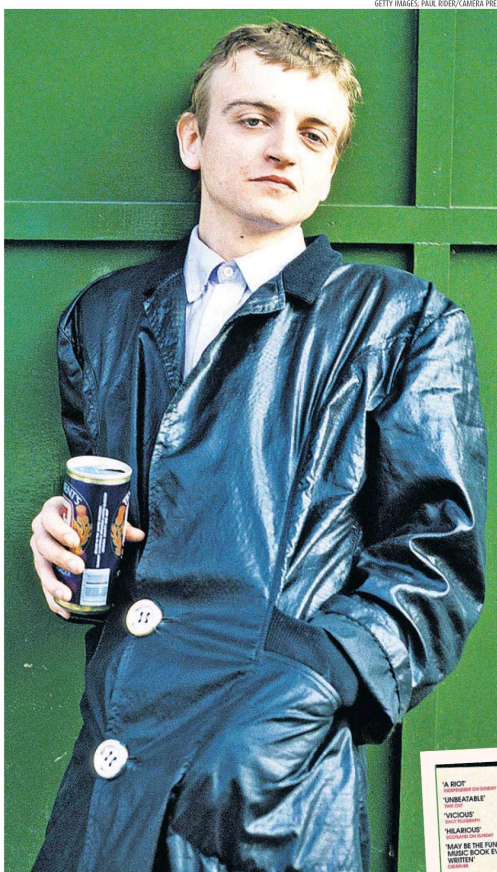
It was a dysfunctional approach to human relationships that led to 66 musicians passing through the ranks of the Fall over the group's existence, while he remained the only constant member.

One third survived less than a year. He once sacked a band member because he didn't like his taste in food ("the salad was the last straw"). The guitarist and keyboard player Marc Riley was sacked on his wedding day.

Another line-up was lost after a fight on stage in New York, which continued afterwards at the group's hotel and resulted in Smith spending a night in jail and being charged with assault and harassment.

He remained unrepentant and derided those he sacked or who walked out on him as "dickheads who couldn't hold their beer" and went running back "to their humdrum bleeding lives".

Unable to separate work from pleasure, several girlfriends and two of his three wives played in the Fall at different times. He



Mark E Smith, above, married Laura Salenger, left, better known as Brix Smith, in 1983. She played with the Fall and they parted in 1989

married the American guitarist Laura Salenger better known as Brix Smith, a few months after they met in Chicago in 1983. She was 20 and, convinced she had met her soulmate, flew to Manchester to be with him.

He collected her from the airport in a taxi and on the way back to his Prestwich home he pointed out the local attractions such as Strangeways prison.

Entering the lobby of his building, she was struck by the "strong odour of urine". In his flat there were cats everywhere and the floor was strewn with the unwashed underwear of an ex-girlfriend. He offered her a cup of tea and reached for a pint of milk sitting on the window ledge alongside a carton of eggs and a loaf of bread.

She thought it was a "quaint"

English custom and they married at Bury register office and celebrated with sausage rolls, crisps and pickled onions in the Eagle & Child pub.

She described marriage and life in the Fall as a "dictatorship". It was a judgment with which Smith did not argue. "I mould them like a football manager. I'm a bit like Alex Ferguson," he said.

Astonishingly, she lasted six years until she left both band and husband in 1989 for another rollercoaster romance with the violinist Nigel Kennedy. By then Smith was already sleeping with another member of the band, but he picked at the scabs of their broken marriage in songs such as *Don't Call Me Darling* and *Feeling Numb* and made known his feelings about Kennedy in a song titled *Fiend With A Violin*.

In the 1990s he married Saffron Prior, who ran the Fall's fan club. After their divorce, in 2001 he married the Greek-born Eleni Poulou, who was a member of the Fall until 2016. They were separated and he is survived by his partner, Pam Vander, who also operated as the Fall's manager. There were no children from any of his marriages.

Born Mark Edward Smith into a working-class Manchester family in 1957, his father, Jack, had served in the Black Watch and worked in the family plumbing business. His mother, Irene, then gave him three younger sisters, which, like most things in his life, he seemed to resent. "I was picked on at school because I was timid. I had

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younger sisters; I couldn't turn to them for help," he complained in a rare admission of vulnerability.

Yet he was top of his class at primary school and won a place at Stand Grammar, where he developed a love of literature. To his chagrin, when he transferred to college at 16 he received no support and his father insisted that he worked simultaneously for the family firm. "He gave me no money. My ribs would be sticking out. I'd hate the bastard," Smith recalled.

His response was to quit his course and move in with his girlfriend Una Baines, paying the rent via dead-end jobs, where he wrote songs during his lunch breaks.

He formed the Fall in 1976, taking the band's name from Albert Camus's novel, and recruiting Baines on keyboards.

In his teens he had belonged to the Socialist Workers Party, but in later years his politics tended to anarchy rather than socialism. Asked for his manifesto, he suggested he would "halve the price of cigarettes, double the tax on health food and declare war on France".

Despite the churn of band members and his problems with alcohol, he continued to record prolifically and released, by some estimates, more than 60 studio and live albums as the Fall.

His judgment of his life was wildly contradictory, veering between defiance and guilt, denial and self-awareness. "I have never hit anybody who didn't deserve it," he once said. Yet on another occasion he confessed that if he were to apologise to everyone he had wronged, "I wouldn't have a day left in my life".

Mark E Smith, musician, was born on March 5, 1957. He died on January 24, 2018, aged 60, after suffering respiratory problems

