
invisible jukebox

Every month we play a musician a series of records which they're asked to identify and comment on — with no prior knowledge of what they're about to hear. This month it's the turn of . . .



Mark E Smith

Tested by Edwin Pouncey. Photos: Hamish Brown

50 The Wire

Mark E(dward) Smith is the mastermind behind The Fall, the group which he formed in his home town of Manchester in the late 70s after quitting his job as a shipping clerk. Since then he has nurtured and steered the various musicians and performers he has come into contact with over the years through nearly 35 albums and 27 different line-ups. The latest Fall album (released on new label Eagle Rock) is called *The Unutterable*, a title which may refer to Smith's fascination with the work of American Gothic horror writer HP Lovecraft. But trying to pinpoint exactly what goes on in Smith's head is a dubious task that inevitably throws up more questions than answers. The music on *The Unutterable* — featuring keyboard player Julia Nagle, guitarist Neville Wilding, bass player Adam Hala and drummer Tom Head, together with a guest appearance from Kazuko Hohki of The Frank Chickens — is a giddy mix of futuristic Techno crush, razored rockabilly and punk rock machine head meltdown, all superglued together with Smith's domineering nasal snarl.

Prior to *The Unutterable*, the group released *The Marshall Suite* on Artful Records, together with a solo spoken word album from Smith titled *The Post Nearly Man*. This last project prompted him to give a public reading of his poetry and lyrics in London, eliciting a response that, according to him, was favourable and fulfilling.

Although he prefers to live in the familiar territory of Manchester, he avoids acknowledging that his ideas as a writer and a musician belong to any particular place other than 'Planet Mark'. "I don't know, because I'm neither British or American," he replies when probed for his thoughts on what makes UK rock musicians different from their US counterparts. "I'm not anything." The Jukebox took place one stormy December evening in Prestwich, Manchester.

THE SPIDERS

"Johnny B Goode" from *Let's Go Spiders* (Big Beat) 1966

It's obvious what the song is, but can you tell the nationality of the group?

[After listening intently for several minutes] Japanese. You can tell by the pitch.

You're right! How does the pitch reveal where they originate?

It's not French, because the French play rock 'n' roll in a different style. They play it really over the top. The Japanese get it pretty much on the ball. That's a bit of a good one actually.

It's by a 60s group called The Spiders. Do you like the way the Japanese embrace rock 'n' roll and make it their own thing?

I like some of those attacking groups, a lot of the ones who did that Speed Metal which was like a minute and a half long. I can't remember their names but they're really good. I'm a big Damo [Suzuki, former Can vocalist] fan as well.

Do you listen to his new stuff?

When he sends it to me.

CURRENT NINETY THREE

"Faust" from *Faust* (Durtro) 2000

[Minutes pass] No idea.

It's music from Current Ninety Three that was inspired by a previously unpublished supernatural story by decadent writer Eric, Count Stenbock.

It sounds sort of like cheap film music. I don't think you can put those kind of stories on to film. It's all in the imagination.

Your *Post Nearly Man* spoken word CD opens with "The Horror In Clay", which is based on the first section of HP Lovecraft's cosmic horror story *The Call Of Cthulhu*. Can you tell me about that?

I changed it a bit so it was set in Penzance, which is where I wrote it. It was when the Teletubbies came out actually, so the fellow who is reading it out was like a bloke who goes mountain climbing and this sun comes up with a big evil Teletubbies baby grin on its face. It was like Glastonbury gone wrong really. I tried to zip it up a bit. Few people understood it because there's no beginning and no end to it.

[Dramatically] "The Horror In Clay"! It is good, isn't it? I'm glad somebody else likes it. You're the only one! And a couple of Portuguese people [laughs].

Do you keep returning to Lovecraft?

Yeah, very much. I still read him. I went round to Providence [Rhode Island] where he lived when I was in America and you can see it all. I thought, 'Bloody hell, there's enough material there to last you a lifetime.'

Do you like this?

It's OK, yeah. I had a tape like that called *Purgatory* by this group called Evil and it was the most frightening thing you've ever heard in your life. I think they were American or something. I taped over it because it was doing my head in. It was like that in a way, it was terrifying.

PRINCE JAZZBO

"Every Nigga Is A Winner" from *Mr Funny* (Pressure Sounds) 1972

[Turns volume up] It's like slow Big Youth. Same lyrics.

It's Prince Jazzbo.

Aw, it wasn't, was it? We were only talking about him today [calls partner in to listen]. We were talking about this LP called *Prince Jazzbo Vs I Roy* [Step Forward Youth]. [Sings] "I Roy you a boy, you imitate the great U Roy" [much laughter]. Great lyric. Is that new?

It's a new compilation, yes.

He has no shame, Prince Jazzbo, he just rips off everybody. On the other side of this LP it's got I Roy going [sings], "Prince Jazzbo don't bother me, you don't have an idea in your head, you taped everybody, soon you will be dead" [laughs]. It's fucking great.

That DJ battle sparked off a rash of versions.

Yeah, I know. I've got them all [looks at cover]. Can I grab that one? Roots reggae was huge when The Fall first started.

Were you always a fan?

Well, I liked dub music, Augustus Pablo. It was the only thing around worth listening to for a while, wasn't it?



MERZBOW

"Decomposition 002.1.1" from *Untitled Ten* (Extreme) 1997

There's a school of music like that in Manchester, where they play records with needles made out of wood.

It's Japanese noise. It's by Masami Akita, better known as Merzbow.

It doesn't go far enough for me. It's a bit like a Can outtake without the drums, or Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*.

It's very like *Metal Machine Music*. Do you like that album?

Metal Machine Music just cleans your head out. I like that, it's my favourite. It's the best thing Lou Reed ever did. It was when he went bonkers, wasn't it? I had gone right off him by then. I was a big fan at one time, but after *Transformer* I lost interest in what he was doing. Then he brought *Metal Machine Music* out and I thought it was just brilliant.

Did you buy it when it first came out in 1975?

Yeah. I was buying it when everybody else was taking it back [laughs]. People were wanting their money back.

Did you hear *Ecstasy*, his last record?

I'd like to hear it. The reviews he got for that last record were terrible and so I quite fancy listening to it.

You must hear "Like A Possum", this long electric guitar rant which is the best track on it.

Yeah, I read about that and it sounded good to me then. I think I'm definitely gonna buy it.

CHRIS MORRIS

"4FTCAR" from *Blue Jam* (Warp) 2000

[Glances at CD player] Who's this?

It's from *Blue Jam*, by comedian Chris Morris with music by Propellerheads. It was first broadcast on BBC radio.

I don't agree with that at all. I think it's fucking crap. Comedians and actors all want to make records, as if they haven't got enough fucking musicians who want to make fucking records. You made a record didn't you?

Yes.

Well you shouldn't have done, should you?

Why?

Because I said. No, I'm only kidding you. The whole thing about making music now is that it's very easy. So you've got the prime minister of this country who wants to be in a rock band. You've got a chancellor of the exchequer who wants to be a pop star. Bill Clinton wants to be a rock musician, they don't know what they're fucking talking about. I mean, Jack of all trades and master of none. I'm a singer/songwriter and that's fucking it, otherwise your quality goes down.

FAUST

"It's A Rainy Day, Sunshine Girl" from *So Far: The Wümme Years 1970-73* (Recommended) 1972

Many more to go now, Edwin? Are they all like this? Is it Can?

Close: it's Faust.

Oh right, right. Really? Is it new stuff?