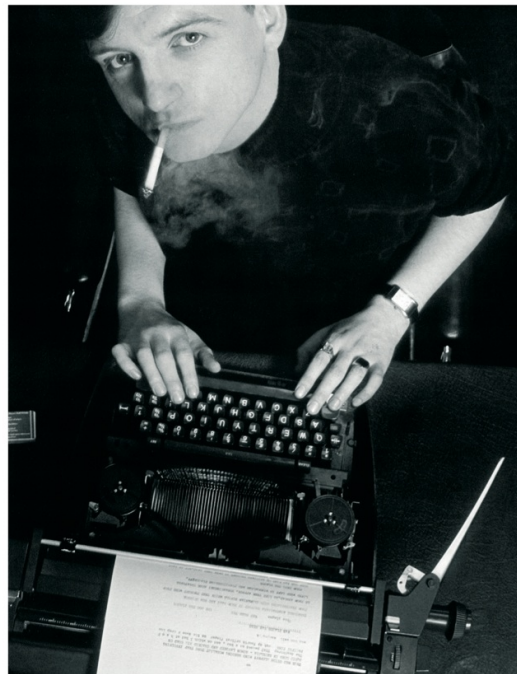




PHOTOS: KEVIN CUMMINS / IDOLS (SMITH & CLARK); BLEDDYN BUTCHER (NME)

Mark E Smith with dancer and choreographer Michael Clark, during their *I Am Curious, Orange* collaboration in 1988



Mark E Smith at the NME's Holborn offices, 1988

direction, with short, often poppy tunes and a minimal amount of the extraneous noise that had previously deterred bystanders. Its attendant single "C.R.E.E.P." was shockingly radio friendly by Fall standards. My cousin, who had an inverted cross painted on her bedroom wall, bought the album and enjoyed the sinister pagan chanting, copped from TV's *Quatermass* series, that precedes its opening track, "Lay Of The Land". "Elves" stole its central riff from The Stooges' "I Wanna Be Your Dog" and sold it back to a new generation of fans who didn't recognise it. A previously undiscovered constituency was opening up, of disillusioned suburban teen types who a decade earlier would have been primed for punk, but now wanted a new strain of outsider music.

1985's *This Nation's Saving Grace* is a stand-out amongst their five Beggars albums, and drew in the merely curious with a clean production, catchy choruses, and something of the Gothic grandeur that passed for drama during those dreary days. "I Am Damo Suzuki", heavily indebted to Can's "Oh Yeah", flagged up The Fall's Krautrock influences back before anybody could buy CD reissues to follow them up, and the opening instrumental, "Mansion", fingered The Deviants' "Billy The Monster". The Fall were stealing from the greats. "LA" was a moody instrumental, in keeping with the nocturnal feel of the era, but the unerring repetition and impenetrable ranting of "What You Need" recalled *Perverved By Language*, albeit in shinier shoes. "Spoilt Victorian Child" and the contemporaneous, rockabilly-styled single "Couldn't Get Ahead"/"Rollin' Dany" harked back to their thrash roots, and the moment in "Paintwork" where Smith accidentally erased a section of the tape confirms an ongoing faith in the artistic value of chance. *This Nation's Saving Grace* took the best of The Fall and force-fed it to fans beyond the reach of John Peel's end of year Festive 50 countdown.

The following year's *Bend Sinister*, despite the fan-favourite cover of 60s garage group The Other Side's "Mr Pharmacist", lost some of the ground *This Nation's Saving Grace* had gained in a quagmire of doomy songs, though "Dr Faustus", a kind of

marching song for small mechanical goblins, was clearly indebted to Krautrock group Faust. 1988's *The Frenz Experiment* (BEGA96 CD) included an unexpected pop hit, a cover of The Kinks' "Victoria". Indeed, the Beggars period, which ended in 1990, is best enjoyed via the two *458489* singles compilations of A sides and B sides, which document The Fall either creatively crowbarring their individual aesthetic into a borderline pop format, or else enjoying the artistic freedoms and experimental opportunities that B sides offered in the pre-download era.

#### I AM KURIOUS, ORANJ BEGGARS BANQUET 1988

#### I AM PURE AS ORANJ NMC 2000

*I Am Kurious, Oranj* was the soundtrack to a collaboration with the progressive ballet dancer Michael Clark on a piece loosely based on the life of William of Orange, which eventually ran at the temple of culture that was London's Sadler's Wells. With *I Am Curious, Orange*, Clark and The Fall created a mild media panic. Today broadsheet newspapers are required to run reviews of the latest Pete Doherty biography, but there was no context in highbrow circles for The Fall in 1988. The high culture/low culture barrier was breached, however briefly, as ballet dancers with bare backsides twirled to the title track's unusual fusion of offbeat reggae and 17th century history. A spirited reading of William Blake's "Jerusalem", with its satirical sideswipes at compensation culture, reclaimed this righteous revolutionary anthem from rugby fans, public school assemblies and glib patriots. The stomping rewrite of *Hex Education Hour's* fragile "Hip Priest", entitled "Big New Prinz", survived in live sets until the early 21st century, where Smith's romanticised description of an undervalued artist became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A belatedly issued live album, *I Am Pure As Oranj*, captures the strange, hostile ambience of the dance event itself. You can hear the audience stiffen as Smith's mumbled spoken word bit, "Dog Is Life", fills the expectant auditorium, punctuated by the

inappropriate applause of excited fans. Other rock peasants have briefly dabbled in the realm of high art. Few have done it while simultaneously enjoying hit singles and backing giant dancing hamburgers.

#### CODE: SELFISH FONTANA 1992

Brix left Smith and The Fall, and The Fall left Beggars for Fontana – a major label, where powerful cybernetic arms were grafted onto the body of an act that, on the evidence of their final Beggars release, *Seminal Live*, had perhaps shown signs of weakening. As his contemporaries descended upon seaside towns playing the hits, Smith poured scorn on the burgeoning punk nostalgia bandwagon, fashioning instead a Fall that sounded undeniably contemporary by bringing the group's sound into the digital age. A collaboration with dance producers Coldcut gave rise to the sublime stuttering beats of "Telephone Thing" on *Extricate* (Fontana 1990), and by the following year's *Shift-Work*, Dave Bush was on board, credited with "machines", augmenting a stripped back quartet of longterm inmates Hanley and Scanlon on bass and guitar, with Simon Wolstencroft on drums. Live, The Fall began to sound like a computerised threshing machine, inexorably sucking everything before it into its gaping maw.

The standout album of this phase is 1992's *Code: Selfish*, with Smith's visions of a future Europe on "Free Range", and his comically acerbic deconstruction of thwarted provincial ambition on "The Birmingham School Of Business School", simmering with a barely controlled contempt. "*The jumped-up prats/Laughing stock of Europe/Olympic bidding again and again/Exciting developments,*" he spat at the desperate Bummies. Hanley's distinctive bass playing, usually delivered as a powerful throb amidst gnarly guitars, discovered a new precision amongst the computerised rhythm tracks, and Scanlon was free to play textures rather than riffs. "The Birmingham School" even included a guitar solo, albeit one that sounds contemptuous of the very idea of guitar solos.