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**Sam Batra talks to The Fall's
ogre-in-chief Mark E. Smith
and finds a mellowed man.
Or does she? Keith James
materialized his spirit.**

● In 1987 I left The Fall's *Bend Sinister* LP on a bus back from the Portobello Road. I had just bought it and couldn't afford to replace it at the time; this record which held so much expectation, that I'd listened for eagerly on the *John Peel Show* weeks before its release. *Bend Sinister* became lost property on London Transport — falling into the keeping of hands (and ears) I'll never know.

Of course I ultimately tape-copied the LP from a friend and the loss didn't seem to matter so much. Hearing "Mr Pharmacist" being played at an alternative disco (as they were known then) was still a special thrill. But it took me a while to forgive myself in my adolescent way and somehow The Fall were never quite the same for me.

Seeing them live — by contrast — has always been a mixed experience, sometimes predictably competent, other times uncompromisingly dull. Perhaps, given his vocal delivery, there was some expectation that Mark E. Smith sported his own idiosyncratic flourish, Manchester cousin to Ian Curtis's idiot dance or Morrissey's flounce and flail — but he simply clutches the microphone intensely, occasionally letting go to swing his arms. But for all its lack of visual drama, the frame is always Mark E. Smith's obliquely laconic misanthropy; *Always different, always the same*, the line runs — it's a joke, of course, but it's still true.

They appeared in 1977, somehow punk but not punk, evolving into one of the seminal Manchester groups; in the 80s, they were increasingly associated with images of resentful Manchester folk-history, via titles like "Hit The North" and "Deadbeat Descendent". The city's character and culture permeates their work. Others, heirs to the same tradition, have come and gone — The Smiths, Happy Mondays, Factory itself, all no more. The Stone Roses have submerged — working so long on their second LP that it's become a legend in its not-quite-existence. The rumour is now that the historic city itself is at a standstill, ruled by nothing but gang disorder. Through it all, The Fall, its cultural ambassadors, hover in and around the margins of pop, hanging onto their distinctive voice and lonely direction.

Still, they need some excuse for the disappointments of *Extricate* and *Shiftwork*, the records that made me think I'd grown out of this music, that perhaps *Bend Sinister* was better left on that bus. I suddenly didn't possess the staying power to grant them more than a couple of spins — they just didn't entice me. So, has Mark E. Smith been disillusioned with the pop scene over the last few years, I wondered?

"No, not really. I feel the same as I always did. We started a very long time ago now but we started so young that 14 years has gone by fast. I just keep on writing really... 60% of my practical time is spent writing songs."

Smith's famed misanthropy is hardly apparent in his conversation. He is personable and polite, apologises several times for being late and laughs a lot; all things the mythology dictates that Mark E Smith is not. He's reticent about his work, and unwilling to be drawn on just any old thing. Still, he's perfectly capable of railing when he has to; as per myth. Talk of his work patterns — the current LP was made in two months flat — sends him into familiar territory:

"God, these types who spend their time retiring to the country and thinking about Greenpeace, putting out as few LPs as they possibly can. There seem to be loads of them, I don't want to end up like that. When we were with Fontana they kept getting rid of all these other bands and one day they said to us 'Don't worry we won't review your situation till March. I just thought then and there, forget it we're going now, so we walked straight out. I wasn't going to be treated like that. You need some autonomy and control."

Smith is apparently one of those that *has* to create — making LPs isn't a chore, it's a necessity. It comes naturally (and country houses and Greenpeace don't). The critics may deride him, and occasionally wish his output was less prolific, but it's his driving force. Probably this prolificity has held The Fall together, as each new LP becomes a mental work-out for its writer and main-man. However this may be, the new album *The Infotainment*

"I like dancing to some of the House and Techno things. I like the way they abuse machines. I've always been into that idea."

Scan is the most interesting for years. The songs are memorable, odd phrases and peculiar melodies — and sometimes the lack of them — constantly returning, haunting some crevice in your head. Back on a truly independent label, Permanent Records, run by former Fall manager John Lennard, Smith seems comfortable — and his serrated edge is rediscovered.

With talk of leaving labels and workrates, conversation strays onto the recession (and the most curious disparity): "The recession stuff's a good excuse it seems to me for most things, you know cutbacks and the like. People keep using it as a feeble scapegoat for throwing others on the scrapheap. It's a bit weird isn't it if people aren't going to gigs that they still put the prices of gigs up, when they should be putting the prices down."

Which is fair enough, perhaps, but still expressed more in the manner of man-in-pub than the legendary Man-With-Chip. There's a gap between his uncanny ability as a writer and performer to articulate, and his conversation in interview, often funny, occasionally quotably pointed, but hardly remarkable. Perhaps it's not a complete surprise, though it's a let-down. In a way, of course, it explains The Fall's continued existence: this way he provides himself with a continuing means to comment, cryptically and intelligently — one that suits him, that makes him think that he's in command of. You press on, hoping, probably fruitlessly, for the legendary honed and twisted bile to start spurting.

He is disparaging about Manchester — he recently moved back there from Edinburgh (he says he enjoyed living there) — in a manner that only the Manchester-born could get away with, but his tone of voice indicates a cynical affection for the place — it's an old garment, but he's comfy in it.

"You know, it's settled down a bit there now. When the Hacienda became the place to be, everything got out of hand. Before that there would be all different types hanging out there — Goths, punks, skins, the lot. But then things changed and everyone tried to look like they were in The Stone Roses and pretending they were on E and that. It just got boring and uniform." *Pretending* they were on E? They were, weren't they? "Nah, most of the time they were just pretending."

He cackles as if he were sitting in a working man's club ridiculing the younger generation. These days, he belongs to a bygone era of Manchester sub-culture now old and very distant from the current scene (though "belongs" may always have been the wrong word). Lasting so long brings sagacity with it — not that he didn't always seem somehow plugged directly into ancient Manchester wisdoms and histories. Either way, he has a perspective on the city that means above all that he knows when fellow Mancunians are faking it, running around at raves or out of their heads.

I imagined that his attitude to dance music would be just as cynical — especially as on *Infotainment* several tracks experiment with it. This is hardly core Fall-territory, or so my adolescent self would have thought, but one of the best moments on the LP is the cover of Sister Sledge's "Lost In Music"