

## THE INFOTAINMENT SCAN

PERMANENT 1993

Smith split from Fontana before he was pushed, signed to the independent label Permanent and released *The Infotainment Scan*, now reissued by Castle with an extra CD of supplementary material (CMQDD1227 2xCD). The album, which peaked at number nine in the national charts, adapted Sister Sledge's "Lost In Music" to address the thorny issue of juvenile access to pubs and deconstruct the very notion of dance music. Smith found a sincere sentiment within Steve Bent's novelty record "I'm Going To Spain" that seemed to echo his own cultural displacement, despite being sourced from the Kenny Everett-compiled *World's Worst Record* album.

*The Infotainment Scan* has a strange and uncharacteristically wistful, melancholy quality to it. Lyrically, "It's A Curse" and "A Past Gone Mad" nailed the noxious modern phenomenon of media nostalgia years before Channel 4 began building entire TV schedules around remembering the 70s and the 80s, but both betray a feeling of regret, of being a man out of time. Smith rails against the world whilst realising he is no longer the tastemaker's autodidact of choice. Even with a dance element to his music, he could pass for the titular subject of "Paranoia Man In Cheap Shit Room", a fearful figure "in his early thirties/At the zenith of his powers".

## THE TWENTY-SEVEN POINTS

PERMANENT 1995

*The Infotainment Scan* aside, the mid-90s remains The Fall's least interesting period; yet it's their most thoroughly documented, with six live albums – two of them doubles – covering the four studio albums released during the muddled years from 1993–96. These are supplemented by around four dozen outtakes spread thinly and repetitively over eight compilations on the ominously named Receiver label. As Britpop flourished, recycling retro-Mod aesthetics, there was little space for Smith's scorched earth attitude towards the past. Ironically, just as Pavement launched a career built on appropriating the sound of early 80s Fall, the genuine article released a series of increasingly weak albums, vast portions of which sounded like a standard indie rock guitar outfit, albeit one fronted by a determinedly distinctive vocalist.

1994's *Middle Class Revolt* was the last record to feature the electronics of Dave Bush, and it was bulked out with high-fibre covers of The Groundhogs, The Monks and Henry Cow/Slapp Happy. Brix came back for 1995's *Cerebral Caustic*, co-writing the album's stand-out track, "Bonkers In Phoenix", a satirical sound collage of summer festival experiences that basically graffitied over a sincere attempt at writing a genuine paisley-pop hit. She left for the final time during the tour for 1996's *The Light User Syndrome*. The long serving Craig Scanlon was sacked before the same album which, while offering some hope for the future, featured lacklustre guide vocal tracks over a sonic palette that's cluttered and unfocused. The lead-in single, the 17 minute, three part "Chiselers", described by Smith as "relevant to the recent experiences of Halifax Town football club", was notable for its length and audacity, but arrived on the album proper in a truncated form. The period is perhaps best represented by the unfairly maligned, Smith-assembled live double *The Twenty-Seven Points*. The album adds found snippets and spoken word sections into a sometimes unflatteringly honest yet always entertaining portrait of a group in creative crisis, yet nonetheless capable of genius. "Idiot Joy Showland" is abandoned after less than a minute. The otherwise unrecorded live track

"Noel's Chemical Effluence" is a gradually uncoiling, lean and slinky slice of snake-charming music that ranks amongst the group's finest moments. But on the whole, Smith was a man adrift. There seemed to be no obvious way forward for The Fall. Something was rotten in the state of dear Mark.

## LEVITATE

ARTFUL 1997

## THE MARSHALL SUITE

ARTFUL 1999

## THE UNUTTERABLE

ARTFUL 2000

In April 1998, the last line-up of The Fall with any link – apart from Smith – back to its earliest officially recorded line-up fell apart acrimoniously in New York, though fans who have seen the video of the group's onstage collapse would be hard pressed to tell it apart from any number of similarly shambolic mid-90s live fiascos. But Steve Hanley and Karl Burns were finally gone. This act of severance ultimately enabled the creation of a succession of completely new Fall line-ups. These gangs of anonymous young men, many only mewling infants when "Bingo Master's Breakout" hit the racks, were creatively unburdened by a shared history, or any sense of what The Fall were supposed to be. This in turn unburdened Smith himself, who increasingly resembled the last pink rabbit without any Duracell batteries.

The old gang's last gasp, 1997's ungainly but effective *Levitate*, finds Smith sounding hoarse and thrillingly incoherent over clattering electronica that has none of the streamlined power of Dave Bush's contributions, and instead leaves the group in a heroic struggle with seemingly random hails of beats. In the midst of the chaos, courtesy of keyboard player Julia Nagle, comes the strange pastoral interlude in the middle of "Ten Houses Of Eve", and the piano instrumental "Jap Kid". *Levitate* works miracles with a Fall that had started to sound too much like itself, disguising them with multilayered vocals and noise for one last hurrah.

1998 saw Smith play gigs with hurriedly assembled three-piece line-ups, issuing the famous onstage disclaimer, "If it's me and your granny on bongos, it's The Fall." He released a spoken word album, *The Post Nearly Man* (Artful 14 CD), but things became increasingly desperate. Then Smith returned with a new Fall that retained only Julia Nagle and *The Marshall Suite*, a record that ranks amongst the best of The Fall's career. Guitarist Neville Wilding helped assimilate Tommy Blake's rock 'n' roll revenge number "F-oldin' Money" and The Saints' "This Perfect Day" into The Fall's oeuvre, and "Shake-Off" and "(Jung Nev's) Antidotes" found new ways of meshing rock tropes, noise and Nagle's increasingly pervasive keyboards and electronica, without falling back into familiar patterns. "Touch Sensitive" – a chart hit that never was – later enlivened a Vauxhall car commercial, and was followed by a minor squabble over royalties.

The following year, *The Unutterable* (Eagle EAGCD164 CD) was the last Fall album to feature Nagle. The high point amongst a playful and personable set was "Dr Buck's Letter", a menacing yet amusing re-appropriation of the text of an interview with UK DJ Pete Tong.

## A WORLD BEWITCHED

ARTFUL 2001

## THE REAL NEW FALL LP

ACTION 2003

In 2001, the compilation *A World Bewitched* gathered together various rarities and collaborations in an

alternative history of The Fall's 90s output. It suggested a parallel career rather more daring than much of the decade's official releases indicated at the time. The same year saw yet another entirely new Fall line-up (featuring guitarist Ben Pritchard, soon to become a key player) release *Are You Are Missing Winner*. The group knocked out an unapologetically simplistic set of high-octane punk noise, free from feminine keyboard embellishments, as if to settle a score. In retrospect, *Missing Winner* is the sound of the new Fall clearing its throat before commencing the job of reclaiming the group's reputation, and releasing its best album for over a decade.

2003's *Country On The Click* was retitled *The Real New Fall LP* after bootlegged versions made it out in advance of the official release date. This record and its attendant singles meshed the pop sensibility of the Beggars Banquet years with the cohesion of the high points of the early 90s. "Mod Mock Goth" was an almost unbearably dense meditation on the Camber Sands All Tomorrow's Parties event, whilst the sinister football terrace stomp, "Theme From Sparta FC", could have been a number one single. The Fall were being extensively reviewed, rated and written about again.

## 50,000 FALL FANS CAN'T BE WRONG

SANCTUARY 2004

## INTERIM

HIP PRIEST 2004

## FALL HEADS ROLL

SLOGAN 2005

## THE COMPLETE PEEL SESSIONS

1978-2004

SANCTUARY 2005

In 2004, *50,000 Fall Fans Can't Be Wrong* bucked a trend of unfocused Fall compilations to provide the first phase-by-phase overview of the group's history. Smith's fond imaginings that younger fans outnumbered the league of bald headed men always present in his audience were becoming fact. And some spectacular live shows did nothing to disappoint. Last year, *Fall Heads Roll* consolidated The Fall's return to form, referencing the best of nearly three decades of different approaches. "Bo Demnick" and "Clasp Hands" rocked with the rockabilly rhythms of the Step Forward years. The monotonously mesmerising "Blindness", though far better in its Peel Session form, referenced the glory days of "Garden" or "And This Day". Lyrically, Smith now deals in fragments and found phrases, sounding like no one but himself. Even if the complete narratives of *Grotesque* and the pin-sharp social satire of *The Infotainment Scan* appear lost forever, his voice is once again uncommonly clear.

Recent live recordings include the *2G+2* album (Action TAKE18 CD) and *Touch Sensitive Box* (Castle CMYBX752 5xCD), which document the same line-up playing largely similar material over six dates. *Interim* includes rare returns to the early 80s songs "Mere Pseud Mag Ed" and "Spoilt Victorian Child" alongside spirited readings of new material in unusual settings. A fire alarm interrupts a rehearsal run-through of "Open The Box", but is assimilated despite its persistence. Finally, the six CD set of the group's 24 *John Peel Sessions* topped various polls at the end of 2005. Had it come out ten years ago, it might have looked like a tombstone. Here lies The Fall and Mark E Smith. But luckily, Smith, though now almost 50, is once again at the zenith of his powers and the *Sessions* collection is anything but a full stop. The Fall's Peel box, and by association their recorded output in general, reads as a secret history of the last three decades of popular music. □

PHOTO: KAREN HOPE



Mark E Smith on stage in Preston, 2005