

25 YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, IN A BASEMENT ARTS SPACE IN CENTRAL MANCHESTER IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE THAT INCLUDED THE BUZZCOCKS AND COMPOSER TREVOR WISHART,

The Fall

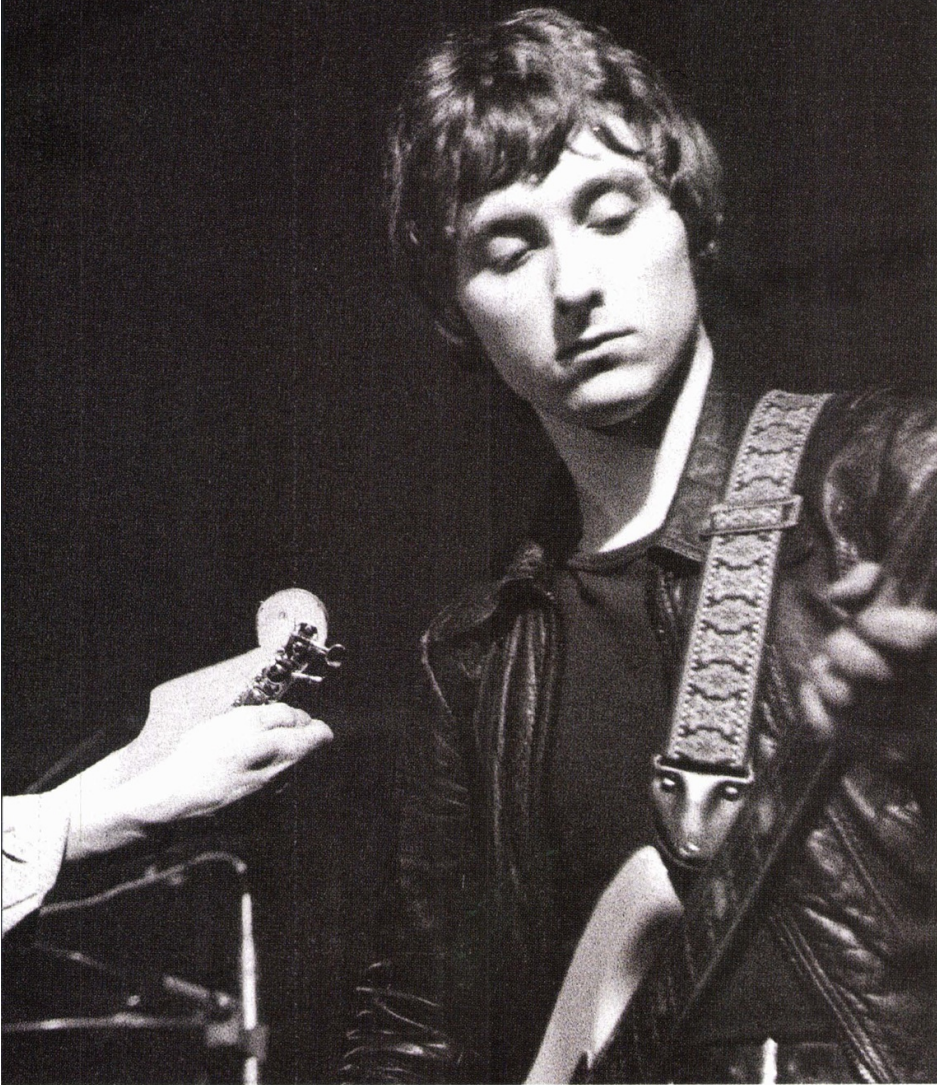
STEPPED ONTO A STAGE FOR THE FIRST TIME. SIMON FORD DOCUMENTS THE EARLIEST MOMENTS IN THE LIFE OF ONE OF THE MOST UNCOMPROMISING GROUPS OF THE AGE, AND TALKS TO ORIGINAL MEMBERS MARTIN BRAMAH, TONY FRIEL AND UNA BAINES

Photos: Kevin Cummins

Primal



Scenes



Everything has to start somewhere, even a group that seems to have been around forever. This month marks the 25th anniversary of The Fall's first live performance. Fittingly for a group that soon became a byword for credibility among members of the musical underground, the performance took place in a basement space in central Manchester. It was the primal scene that set The Fall on the road to creating a body of work which has been described by Michael Bracewell, in his 1997 book *England Is Mine*, as being "as important to the history of English pop as cubism was to the development of European painting" – quite an achievement for a bunch of disenfranchised, Northern working class youths.

But who were these people and how did they meet? The oldest member of the group, Mark Edward Smith, was born on 5 March 1957 in a quiet, leafy avenue in Prestwich, about five miles north of Manchester city centre. The name of the area derived from the Old English words 'preost' and 'wic', meaning 'priest's retreat' or 'the dwelling of a priest' – a fitting lair for the future Hip Priest of legend. Smith was a smart kid: he passed his 11-plus exam and went to Stand Grammar School in nearby Whitefield. Among previous 'Old Standians' was Lord Clive of Plassey (1725-74), famous for his role in the expansion of the British Empire into India.

From an early age Smith was healthily immune to the blandishments of pop music, preferring instead anything that sounded strange or different: Black Sabbath's "Paranoid", The Groundhogs, Van Der Graaf Generator. He left school in the summer of 1973 and enrolled as an A-level student at St John's College. One of his fellow students at the College was Una Baines. The two had already met during the summer at a fair in Heaton Park. "When I met Mark I was still wearing my black satin Marc Bolan jacket and was into Bowie and stuff like that," Baines recalls. "But it was like I was outgrowing that sort of stuff; the glam scene had become just too commercial. Mark introduced me to The Velvet Underground."

Baines was a month younger than Smith. They both found studying at St John's College financially difficult and soon left. After a stint working as an office clerk, Baines began training as a psychiatric nurse. She left home and rented a flat with an attic on Kingswood Road, just round the corner from Prestwich Hospital. Smith, meanwhile, was working as a clerk in an import-export business on Manchester Docks. It provided a steady income at a time when unemployment in Manchester and the rest of the country was growing. His desk job also provided cover for his writing, and he took full advantage of his breaks to use the office typewriters, tapping out short stories and poems, fragments of which he would later transmute into lyrics, inspired by the 'weird' tales of HP Lovecraft and the strung-out science fiction of Philip K Dick.

One day in the mid-70s (no one remembers when exactly), Smith and Baines were relaxing on the couch at Smith's parents' house, listening to The Velvet