

The Primer: THE FALL

A bi-monthly guide to the selected recordings of a particular artist or genre

This month: Stewart Lee takes a dragnet through the wonderful and frightening world of The Fall to plot the best route through Mark E Smith's ever-mounting discography of more than 130 albums, reissues and live recordings. Illustration: Savage Pencil

The Fall made their first appearance on vinyl in October 1977, on a 10" EP of recordings from their local Manchester punk venue, entitled *Short Circuit: Live At The Electric Circus* (Virgin VCL5003/CDVCL5003). The two spindly songs included, "Stepping Out" and "Last Orders", gave no indication that, nearly three decades and 27 studio albums later, The Fall would turn out to be the only group to survive the punk era with critical status undiminished and critical faculties intact. Over the years, the group have mixed rockabilly rhythms, pounding riffs, experimental collages, misappropriated electronica, a subversive pop sensibility, and a dark and often deceptive sense of the absurd. Frontman Mark E Smith's immediately recognisable anti-vocals, stream of consciousness lyrics and leftfield literary references to create a body of work unequalled in scope and sheer size by any other rock outfit.

Smith, The Fall's single long term constant, is publicly disdainful of what he calls "look-back bores" and the cult of short term nostalgia. Fall sets rarely include any songs older than the last couple of albums, unless they are seasoned covers of 60s garage classics and old rockabilly riffs ripe for reinterpretation, or songs that fans don't really like, offered up as if to teach them to appreciate the new stuff. Smith refuses to become a keeper of sacred relics – the living interpreter of his own back catalogue. Compared

to The Fall, even Dylan's apparently sacrilegious approach to the casual rephrasing of his own legacy of song seems accommodating and respectful. The very notion of a Primer on The Fall would no doubt irritate Smith a little, as if someone were preparing his obituary, and the nature of the group's output and the passion of its followers makes it impossible to agree on generally accepted highlights. The most recent Fall record is always the most important one. The music speaks for itself, albeit in an often impenetrable accent, and about things that appear to make little sense.

Perhaps appropriately, The Fall's recorded output has been in comparative disarray for some years, with semi-legal CD reissues mastered from scratched, skipping vinyl, songs mislabelled, and vital singles and session tracks completely overlooked. Compilation albums have been assembled from unsourced outtakes that were allowed to fall, in lean times, into the hands of unscrupulous labels, as if in exchange for plastic bags full of used fivers. There are more Fall live albums than are necessary, and most are of a sound quality best described as no-fi. The group's late 90s studio output is already deleted. Details of the original label release are included in the headers below, while the text points out the most reliable currently available CD version of each relevant record, avoiding illegal or bootleg releases.

THE FALL LIVE AT THE WITCH TRIALS

STEP FORWARD 1979

DRAGNET

STEP FORWARD 1979

TOTALE'S TURNS

ROUGH TRADE 1980

All the early Fall singles are collected as extra tracks on the satisfyingly thorough Castle reissues of their first and second albums *Live At The Witch Trials* (CMQDD847 CD) and *Dragnet* (CMRCD848 CD). From the opening notes of August 1978's "Bingo Master's Breakout" 7", The Fall were sheltering from the spit-storm behind the convenient punk umbrella, while in fact defining themselves in opposition to any prevailing orthodoxies. As youngsters, Smith and his cohorts were nourished by the 70s counterculture drip-feed of Krautrock, Iggy Pop, Captain Beefheart and weird Prog, and it could be argued The Fall became Peel favourites in the 80s precisely because they reflected a decade of digesting the DJ's more extreme musical choices. The Sex Pistols may have inspired Smith to form a group, but there any comparison between the two ended. The Fall's debut album, January 1979's *Live At The Witch Trials*, is characterised by Yvonne Pawlett's cheap and nasty keyboard sound, suggesting a toddler channelling Van Der Graaf Generator. Producer Bob Sargeant attempted to counterbalance the group's inherent

