

“MARK LET FLY WITH SUCH VENOM FROM DAY ONE. I REMEMBER HE SORT OF REACHED INTO THE AUDIENCE AND VIRTUALLY POKED HIS FINGER UP HOWARD DEVOTO’S NOSE”

Below: The Fall play out in Manchester, August 1977. Individual portraits, left to right: Bramah, Friel, Baines, Smith

A belief in their own creativity dictated against The Fall playing any cover versions that night. Instead the set consisted of original material, including the anti-racist rants “Hey! Fascist” and “Race Hatred” (complete with its “*What yer gonna do about it?*” chorus), the bitter humour of “Bingo Master’s Breakout”, and the adrenalin rush of “Psycho Mafia”. The set ended with an extended two-chord dirge titled “Repetition”. The song was almost a manifesto for the new group, albeit one laced with a heavy dose of sarcasm, with Smith’s lyric prophetically announcing, “*Repetition in the music and we’re never gonna lose it*”.

The sound was poor and the musicianship rudimentary, but the commitment, range and charisma were there for all to see. It was a phenomenal debut but before The Fall could move on, they needed to find a drummer who shared at least some of the group’s ethos. The answer was close to hand.

Prior to The Fall, Bramah had been a member of a putative group called Nuclear Angel, which also included Karl Burns. “I first met Karl Burns on the street,” recalls Bramah. “He had this picture of Hitler and two of his henchmen and one had a ring round his head and Karl was insisting this was his father. That was my first meeting with Karl Burns, this mad kid claiming his dad was a Nazi.”

Burns was a natural musician on guitar and drums. Nuclear Angel never performed live but used to rehearse in the cellar of a shoe shop off Deansgate (in Manchester city centre) that was owned by the bass player’s father. Here they would thrash out New York Dolls and Stooges covers – until one night they got carried away and trashed all their equipment. At the time Burns had long hair and was into Heavy Metal, but Bramah persuaded him to give the new group a chance. ‘Dave’ therefore holds the dubious honour of being the first of many members to be sacked from The Fall.

The Fall’s second gig took place on 3 June at a ‘Stuff the Jubilee’ festival (1977 marked 25 years of the

Queen’s reign) in a space known as The Squat on Devas Street. Earlier the group had attended an anti-Jubilee demo. “There was about 12 of us,” Baines recalls. “Someone tried to unfurl this banner with ‘Stuff the Jubilee’ on it and the police came along and said, ‘Put that banner down’. He refused saying it was his democratic right to protest and they just pulled him into the back of a police van and kicked his head in. So that was the end of the demo.”

The Squat was situated in a decrepit building that had once been the home of the Royal Manchester College of Music. When the College revealed plans to demolish the building, it was occupied by students who then successfully campaigned for it to be turned into a live music venue. Other local groups appearing at ‘Stuff the Jubilee’ included The Drones, Warsaw (who would soon rename themselves Joy Division), The Worst and The Negatives (which included Paul Morley on guitar and photographer Kevin Cummins on drums). Baines, who now had her own keyboard, remembers the night well: “I played the national anthem with all these explosion sounds from my new keyboard. It was called a Snoopy and the week after I bought it, it got reviewed in *Sounds* or *Melody Maker* as the worst keyboard you could get – totally slated. It was just the cheapest, but even so I never did pay off the loan.”

Later that month The Fall played a Rock Against Racism benefit supporting The Buzzcocks and The Verbals at North East London Polytechnic. As Martin Bramah explains, there was always a strong left wing element in the group, but they were wary of bandwagons: “The core of that left wing attitude was working class struggle and that’s what we related to. Una was a very strong feminist and would be prepared to strike up an argument in a pub with any man who said anything remotely sexist. Tony Friel was a member of the local Communist Party.”

These were politically polarised times. A month later in August 1977 there were violent clashes as demonstrators tried to halt a National Front march through Lewisham, South London. Although appreciating

the exposure Rock Against Racism gigs gave the group, Smith found the populist and sloganeering attitude of the organisers ideologically suspect. “I was disillusioned very quickly,” he told Ian Penman in *NME* in August 1978. “I’d always equated left wing politics with revolution... What happens is before you go on they say, ‘Will you hold this poster up?’, and it’s a picture of Belsen: ‘DON’T LET IT HAPPEN AGAIN’. I would say, ‘We’re a political band, that’s what we sing about.’ But they want you to make announcements between songs; they see you as entertainment. You might as well be singing Country & Western.”

Along with Rock Against Racism benefits, The Buzzcocks continued to be the best source of gigs for the new group. On 4 July The Fall supported The Buzzcocks at the launch party of the Vortex at Crackers on Wardour Street, London. The Buzzcocks were now the leading group in Manchester, and in August signed to United Artists for £75,000, which must have seemed like a fortune at the time. Record company interest in other Manchester groups was stimulated by articles such as Paul Morley’s cover story for *NME* in July 1977. The cover line read: “Manchester: The Truth Behind The Bizarre Cult Sweeping A City’s Youth.” The article featured The Buzzcocks, Howard Devoto, Slaughter And The Dogs and The Drones. The Fall were classed – alongside Warsaw and The Worst – as interesting newcomers.

Over the weekend of 1-2 October the new Manchester groups put together their first real collective show of strength. The venue was the Electric Circus, an ex-bingo hall situated two miles north of the city centre. Like many Manchester venues, it had seen better days, but its scuzzy informality was perfect for the new groups and their fans. In fact it was the popularity of the local groups that led to the club’s downfall. The Electric Circus had a legal capacity of 280, but the likes of The Buzzcocks were regularly attracting audiences of 500 or more. By October the club was facing closure due to numerous breaches of fire regulations.



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The line-up for the first night of the two day festival consisted of Manicured Noise, The Swords, Big In Japan, Steel Pulse and The Drones. The second night opened with Warsaw, followed by The Prefects, The Worst, The Fall, the debut of Howard Devoto's new group, Magazine, and finally The Buzzcocks. At the end of the night there was a stage invasion, and as with many Manchester gigs of the time, John The Postman came on to sing a version of "Louie Louie". Both nights were recorded by Virgin and selected tracks were released on a 10" album, *Short Circuit*, in June 1978. The two songs by The Fall – "Stepping Out" and "Last Orders", both dominated by Tony Friel's lead basslines – represented the group's first appearance on vinyl.

By the time of the Electric Circus festival The Fall had found champions in the music press in the shape of Paul Morley at *NME* and Chris Brazier at *Melody Maker*. Both writers emphasised how the group's strong political content and complex song structures placed it in a different league from its peers. The Fall were growing in confidence and hitting a peak of productivity, but they were still loosely organised as a collective, and decision-making was increasingly difficult. In an attempt to solve the problem, a new figure was brought into the group's structure.

Kay Carroll was almost ten years older than the rest of the group and had already been married, had two children, got divorced and was now a nurse at Prestwich Hospital. It was there that she met Una Baines and she soon became a regular at the Kingswood Road soirées, eventually moving into the flat. "When I heard the band for the first time it blew me away," says Carroll. "I wasn't expecting it at all, I wasn't expecting anything to tell you the truth, but their sound was so hypnotic, they had a sound like Can, and Mark's poetry was – and still is – just pure genius. I was hooked!"

As The Fall's workrate increased, Smith's prolonged absences from his office desk became increasingly problematic, and he eventually left to sign on the dole.

It was not long before he was joined by Carroll, who used part of her last pay cheque to pay for a phone to be installed in the flat, so she didn't have to use the public phone box across the road to book gigs.

At the end of October, The Buzzcocks released "Orgasm Addict", their first single for United Artists, and set off on a UK tour. Among the support acts were The Worst, The Flys and The Fall. Richard Boon, The Buzzcocks' manager, was very supportive of the group and the following month put up the money for its first studio session.

On 9 November the group went into Manchester's Indigo Studios and recorded four songs, "Bingo Master's Breakout", "Psycho Mafia", "Repetition" and a version of "Frightened". The plan was for all the tracks to be released by Boon on either New Hormones or United Artists as a 17 minute EP, but interest waned as Boon's time was increasingly taken up with managing The Buzzcocks' burgeoning career. The tapes were returned to the group and hawked around various other labels, but none seemed able to deal with The Fall's uncompromising attitude and commitment to self-determination over matters such as marketing. The group thought about releasing a single themselves, but as they could barely afford their own phone it was never going to be a feasible proposition. (Three of the tracks, "Bingo Master's Breakout", "Psycho Mafia" and "Repetition", were eventually released as the group's first single in August 1978 on the Step Forward label.)

By the end of 1977 the Manchester Musicians' Collective had relocated to the Band On The Wall on Swan Street in the Ancoats area of Manchester. Three groups would play each week, with the takings, after expenses, being distributed equally among the musicians. The Fall debuted there on 13 November along with Trevor Wishart and Pride. The set ended with "Repetition", which Smith prefaced with the warning: "This song's gonna last for three hours."

The year ended with a Rock Against Racism benefit on 23 December at Stretford Civic Centre. The Fall

topped a bill that included John Cooper Clarke and The Worst, plus an encore by John The Postman. An ultra lo-fi recording of The Fall's set was recently released as *Live 1977* by Cog Sinister/Voiceprint. It was a significant gig for Friel, because, as Bramah announced to the audience: "It's the bass player's last gig. It's like losing your left leg."

The main reason for Friel's departure was his disapproval of the amount of managerial control taken on by Carroll. Bramah and Baines were also concerned about her growing influence and how it was affecting the internal politics of the group. "When Mark and Kay became a team," Bramah explains, "it became a bit of a dictatorship and that changed the band because we'd started as equal friends. Kay was his enforcer, his strength and his mouthpiece within the band. We all recognised his talent and just put up with things, but I think Kay made it harder to be in the band, especially for Tony, who thought The Fall were as much his vehicle as Mark's. He'd thought of the name and was the primary musician within the band."

Friel had lasted for just eight months. Baines left not long after in early 1978. Later that year, Karl Burns departed, followed by Bramah in April 1979. Within two years of forming, The Fall, with the exception of Mark E Smith, had a completely new line-up, a pattern of attrition and renewal that has been repeated to this day. After The Fall, Friel went on to form The Passage with Dick Witts. He is currently the bass player in The Woodbank Street Band. Baines and Bramah subsequently formed The Blue Orchids, and a compilation of their work, *A Darker Bloom: The Blue Orchids Collection*, has just been released by Cherry Red. In 1989 Bramah rejoined The Fall but left again the following year. Today he still writes songs and plays the guitar, but earns his living as a van driver. Baines works at a community centre in Whalley Range, South Manchester. She helps organise the annual Whalley Range festival and, showing admirable consistency, is in the process of setting up a women's musicians' collective. As for Mark E Smith... □



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