

"EVERY WEEKEND WE WERE GETTING OUT OF OUR FACES. BUT WE DIDN'T SEE IT AS A NIHILISTIC THING BECAUSE TO US IT WAS A QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE, WE WERE HUNGRY TO SEE DIFFERENT WAYS OF BEING"

Previous page: Mark E Smith, Martin Bramah and Tony Friel, The Electric Circus, Manchester, October 1977
Below: Bramah (on floor), Karl Burns, Smith, Friel and Una Baines inside the Kingswood Road flat (left) and outside Prestwich Hospital, Manchester, mid-1977

Underground and The Doors, when Smith's sister, Barbara, came home with two new friends, Martin Bramah and Tony Friel. "Mark and I shared an interest in music," Friel recalls, "and would spend many evenings listening to records. Mark had an interesting collection, lots of bands I never listened to before, like Can, and 60s US punk bands."

Bramah and Friel had met at Heys Boys Secondary School. Bramah remembers Friel as "a very eccentric boy. He got picked on a lot, but he had this wild imagination. I was drawn to him because he was full of mad ideas and tall tales". Bramah left school with just one O-level, in art. "We were really just factory fodder," he says. "It was a boys' school, very military in attitude, so we just tried to avoid it as much as we could. We would wander into town and do shoplifting. To be honest, most of the instruments we used to start The Fall were stolen." Like Smith and Baines he lasted just three months in further education. His teacher at Radcliffe Further Education College described trying to teach him as like "pissing against the wind". Friel left school without any qualifications but was determined to make his way as a musician. "I always had an interest in art and music," he says. "The first record I bought was The Rolling Stones' 'Get Off Of My Cloud'. At the age of 11 or 12, I really got into Marc Bolan, and he inspired me to play guitar."

Friel, Bramah, Smith and Baines would often meet at the Kingswood Road flat to take drugs (acid, speed, magic mushrooms), play music and talk about what

they wanted to do with their lives. "We were totally wrapped up in music," Bramah says. "it meant a lot to us. The bands we loved, we loved dearly, it was our escape from what the world was offering us. Every weekend we were getting out of our faces. But we didn't see it as a nihilistic thing because to us it was a quest for knowledge, we were hungry to see different ways of being. We were all writing poetry."

Soon after coming together this quartet of friends decided to form a group. At first Bramah was going to be the singer, with Smith on guitar, Friel on bass and Baines on drums. It soon became apparent, however, that Smith was never going to learn to play the guitar, and he swapped roles with Bramah. Baines was also unlikely to be able to afford a drum kit and instead she started saving up for a keyboard. Even then they might not have taken it any further had it not been for the visit to Manchester in June 1976 of The Sex Pistols. The four decided to go to the gig, at the Lesser Free Trade Hall, after reading a reference to The Stooges in Neil Spencer's legendary *NME* review of an early Pistols show. It turned out to be an empowering experience, reinforced a month later when The Pistols returned to Manchester and were supported by local groups Slaughter And The Dogs and The Buzzcocks. As Bramah explains, "The music scene was very different then. People didn't start bands in Manchester. The gigs were all at big venues and bands came from out of town and half of them were American. You didn't think you could really do it, until

the punk thing happened."

A new urgency was injected into the group, but there was still the important question of what they should call themselves. According to Bramah, Smith's nominations included Master Race And The Death Sense and, somewhat less inflammatory, The Shades. For a while they were The Outsiders, after the novel (*L'Étranger*) by Albert Camus. When they discovered another group were already using that name, Friel suggested The Fall, the title of another book by Camus (*La Chute*). At a draft stage entitled "A Puritan Of Our Time", *La Chute* told the story of Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a successful Parisian barrister who came to regard his bourgeois existence as a sham and exiled himself to Amsterdam where he became a self-styled 'judge penitent', prosecutor of both himself and those he met. It was a perfect name for the new group: simple, distinctive and evocative of the withering social and moral critiques that would come to define Smith's lyric writing.

At the beginning of 1977 there were few signs to indicate that Manchester would become a centre for innovation, the site of a new wave in music. The consequences of The Sex Pistols' appearances took some time to filter through to live venues and works on vinyl. The first hint of what was to come occurred on 29 January, when The Buzzcocks' *Spiral Scratch* EP was released on the group's own New Hormones label. The city's music scene continued to develop out of the



30 THE WIRE

sight of the national music press, until *Melody Maker* ran a story, on 14 May, titled "New Wave Devolution: Manchester Waits For The World To Listen". The article focused on The Buzzcocks, The Drones and Slaughter And The Dogs, and included a succinct description of the local milieu by Tosh Ryan, who ran Rabid Records, the label which had issued Slaughter And The Dogs' first single: "The area is so neglected, so economically deprived and full of massive housing complexes, that the mood of the place was right and ready for a new movement in music with a markedly different criteria of success. What has developed is peculiar to Manchester and I can only hope that instead of going to London for future deals, the agents and record companies will come here."

An important component in this 'new movement in music' was the Manchester Musicians' Collective, which had been established at the beginning of the year by Dick Witts and Trevor Wishart. Witts was a musician who had come to Manchester to study percussion. With money he earned working for The Hallé Orchestra, he promoted concerts of contemporary classical music and became interested in the idea of musicians organising themselves into co-operatives and collectives. At the same time, Wishart was employed as a composer-in-residence by North West Arts, the regional branch of the Arts Council. It was Wishart's idea to set up a collective to share equipment and put on gigs. "We wanted to know how these kids made music when they were musically

illiterate," Witts explains. "This was fascinating because we were overburdened with knowledge about music, we were just playing other people's stuff, and here were these kids coming along playing something from nowhere."

North West Arts occupied an office, shop and basement cafe on King Street, one of the most exclusive streets in Manchester's city centre. Witts persuaded the organisation to let out the basement on Monday nights for the Collective to use. From The Fall, it was Friel who first made contact with Witts and the Collective. "It had quite an impact on me personally," Friel says. "I met lots of interesting people and it turned me on to 'New Music', which has been an interest ever since." Friel persuaded the other members of The Fall to attend the Collective's meetings, and eventually the group were offered the chance to play. There was one problem: The Fall didn't have a drummer. Through a local advertisement they found 'Dave', an insurance salesman and rabid Conservative whose one attempt at songwriting was entitled "Landslide Victory". He was far from perfect, but for the moment he had to do. Another problem was that Una Baines had nothing to play. The bank loan she had applied for in order to buy a keyboard was still being processed. So with no instrument, she had to stand in the audience.

No one involved can remember the exact date of the gig, but Witts recalls the venue as being "like a fashionable restaurant in the late 70s, with everything

white. It was done out like a small white cave. We just took the tables and chairs out. Mark and Martin, who were taller than the others, had to bend down because of the low ceiling. It wasn't really public, the audience was just a group of other musicians sitting around listening."

Part of that audience consisted of local heroes The Buzzcocks. "The first gig was recorded, so somebody might have a tape somewhere," says Bramah. "It was a small room and about half the audience was The Buzzcocks. Mark just let fly with such venom from day one. I remember he just sort of reached into the audience and virtually poked his finger up Howard Devoto's nose."

For Friel the gig was the opportunity he'd been waiting for: "As you'd expect it was a bit rough – just right! We were really pleased to have a chance to play outside the bedsit. People were kind and it was very encouraging." What hit the small audience immediately was the intensity of the group, especially Smith, who, according to Witts, "howled the place down". Later, Baines told Witts: "I don't know what the fuck he was doing. I've never heard him do that before, it scared me!" Bramah was not so surprised: "It was just welling up inside us all. That was the way we were living, that was the way we felt and that was the way Mark was. I mean, if you went out to a club with Mark he'd pick a fight with someone. But that was just Mark: irrational and erratic. He didn't practise it, he didn't plan it, he was just like that."



THE WIRE 31