



Mancunian Caustic

An interview with the Fall's Mark E Smith.

I met Mark E Smith when the Fall played Christchurch in August 1982. The Fall had just toured Australia and Smith had been injured playing soccer with the road crew.

"Yeah, over me eye. That's right," he recalls 13 years later. "How are ya? Is everything all right?"

Fine, cock, fine, as the Northerners would say. What are your memories of that tour?

"Not very fond, really," he laughs. "The New Zealand bit was the only good bit."

I remember you were disgusted with facets of Australian life, like Kings Cross.

"Yeah, I didn't enjoy that tour at all, but we've been back there since, and it was all right."

The Fall have been Britain's anti-bullshit barometer ever since Smith staggered from his Manchester bedroom in 1978 with a master plan and the single 'Bingo Master's Break Out'. Seventeen years later, and their longevity suggests they could be the Rolling Stones of the post punk generation.

"You're the second person that's said that to me. I just take things every fookin' six months, mate. I never plan ahead — that's the ironic thing. As far as the Stones are concerned, I think they're a bit old for it really. If you've got money, I don't understand why people like that carry on. If I had their kind of money, I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't even go outside the 'ouse. And I don't really see the Fall like that, as there's been about 10 different Falls, line-up wise and attitude wise."

The constant line-up changes are part of Smith's anti-formula philosophy, an attitude that's attracting new and younger fans to the band.

"The funny thing is the audience keeps getting younger and it's not just me getting older. I've been talking to people who're just 20 and they got into us a year ago, and that's remarkable. When audiences and sales start dropping, that's when I'll give it up. But, at the moment, I've still got something to say, and I don't think we've done the proper LP yet."

"What you've got in England at the moment is every bloody group and his brother reforming. So, you've got the Searchers and some beat and all the punk groups have reformed — even fooking Wah! Heat. People you thought were dead and buried forever, they're all coming back now. There's a big market in retrogression — very depressing really."

Doubly depressing when bands like Wah!

Heat were basically crap to start with.

"Yeah, that's right." Smith dissolves in laughter. "They were crap anyway. They'll be a parody of their former selves, which was shit anyway."

When Smith eases off the laughter button, I suggest the Fall's career could be construed as having a dozen reformations, the way he's fired and hired people.

"Yeah, that's right. I should have one running on the sideline, like a Fall Mark III, while the proper one's going, just in case."

The latest Fall survivors managed to make the studio before they were fired (joke!), and turned out *Cerebral Caustic*, astonishingly enough, the band's twenty-fifth album. It's bare, garage energy is a welcome alternative to the carefully preened surfaces of most 90s product, but too many of the songs sound incomplete, rushed.

"On our last couple of LPs, we were getting very techno, so I went back to more distorted sort of stuff. It's more up-front," explains Smith. "And I wanted to get *Cerebral* out really quick. That's the beauty of this label I'm on at the moment [Permanent in Britain, distributed by BMG], you can actually bring an LP out whenever it's done, as opposed to a lot of labels in Britain who want you to spend two years on an LP — a year making it, six months marketing it, and another six months promoting it. It loses all impetus. Gone are the days when you can bring out two LPs a year of new material. But I can do this with this label, and we turned *Cerebral Caustic* around in two and a half months."

"We were on Phonogram for a couple of years and it was a real drag. It was like: 'You've got to record an LP in the summer and it's got to come out the next May.' So you spend six months talking about it, and I found it really boring. With Phonogram it was getting to the stage where they were paying us not to record. It was cheaper for them to give us money for an LP and not record it. Believe it or not."

So, to album titles: *Cerebral Caustic*, *Slates*, *Hex Education Hour*, *Perverted by Language*, *Totales Turns*, *The Frenz Experiment* et al. Where do they spring from?

"I dunno," Smith readily admits. "Although I usually spend more time on the names of the LPs than on the titles of the songs, as I think it's important to keep a theme of names running through the LPs."

The song titles on *Cerebral Caustic* are Smith's usual cryptic slurs of topicality, per-

sonal unpleasanties and things he hasn't worked out yet. 'The Joke' starts the album, and it's very much the case of the best track first up.

"People are very afraid to say things in England at the moment if they're not PC (politically correct). It's getting very American. It's being pushed on us, I think, through the media. Y'know, food and everything has got to be green related and all that. It's quite funny seeing British people adapt to that sort of thing as we've always had really shitty diets. We eat worse than the Australians and New Zealanders," Smith adds as a humorous afterthought. That's 'The Joke'.

So, 'Bonkers in Phoenix' could be about a mass murderer in Arizona and 'The Aphid' about life as a mutant bug?

"Well, 'Bonkers' is just about open air festivals in Britain, like Glastonbury. It sounds like the sort of thing you'd hear if you were with 100,000 stoned people, right at the back of a festival. With 'The Aphid', I had this really good tune, like an early 60s dance tune, so I tried to do it like one of those dance crazed songs like 'The Twist', a bit wacky."

Yeah, c'mon do 'The Aphid'. Could catch on.

If the Fall have been the bullshit detectors all these years, then Smith has been the watchdog — an outspoken, caustic wit, seemingly always on the cover of one of the British music weeklies. He's a press favourite, always reliable for a good quote.

"I don't pay much attention to that," Smith justifies. "The rock mags aren't as powerful as they used to be, which is a good thing. I'm not bothered with them. For me, it's like water off a duck's back after 14 years. The last time I saw you in 1982, you would've lived or died by what they said. The *NME* used to be really good, but now it's very insular, what's happening around London, and that's bad."

Smith is still based in his native Manchester — a city, by all accounts, that's now riddled with drugs and violence.

"Territory wise, it's very rough. I try to comment on it, but I'm not gonna move from here. I did move to Scotland a couple of years ago, but I came back here. I like it at the moment. It got very trendy a couple of years ago, with the psychedelic scene, but now that's over it's good."

How was your time in Edinburgh?

"I enjoyed it too much. That's why I came back. It was too good. It was like paradise, a

lovely city. In Edinburgh, I was gonna write the next day, and then I was gonna write the next day, but you don't. You end up walking in the parks and sitting in the pub all day and going to clubs at night — not conducive to creativity."

Talking of creativity, the Fall's status as a singles band seems to have fallen.

"The last year or so, I've just not bothered releasing singles. It's a complete fookin' waste of time releasing singles and videos. You only have to sell about 10,000 to get in the Top 30, as people don't buy them any more."

So, we won't be seeing the Fall on *Top of the Pops*?

"I fookin' stopped watching that five years ago," complains Smith. "It's full of novelty stuff with a dance beat with a banjo over it or something. Or else it's some crappy old song that your mum or dad used to play when you were about fookin' 12."

Are the Fall the antidote to that sickening side of pop culture?

"Yeah, it's only grist for my mill. That's why our audiences are getting younger. Kids aren't as daft as they're cracked up to be. If you were 19, would you put up with the crap that's Number One (Robson Green and Jerome Flynn). It's like two Irish fellas or two comedians singing something like an old Elvis Presley ballad. Remarkable."

"Do you ever see that bloke out of Flying Nun at all?" Smith changes the subject. "The guy Chris Knox. He's got a record out here y'know, and it's a total fookin' rip-off of the *Hit the North* cover, with something like a dart board on the cover."

I'll let him know. Meanwhile, "sounds fooking great" is how Smith describes the new seven-piece, twin drummers Fall, with Brix again included. They could be over here later in the year as an appendix to a tour of Japan.

As the interview drew to a close, I couldn't help wondering how Smith had responded to Manchester United's FA Cup loss that weekend.

"I'm a City fan," he retorts.

Commiserations.

"You should've been here on Saturday when United lost the Cup. It was hilarious. You'd think the Queen had died or something. It was fookin' pathetic."

Other than being a City fan, have you made any other career blunders?

"My career is a blunder, George. I'm skint."

GEORGE KAY

