

The Fall at IndigO2, Greenwich North, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Andrew McLaren

The Fall are so often described according to their history as a group: the turnover of members, prolific recording output, even as an institution, as the late John Peel famously noted: “always the same, always different.” In their newest incarnation, they remain a work-in-progress, and on stage, the present collaboration between Mark E. Smith and crew is arguably the most successful yet.

The current line-up is fairly stable, with Elena Poulou (Mrs. Smith, keyboards) David Spurr (bass) and Keiron Melling (drums) all veterans of the last three recorded albums, with their regular guitarist Pete Greenway on paternity leave, temporarily replaced by the American Tim Presley (who had played in the group in 2006-7).

From the vantage point of my balcony seat, the playing field was clearly established even as the DJs warmed up the crowd. Just as the last time I’d seen them a year earlier (Electric Ballroom, Camden) three mic stands stood up front, destined for continual rearrangement throughout Mark E. Smith’s apparently shambolic stage presence. Yet, the stage antics for which he has become notorious: fiddling with various amplifiers mid-song, sitting backstage while shuffling through lyric sheets, dragging microphone stands across the stage by design and shoving them into speakers (or the drum kit) at will, all seemed to make sense, performatively and musically.

David Spurr and Keiron Melling are without a doubt the strongest rhythm section ever to grace The Fall. Precise and fluid, with greater force and speed than most metal bands, the seventy minute set was relentlessly animated by their flawless timing and impetus.

Elena Poulou's range of keyboard intonations temperamentally filled the songs both new and old, matching the impetuous tendency of Mr. Smith's elbow to make its obligatory intervention on her instrument more than once. Dressed in overcoat and handbag, she nearly mirrors the sartorial form of Glenn Gould, albeit through a very different musical genre.

"Out of the fog..." The set began with two numbers, *Nate Will not Return*, and *Taking Off*, from the new album *Ersatz GB*, establishing a tight, declamatory mash-up of Mark E. Smith's fragmentary lyricism over a sound more akin to 1970s hard rock than the noodle-y dissonance of The Fall's middle years.

Elena: "Is there anybody there?" introduced the fastest-tempo re-visitation of *Psykick Dancehall* (1979) I've yet heard, with Spurr and Welling driving it past the point where Smith had to play catch-up on vocals. This was followed by an even older song, often covered by The Fall: The Sonics' *Strychnine*, sounded dispassionate in contrast to the salubrious histrionics the late Lux Interior brought to the better known version recorded by The Cramps.

*Laptop Dog* returned the setlist to newly released material, a downbeat rant skewering bloggers and their oft-empty lives; *Cowboy George* from last year's *Your Future Our Clutter* returned the pace to staring at the void: "Unseen knowledge... unseen facts... unseen footage..." segueing into the same album's (*I'm from*) *Bury*, a heavily funk-laden riff shouted over with both David Spurr and Elena Poulou in refrain. *I've Been Duped* from 2008's *Imperial Wax Solvent* is Elena's song, giving Mr. Smith a well-earned break, as its catchy 1980s-Europop underscoring her deadpan, strongly Germanic voice (again with David Spurr belting along for the chorus).

*Cosmos 7* (the first track on *Ersatz GB*) marked Mark E's second shift back in the tangled mass of mic cables he'd left behind earlier. Singing into two microphones at once, wandering around to his chair at the back to shuffle through some lyrics sheets, this was followed by *Latchkey Kid* (from *Imperial Wax Solvent*), a song reminiscent of *Shoulder Pads* from 1986's *Bend Sinister*.

The evening's highlight followed in two more songs from *Ersatz GB*: *Greenway* and *Monocard*. "It's good enough for me, it's good enough for you... Greenway! I had to wank off the cat to feed the fucking dog..." surmounting the heaviest backbeat ever presented in the Fall's recorded oeuvre (essentially a cover version of Greek Metal band Anorimoi's *Gameboy*), as Smith's growling recollection of some channel-hopping on Danish TV, recognizing a video of himself, broke down, into the more questioning rhetoric of *Monocard*, somehow reassembling the leftovers from Sabbath's *Electric Funeral* into the amorphous space that has housed Smith's Burroughs-like monologues for over three decades.

As a tonic no doubt for himself and his eager audience, the more upbeat standard of *White Lightning* (originally by The Big Bopper, now in their repertoire for over twenty years) provided a return to the rockabilly roots that continue to emerge from under Mr. Smith's incessantly pacing feet.

*Reformation*, the eponymous track from 2007's *Reformation TLC*, was a highlight for Tim Presley's return to the fold, as his guitar animated the story (there have been a few of these in their history) detailing The Fall's breakdown and reconstruction during the disastrous American tour of 2006, wherein Presley and two other Californians became the band's temporary (but well-accomplished) strings and rhythm section. Barking one phrase at a time, adding his other microphone to Presley's amp before throwing it into the drum

kit, this was an instance where Smith's onstage shenanigans somehow complemented the orchestration, and his construction of the band.

The following *Mr. Pharmacist* was always a crowd-pleaser, The Other Half's 1968 song having now been among The Fall's signature pieces for a quarter-century, but at this time Smith's decision to turn down the guitar amp deadened the melody more than enhancing it. This was the evening's nominal finale, with the group exiting stage left to a still-eager audience, as we demanded an encore, which was delivered in 2005's *Theme from Sparta F.C.* partly familiar to BBC radio audiences as the libretto for the Saturday afternoon football scores. Ringing guitars, both Mark and Elena shouting their battle cry of the archetypal fans of blood sport, before once again indicating that this match had gone well through its overtime, and was now definitively over.

We are left however, with an ongoing musical experiment that has bridged its own history, and continues to re-create anew beyond its past trappings. This is far more than Mark E. Smith's backing band; true to The Fall's legacy, the emphasis is upon current material, and the reinvention of some of the darkest, yet still weirdly wonderful, and visionary, music to emerge from the contemporary Anglo-American soundscape.

*London, November 2011*

Reading “The Fall at IndigO2, Greenwich North, November 24th, 2011” in Vienna.

Yuki Higashino

Examining the music of The Fall poses peculiar difficulties for a writer. On the one hand, The Fall has always been a personal project of the frontman Mark E. Smith whose aberrant personality often overshadows his song writing. Any analysis about The Fall could easily become a judgement of Smith’s personal character. On the other hand, and due to the exceptionally long and complex history of The Fall - a truly unique phenomenon in rock and roll - avoiding a historiography of the band is nearly impracticable. Both methods of writing, though entirely valid as pursuits in and of themselves, cannot be considered sufficiently objective to be a critical text on or about their music. Moreover, these problems observed in the writings about The Fall are subsequently used by the mainstream press in order to dismiss the band and its followers. The criticisms launched at the band and its followers are many: that The Fall always sound the same, that only the fanatics blinded by Smith’s eccentricity are truly interested in their albums (of which there are far too many), and ultimately their music requires too much homework for the average listener, etc.<sup>1</sup>

Of course the difficulty of avoiding biography or historiography in order to produce an objective criticism exists in many attempts to write about music because the element of taste and emotion are so ingrained in the act of listening to music. Music writing often

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<sup>1</sup> This critical laziness and lack of penetration is conspicuously displayed in The Guardian review of their most recent album *Ersatz GB*. “...The Fall, whose 317th studio album, or whatever it is, has absolutely no chance of reaching beyond the people who dutifully queued up for their 316th album: everyone already knows what to expect and, largely, they'd be right”. Rob Fitzpatrick, *The Fall: Ersatz GB – review*, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), Thursday 10 November.

becomes entrenched in the realm of fandom or inexplicable hatred; hardly a qualification for a critical text. However, publicly stating one's support or aversion to The Fall implies many social, political and cultural objectives beyond that of the musical component. Being a fan or foe of The Fall is an ideological position.<sup>2</sup> Though any opinion placed on a cultural product becomes ideological, the unique position which The Fall occupies in the cultural landscape makes these ideological manoeuvrings more conspicuous. One is able to say that writing criticism on The Fall condenses and exposes the contradictions of music writing.

Additionally, when one writes about music, the degree of one's involvement with the subject matter always needs to be examined. Music, especially rock and pop, is inseparable from the temporal and physical experience. Because as a product, rock and pop does not only encompass the aural, but also fashion, life style and the biographies of the musician(s). Visuals and attitudes are as important as the actual music. In pop, a song is not the song per se, but everything involved in the presentation of it. It surrounds itself with the manufactured version of a Benjaminian aura, which could be glamour, mystique or substance abuse packaged as style. This, coupled with the glorification of contemporaneity, provokes a desire for an authentic experience of the music, authenticity measured according to the intensity of the experience. So, in the case of a rock band, it is always better to see them live rather than listen to their records, and the gig would be better felt in a small club rather than a stadium, knowing the members of the band would enrich your experience of the music, so on and so forth. This expectation for involvement extends to writers, authentic experience often deemed

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<sup>2</sup> Ideological implications The Fall has when seen in the broader social context is a vast subject that calls for an extensive paper on its own. For instance, Smith's working class work ethic, or his tenacious refusal for change and teamwork is highly complex seen in the light of Thatcherism and New Labour.

as a prerequisite for a credible text.<sup>3</sup> And yet, objective criticism still possesses significance in music writing. The writer has to negotiate his or her position between the desire for involvement and desire for objectivity, both equally unobtainable in their purest forms. Music writing is produced from the tension between the language of enthusiast and the discourse of the connoisseur. Every writer having to find their place in the vast but contested space between, say, Lester Bangs and Adorno.

This tension brings to focus the topic of meta-music writings, like this present text. By its nature, a meta text attempts to perform objectively, or more precisely, takes its critical distance for granted. But this tendency could jeopardise the text's relevance when the subject matter is music and direct experience holds so much power. When writing about writings on The Fall, I also have to negotiate my position between being a critic and being a fan. Like any form of writing, the writer's personal preferences and agendas are exposed in the text. This is something not always implicit. By writing a text like this one, I make it clear that I am a fan of The Fall, enough to have read all the available texts about them. It should be stated that I have yet to see the band live, and I hold an utterly unjustified grudge against those who have witnessed a live show.

The review of The Fall show in London by Andrew McLaren is precisely the kind of text I consume with pleasure and jealousy. I experience the show through his text, and now write a second text as a response from distant Austria where The Fall rarely venture. These two texts are located on the opposite ends of the field that is music writing, one emphasising the experiential and the other

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Bracewell recounts meeting Jon Savage, worn out but jubilant after he followed Nirvana through their North American tour, sharing drinks, drugs and other excesses and mayhems. Michael Bracewell, *When surface was depth*, p153, Flamingo, London, UK, 2002.

analytical (peppered with some personal agendas). By reading these two texts in parallel, perhaps one can begin to devise a different strategy between involvement and objectivity. Perhaps the middle ground between the two texts, made visible through parallel reading, is where one can search for the way to prevent music writing from being haunted by the desire for authentic experience or pure objectivity.

The band's performance as a whole is from the start measured according to the standard established by the numerous previous members. It seems impossible to evaluate the concert on its own merit. History is always present, not as points of reference or context, but as a burden. The overbearing history of the band turns their present product into an index of their legacy, while also turning the critic into a historian, a possibly insurmountable obstacle for a review because in historiography the significance of the subject under discussion is always already established. The decision to write history on a subject signals that the author believes in its importance. What historiography does is to elucidate why the subject is important, while a criticism is written as an attempt to determine whether this subject is important or not. The historicity of The Fall tends to preclude criticism, whether negative or positive, because the author is already convinced by their significance (or demonstrates antipathy toward the band).

McLaren makes his dedication to the band crystal clear by stating that he frequents their concerts. This casual remark makes him vulnerable to the aforementioned attack by the mainstream hacks - that only the core fans are interested in The Fall - as well as disclosing to us his social, cultural and geographical orientation. In an era where a Tory Prime Minister insists that 'The Queen Is Dead' by The Smiths is his favourite album, being a fan of The Fall and going to their concerts is above all a political statement. It is also a

type of privilege, the same kind of privilege that is acquired by participating in other cultural fields (e.g. going to exhibitions or theatre, etc.). Spectatorship always speaks of the capital gained from where and how one lives, and the knowledge one has acquired.

The eccentric onstage behaviour of Mark E. Smith is an integral part of The Fall's performance, as McLaren convincingly illustrates. Smith personifies The Fall's music, manifesting what Adorno could not stand about popular music, making, as I wrote earlier, criticism on The Fall's music into a judgement on Smith's person. However, the sheer longevity, or perhaps the obtuse persistence, of The Fall's austere stripped down music and Smith's outlandish personality, the band's "always the same, always different" quality, can also be considered a never-ending experiment in testing the limit of what makes rock music rock music - and a rock star a rock star - an endeavour to locate and extricate<sup>4</sup> the essence of rock and roll. The music of The Fall, one may say, is a theory of rock music.<sup>5</sup> This poses even greater difficulty for a critic; if what The Fall produces is theory of both itself and the musical form they belong to, it calls for another theory for its confirmation or refutation, not a criticism because one cannot judge theory. As Thierry de Duve argued, theory and criticism are incompatible.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Extricate* is the title of The Fall's 13<sup>th</sup> studio album from 1990.

<sup>5</sup> "I always thought the pure essence of rock and roll was a completely non-musical form of music. Rock and roll is surely not a 'music form.'" Mark E. Smith in *Renegade: The Lives And Tales Of Mark E. Smith*, p.117, Penguin/Viking, London, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> "It does not say that there is no theory of art, but rather that there is none that could be deduced from the criticism of art, and conversely, that there is no art criticism that is justified by theory. Criticism has no other justification than feeling, which justifies nothing. Or again, it has no ultimate justification, since it is the exercise of judgement, and to justify a judgement another one is required. As for theory, it could not be based on criticism. If St. Christopher carries Christ and Christ carries the world, where does St. Christopher stand?" Thierry de Duve in *Kant after Duchamp*, pp.50-51, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996.

And yet, there is always a desire to evaluate the music of The Fall, not its theoretical proposition or the personality of Smith. Perhaps the only way out is to isolate an experience in time and space and exaggerate its particularities in order to locate what was unique about a given concert or record, independent from the dominating historicity and personality. This would be a grotesque criticism (in the original sense of the word grotesque). It makes criticism temporarily possible. McLaren's statement that this particular configuration of the band is "the most successful yet", creates a space for criticism whether this statement would be accepted by other members of the audience (by the same token, one could also "the worst yet").

The music of The Fall is indeed one of "the darkest, yet still weirdly wonderful, and visionary, music to emerge from the contemporary Anglo-American soundscape", which makes the task of writing criticism a demanding, even possibly unmanageable, process of analysing and understanding the mechanism of this very soundscape. But the sheer quality of the music calls for a critical engagement, with each text written from a temporarily occupied spot somewhere between objectivity and a deep involvement.

Vienna, December 2011