

Essay

The man whose head expanded

Mark E Smith, singer and driving force behind Manchester band The Fall, died on Jan 24, 2018. Cynical, sly, often achingly funny, but resisting all attempts to be domesticated, Smith was both reactionary and visionary; alchemising a bloody-minded caustic wit and uncompromising lyrical and musical direction into a 42-year career with The Fall, which left their self-confessed biggest fan, Radio 1 broadcaster John Peel, marvelling, "They are always different; they are always the same".

The ideal way to hear your first Fall song is by accident, spliced into your life like bad tape. The intonation of a hectoring, ranting, sometimes atonally sing-singing northern voice will break up sentences in such a way that they only resolve into something intelligible on the third listen, and even then remain tantalisingly oblique. The song will seem to be a story: an obscure narrator with shifts in tone and place. The music will be repetitive and circling, promising to continue forever in a locked groove before abruptly changing pace, tone, or character, the basic elements only cohering into a finished song once you've listened to it. You should be as surprised when the song ends as when it starts.

The point of The Fall was not to become better adjusted to your environment: the point was to remain consistently at odds with it, to literally have a head full of ideas above your station. Smith is both a warning and a lesson in what to do if you are working class and clever. Throughout his career, Smith remained resolutely working class without being assimilated or reduced to clogs-on-cobbles self-parody. Smith dropped out of grammar school aged 16 years to work first in a meat factory then as a clerk at Manchester docks, a classic northern outsider, no art school but a desire to make art, English literature at night school. After seeing the Sex Pistols in 1976, he left work to devote his time to the poetry and music he and his then-partner Una Baines and friends had been messing about with. Gigs followed. The Fall recruited over 60 different musicians over Smith's lifetime, regularly featuring women in integral roles. Often changes in sound came from Smith's relationships with women, most notably during his marriage to Brix Smith in the mid-1980s, the period when The Fall came closest to actual pop success.

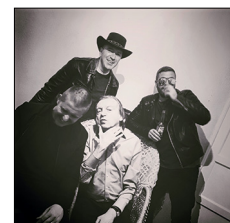
The choice of the Albert Camus novel *The Fall* as a name for the band was not accidental. Clamence—Camus' narrator—spends *The Fall* in monologue explaining how he found himself to be a hypocrite who thought himself a good and moral person, but when the time came behaved with self-interest and cowardice. Ignoring the chance to save a woman who had leaped into the Seine, Clamence walked on, later making it his job be a judge-penitent, a

guilty man pointing out to others why they, too, would turn their back on the drowning woman. Whether the young Mark E Smith realised it in 1976, this scathing, compromised commentator passing judgement would become his full-time job for the rest of his life. Lyrically, Smith's concerns were as likely to be dyspeptic grumbles of a man in the pub as they were to be epoch-making issues. Filtered through Smith's incredible, bilious, over-stimulated capacity for assembling language in new ways, this constantly shifting kaleidoscope of irritations and observations could have passed muster as subjects for a centre-right newspaper columnist having a dry week. Smith's recurring targets included: daytime television; the gentrification of Manchester; nostalgia; the music business and his audience, including critics and commentators; and, at least once memorably, students. Talking about mature students specifically, he told the *New Musical Express* in 1993, "I've got nothing against students as such, it's just when you get old mates using words like 'constructively' and 'comprehensively'. There's nothing worse than a half-educated man. Never forget that."

Smith's narrators are often damaged; paranoid; fractured; visionary; telling stories in which it feels like there is a piece missing; organising incongruous events and utterances in ways that remain private and where it is not clear if it is the narrator who has difficulty with reality or Smith.

Fall records up to the mid-1980s came wrapped in covers with arcane Smith scrawlings and cover paintings, reminiscent of the work of Otto Dix, George Grosz, and Wyndham Lewis and The Vorticists; distorted, fractured depictions of people in urban landscapes. Fall videos tended to mix the absurd and the defiantly working class: pubs, working men's clubs, art happenings, absurdist slogans. In 1988, the band recorded *I am Kurious Oranj*, a concept album about the ascension to the throne of William of Orange, which doubled as the soundtrack to the contemporary ballet production of the same name by Michael Clark, who has sometimes been referred to as the "bad boy" of British dance. With The Fall, Smith packaged arty pretension in a wrapper of northern graft.

Smith's career was always a tension between the need to remain rooted in the real experience of living in the north of England and the impulse to escape the parochial. To move too far would risk losing connection. The answer for Smith was to filter mundane concerns through fantastical mechanisms. To be always in motion, but without travelling anywhere. Booze and speed as transports. Stay in the place where you are comfortable, but travel far and wide in your mind. One of Smith's techniques was to repeatedly use ideas drawn from science fiction and the supernatural,



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Lancet Psychiatry 2018

Published Online

February 19, 2018

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(18)30094-4)

S2215-0366(18)30094-4

the library of paperbacks of a clever kid who shunned education for self-education. Smith's lyrics often include ideas of time travel, of transportation to other places, and of supernatural incursions in everyday circumstances. Early B-side *Various Times* is a time-travelling tale about Nazis based on Ursula K LeGuin's *The Lathe of Heaven*. Ideas from ghost story writers such as M R James and Arthur Machen crop up, as do ideas derived from writers such as J G Ballard and William S Burroughs. In *Wings*, the narrator becomes unfixed in time and space: "I ended up in the eighteen sixties. I've bin there for one hundred and tweentyfive years. Ended up under Ardwick Bridge with some veterans of the US civil war. They were under Irish patronage. We shot a stupid sargent but I got hit in the cross-fire. So now I sleep in ditches and hide from nosy kids. A small alteration of the past, can turn time into space."

The three biggest risks for working class autodidacts are crankishness, bitterness, and feeling set apart from the culture you come from while not feeling comfortable as a matter of course in other, more educated circles; literally having a head too big for your surroundings. Smith made art and a career from all three. In conversation, Smith was often described as cackling rather than laughing. Smith's lyrical universe, while often humourous, was harsh, the only flecks of warmth being a lachrymose drunkard's self-pity. Smith's caricatures are seldom kind. Had Smith not found his voice, he'd have just been what he became in the popular imagination: the bloke in the pub who knows lots of things you'd never expect but who would slice you down in conversation rather than share and build. Smith as a lyricist, and in interviews, always had to have something to push against and was often combative or unpleasant to those around him, on stage and off. In 1998, while on tour in America, Smith was arrested for assaulting his then girlfriend and Fall member Julia Nagel, and regularly came to blows with band members. Being working class is not a political position, it's an economic status and the cultural status that results from it. In thinking about Smith, it's hard not to keep returning to a quote from Joe Orton's diaries: "I look better in cheap clothes. I come from the

gutter and don't you forget it because I won't". The Fall never suggested a utopian new world; they suggested a way of transfiguring this one by putting the cracked vision of the outsider as the author of reality. The closest the UK has come to a successor is in the verbal inventiveness and attitude of Grime.

There is an irony in writing about Smith for *The Lancet Psychiatry*. Smith's entire persona was a booby trap for over-earnest interpreters, always on a knife-edge between pulling the rug from under attempts to analyse his work and accusing others of underestimating his intelligence: "I am not your subject and I am more than your equal". Early on in the life of The Fall, Smith described the band as "the Northern white crap who talks back. We are like you but we have brains." Smith, however, understood the symbiotic relationship between himself, music critics, and his biggest supporter, Radio 1 broadcaster John Peel. In the 1982 song *Room to Live*, Smith sang scathingly: "Foreigners and experts go in and through my place, turn my home into a museum. Like the murder squad they scan the room for the well of inspiration. They don't tolerate ordinary folk and folk look at me strange but I'll give them this at least: They pay for what they eat." The narrator of the song *The Man whose Head Expanded* is convinced others are stealing his thoughts for their own gain: "The man whose head expanded, the soap opera writer would follow him around, and use his jewels for TV prime time." Never leaving behind the chip on his shoulder, Smith cultivated an art that fought against having its rough edges removed, lucky enough to be in the right place in time and space where it was possible to find a life and a place for those idiosyncratic talents. Smith was a glorious example an all-elbows ill-fitting peg, ranging across time and space, but unable or unwilling to leave the soil from which he grew; a cracked mirror that until the end liked to pretend he had more in common with people who work on the docks than any of you pseudointellectuals: even if in the end it was mainly those pseudointellectuals who bought his records.

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