

THE FALLEN

*Life In and Out of
Britain's Most Insane Group*

DAVE SIMPSON



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To my late parents, Reginald and Florence Olive Simpson.
Thanks for the words, Dad.

There is variety in genius as there is talent and beauty. Some geniuses are innovators, some are deep thinkers and some are people of extraordinary skill; most are a volatile mixture of intellectual gifts and character traits. The intellectual gifts are an ability to see things from highly unusual angles, to overlook what is not essential, and to understand the true significance of the obvious. The character traits are persistence, obduracy, capacity for taking great pains, and indifference to ridicule.

A C Grayling, Professor of Philosophy, University of London, 2007

That's my fucking aim in life, to keep it going as long as I can.

Mark E Smith, 1979

IN LOVING MEMORY OF THE FALLEN

Priest: Brethren, we are called upon to pay the last tributes of respect to brothers and sisters who have now gone. Places once filled are now vacant. Chairs once occupied are now empty. Hands, whose helpful clasp cheered us in days gone by, are folding in everlasting rest. It is fitting, therefore, that we should pause, no matter how engrossing our duties, and pay to our departed brothers and sisters the tribute due their memory.

Suggested music: 'Hey! Luciani' by The Fall

Brother scribe, the roll call.

Steve aka Dave ('the unknown drummer', 1976) 'No longer with us'

Tony Friel (bass, 1976 – December 1977) 'No longer with us'

Una Baines (keyboards, 1976 – March 1978) 'No longer with us'

Martin Bramah (guitar/backing vocals, 1976 – April 1979; July 1989 – July 1990) 'No longer with us'

Karl Burns (drums/guitar/bass/keyboards) (May 1977 – December 1978; October 1981 – June 1986; January 1993 – December 1996; May 1997 – April 1998) 'No longer with us'

Kay Carroll (backing vocals, management 1977 – April 1983) 'No longer with us'

Jonnie Brown (bass, January – March 1978) 'No longer with us'

Eric McGann aka Rick Goldstraw aka Eric Echo aka Eric the Ferret (bass, March – June 1978) 'No longer with us'

- Yvonne Pawlett (keyboards, May 1978 – June 1979) ‘No longer with us’
- Steve Davies (percussion/drums, 30 May 1978 and again in June 1980) ‘No longer with us’
- Marc Riley (guitar, then bass, June 1978 – December 1982) ‘No longer with us’
- Steve Hanley (bass, April 1979 – April 1998) ‘No longer with us’
- Craig Scanlon (guitar, April 1979 – December 1995) ‘No longer with us’
- Mike Leigh (drums, January 1979 – March 1980) ‘No longer with us’
- Dave Tucker (clarinet, 1980–1) ‘No longer with us’
- Paul Hanley (drums, March 1980 – March 1985) ‘No longer with us’
- Brix Smith (guitar/backing vocals, September 1983 – July 1989; August 1994 – October 1996) ‘No longer with us’
- Simon Rogers (bass/keyboards/guitar, March 1985 – October 1986) ‘No longer with us’
- Simon Wolstencroft (drums/keyboards, June 1986 – August 1997) ‘No longer with us’
- Marcia Schofield (keyboards, October 1986 – July 1990) ‘No longer with us’
- Charlotte Bill (flute/oboe, 1990) ‘No longer with us’
- Kenny Brady (violin/keyboards, July 1990 – June 1991) ‘No longer with us’
- Dave Bush (keyboards, August 1991 – November 1995) ‘No longer with us’
- Mike Bennett (backing vocalist, late 1994 – late 1996) ‘No longer with us’
- Julia Nagle (keyboards/guitar, November 1995 – August 2001) ‘No longer with us’
- Lucy Rimmer (vocals, December 1995 – October 1996) ‘No longer with us’

- Adrian Flanagan (guitar, December 1996 – February 1997) ‘No longer with us’
- Keir Stewart (guitar, early 1997) ‘No longer with us’
- Tommy Crooks (guitar, August 1997 – April 1998) ‘No longer with us’
- Kate Themen (drums, April – May 1998) ‘No longer with us’
- Stuart Estell (guitar, 30 April 1998) ‘No longer with us’
- Karen Leatham (bass, August 1998 – December 1998) ‘No longer with us’
- Tom Head aka Thomas Patrick Murphy (drums, August 1998 – November 2000) ‘No longer with us’
- Neville Wilding (guitar, November 1998 – February 2001) ‘No longer with us’
- Adam Helal (bass, December 1998 – February 2001) ‘No longer with us’
- Nick Dewey (drums, 27 August 1999) ‘No longer with us’
- Steve Evets (backing vocals/bass, 2000–2) ‘No longer with us’
- Ed Blaney (guitar/backing vocals/management/‘brokering’, 2000–4) ‘No longer with us’
- Spencer Birtwistle (drums, November 2000 – November 2001; July 2004 – May 2006) ‘No longer with us’
- Ben Pritchard (guitar, February 2001 – May 2006) ‘No longer with us’
- Jim Watts (guitar/bass/keyboards/computers, February 2001 – March 2003; July – December 2004) ‘No longer with us’
- Brian Fanning (guitar, mid to late 2001) ‘No longer with us’
- Dave Milner (drums/backing vocals, November 2001 – June 2004) ‘No longer with us’
- Ruth Daniel (keyboards, 22 September 2002) ‘No longer with us’
- Simon Archer (bass, April 2003 – April 2004) ‘No longer with us’
- Steven Trafford (bass, April 2004 – May 2006) ‘No longer with us’
- Chris Evans (drums, 3 December 2004) ‘No longer with us’
- Rob Barbato (bass, 9 May 2006 – 1 June 2007) ‘No longer with us’

Orpheus McCord (drums, 9 May 2006 – 1 June 2007) 'No longer with us'

Tim Presley (guitar, 9 May 2006 – 1 June 2007) 'No longer with us'

Mark Edward Smith (vocals, 1976 to date) 'Still with us. ALWAYS with us.'

This book documents a two-year period (2005–7) which I spent tracking down the dozens of people who had once played in The Fall. By the time the journey was over, what I refer to as ‘the current line-up’ had also departed, joining the ranks of The Fallen. After the book was originally published I tracked them down, which can be read about in the epilogue.

www.thefallenbook.co.uk

PROLOGUE: REMEMBERING THE FALLEN

It was a Tuesday morning in December, and I was ringing people in Rotherham, all of them called Brown.

‘Hello,’ I began, for the fifth time that day, ‘I’m trying to trace Jonnie Brown who used to play in The Fall. I know he came from Rotherham and wondered if you might be a relative.’

‘The Who?’ asked the latest Mr Brown on the end of the line.

‘No. The Fall... the band from Salford. Jonnie played bass for three weeks in 1978.’

‘Is this some kind of joke?’

First I had become an internet stalker, now I was a telephone pest, all because of The Fall. Why was I doing this?

It started on 4 September 2005 when I drove to Manchester to interview Mark E Smith. I am a journalist and I’ve been interviewing pop stars for years but this encounter was different. Before the interview, even casual observers seemed to have a cautioning word. ‘You’d better take a crash helmet,’ joked one mate, aware of Smith’s colourful reputation – in particular, stubbing a cigarette out on a pesky journalist’s forehead. Days before my interview, I received a call from the paper’s photographer, who found the singer so ‘blotto’ at the photo session he’d come away with hundreds of shots of the venerable vocalist having to be held upright by bewildered passers-by.

I’d met Smith years before, in 1981. I had approached the notoriously opinionated frontman on the steps of Leeds University, where The Fall were about to play. Considering that even then he had a spiky public image,

Smith was surprisingly polite, but I didn't get the autograph I craved. Neither of us could produce a pen – instead the singer rather charmingly took a bite mark out of my ticket, leaving a lasting impression of his 1981 dental work and a DNA sample which remains in my possession in case any Fall-mad scientists ever wish to make a clone of Mark E Smith.

As I drove the 70 miles along the M62 to the interview, passing signs for Smith's beloved Prestwich and Salford, something nagged at me all the way. What had happened in the intervening 24 years to transform the cheery ticket chomper into a character with a life seemingly as unique as his song-book and one of the true legends of British music?

If you're reading this, there's every chance you know a lot about The Fall. But if not, you should know the following:

The Fall are one of the most revered and influential bands in British pop, one who more than most lend themselves to obsession.

In John Peel's Record Box – which contained the late DJ's favourite records – Fall records had an entire section to themselves. Peel called them The Mighty Fall: 'the band against which all others are judged'. Their audiences still include fans who don't follow other bands, who never listen to anything else. Smith's inspired, social sci-fi songs are beloved of everyone from comedians Frank Skinner (who uses 1981 Fall song 'Jaw Bone and the Air Rifle' to open his TV show) and Stewart Lee, to the designer Calvin Klein, artist Grayson Perry, and authors Irvine Welsh and the late Philip K Dick. Musicians and music critics love them, too. Julian Cope estimates he saw them 28 times in 1978 alone. David Bowie, Bo Diddley, Thom Yorke and Alex Kapranos all claim to be fans, and Fall albums still regularly receive rave reviews for their paint-stripping riffs, blood-racing rhythms and what one writer has called their 'head-turning quality . . . a hail of one-liners, withering put-downs and bewildering images'.

Despite this acclaim, The Fall have never been a household name. They have had more hit singles that haven't penetrated the Top 20 than any other band – 16 in total. I love this fact. It signifies The Fall's complex relationship with pop and our culture in general: never quite in, but never quite out, maintaining a disaffected, opinionated presence on whatever landscape the music scene – and Britain's social make-up – is occupying at the time.

When the Sex Pistols were taking 'punk' onto *Top of the Pops*, an embryonic

Fall were taking pot shots at socio-culture from the unglamorous, un-pop environment of working men's clubs. During the synthesiser boom of the early to mid 1980s, Smith hectored wildly over walls of guitars. In the 1990s, when Britpop brought a return to straightforward rock anthems, Smith, contrarily, added everything from violins to complex computerised sounds. Along the way, they have produced an enormous body of work. *Reformation Post-TLC*, the band's 2007 studio album, was probably their twenty-seventh, although there have been so many nobody seems entirely sure.

The sheer longevity of The Fall is an achievement in itself. Through times when many bands have been lucky to make it to a second album, they have outlasted five prime ministers, the rise and decline of both Thatcherism and New Labour, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Falklands conflict, Bosnia, two Iraq wars, the fluctuating fortunes of many of England's bigger football clubs – including Smith's treasured Manchester City – and some terrifying vagaries of fashion. When Smith embarked on his mission in 1976 – sporting an anti-fashion tank top – many people wore flares and few households had a car or a colour television. Now we have the internet and rabid globalisation, although people still wear flares, which may suggest to Smith his work is far from done. The Fall have moved with their times but have sounded, as Peel once suggested, 'always different, always the same'.

Throughout it all, Smith has maintained a fiercely uncompromising 'no sell-out' stance towards the music business that has survived apparent anomalies such as an advertising campaign for Vauxhall Corsa (featuring 'Touch Sensitive's' 'Hey hey hey hey!' refrain), ironic given that Smith doesn't hold a driving licence.

My own obsession with The Fall started that night, 17 March 1981 – I know the date because I still have the gaudy orange poster I ripped off the uni walls. Back then, the fact that they were playing the Riley-Smith Hall with a singer called Smith and a guitarist called (Marc) Riley seemed to bestow an almost mystical significance on the event. The gig was unlike anything I'd seen: the music was uncategorisable – Was it punk? Was it rockabilly? Was it experimental? All three? – but had a hypnotic tension that seemed to draw me in. Smith stalked the stage, radiating charisma and baffling but important-sounding words which seemed to convey urgent truths. Around the same time, I encountered other Fall fans who were convinced Smith was psychic.

From that day on, major developments in my life have seemed peculiarly bound up with The Fall. I had my first pint of bitter over the road from my first Fall gig. I lost my virginity – resulting in carpet burns from an orange nylon carpet, a feature of many a council semi at the time – to a girl called Carol, who also gave me my first Fall album, the 1980 masterpiece, *Grotesque (After The Gramme)*, which contained ‘The Container Drivers’, a rollercoasting blast of Northern rockabilly that’s still my favourite Fall song of all time. In the mid 1980s, when The Fall scored a big hit with a cover of The Kinks’ ‘Victoria’, I was dating a girl called Victoria. I’m not saying her being called Victoria made the relationship any more desirable, but it did give things a certain *je ne sais quoi*. Sorry, Victoria.

I’ve found most Fall fans have similar tales – as if Smith, pop’s ultimate ringmaster and provocateur, were wielding the same supernatural control over his audiences as he seems to hold over his group.

In fact, to call The Fall a group – a term Smith prefers to the apparently derogatory ‘band’ – is misleading. Apart from the erstwhile frontman, the line-up has endured so many upheavals that broadcaster Paul Morley, another Fall fanatic, has suggested there have been many different groups called The Fall, all fronted by Mark E Smith, all either wildly dark or wildly funny depending on the day of the week.

I should state now that like most Fall fans I regard Smith as a genius, although I’ve never been entirely sure just what his genius is. His splenic observations and surreal, often slurred insights on everything from MI5 conspiracies to mythical Mancunian ‘city hobgoblins’ to the travails of British people in hot weather (and their resemblance to beached whales) – have earned him the tag of master lyricist and even seer for the way his songs seem to contain uncanny prophecies. For example, the song ‘Powder Keg’ – containing references to Manchester city centre – was released just weeks before the IRA bombing of central Manchester in 1996.

However, for me, the deeper aspect of Smith’s genius is somehow entwined with the way he runs his group. Smith is a ‘musical genius’ who is not a musician. He certainly has an ear for a tune but it’s debatable whether he can actually play a note. Smith distrusts musicians to the point of contempt but one of the many paradoxes in The Fall is that he is reliant on them to produce his lifetime’s work.

For years, Smith – whose father, a plumber, ran his own small business – has maintained The Fall using industrial techniques that were on their way out when the group formed in 1976. The Fall operate like an old-fashioned factory: Smith is the site manager, responsible for hiring and firing workers and overseeing their performances. This is the most precious and secretive area of his art. Smith somehow coaxes performances from musicians – most of them found in his local pub – who shouldn't logically be up to the task of playing in a legendary group. Once musicians have outlived their usefulness, or, perhaps, become too bolshie, they are discarded and left to fend for themselves.

In this way, the Fall factory has been able to produce at least one unit – an album, and often more – a year. However, in recent years the revolving door has almost spun off its hinges. What I didn't realise in 1981 was that, even then, The Fall had already seen off eleven musicians. But in more recent years, line-ups have imploded before gigs, after gigs and even during gigs, with accompanying tales of fist-fights and appalling behaviour. Even Paul Morley has pondered, 'What if he wasn't a genius, he was just an old drunken tramp that when he got really drunk started to spout phrases that made a kind of sense, and we read too much into it, you know?'

And yet, after each seemingly terminal session of public *hara-kiri*, Smith has got up, dusted himself down, assembled yet another Fall and continued, to the bafflement of many, to reshape the band and make even more great music.

By the time I interviewed Smith in 2005, I'd become fascinated both by his guarded doctrine of 'creative tension' but also by the curious lives and fates of the former members. Because Smith has always maintained a Goebbels-like iron grip over The Fall's interviews, little is heard from Fall musicians even where they're in the group, and certainly not afterwards.

As I prepared for my interview, I found myself wondering where they were, not least the line-up I encountered all those years ago in 1981.

The guitarist, Marc Riley, had become a famous DJ on Radio One. Steve Hanley, the bassist, had remained alongside Smith from 1979 until 1998, when he'd departed after a particularly infamous New York punch-up which landed Smith in jail. Craig Scanlon – perhaps the band's most revered guitarist – had been mysteriously sacked in the mid 1990s and was rumoured to be a broken man, grinding out his days working in the dole office.

Most perplexing of all was the mysterious fate of Karl Burns. Burns had been the band's high-profile drummer for 20 years – fired and rehired on numerous occasions – but since the New York incident had vanished as effectively as Lord Lucan. Even Peel had been moved to ponder, 'I don't know if Smith is killing them all or what?'

The more I totted up the number of people who were active members of The Fall (as opposed to producers, girlfriends or wives who added backing vocals, or saxophonists who contributed 15 seconds to a track in 1982), the more mysterious it seemed. Inevitably, Smith was unwilling to shed light – suddenly clamming up or changing the subject whenever we veered towards the topic of ex-workers. Each time I asked about Karl Burns, he swiftly changed the subject, summoning the barman to supply us with more lager.

So, I set myself the task of finding them, dead or alive, imagining that the former members not only held the key to the legends of The Fall, but that The Fallen musicians were themselves a piece of social history: 30 years of music seen through the eyes of the foot soldiers.

Which is why, on a Tuesday morning in December, I was ringing people in Rotherham called Brown. When I started my mission, there were 42 ex-members of The Fall on my list. When I ended it, there were 45. I had to find Jonnie Brown, and the rest, before MES 'killed' any more of them. Or me.

CHAPTER 1

‘It’s like football. Every so often
you’ve got to replace the
centre-forward.’



The first thing you notice when you have any sort of dealings with The Fall is that even in the most cursory functions they don't operate like any other group. There are no armies of publicists, marketers or stylists, or even something as customary as a manager. What there is, is a very nice lady called Dorothy who acts as something like a go-between between The Wonderful and Frightening World of The Fall (the title of their cracking 1984 album) and everybody else. Requests for interviews and such like are batted on to Elena, the third Mrs Smith and at time of writing the current keyboard player in The Fall, who then forwards them to Smith himself.

‘How about getting Mark to talk about the former members and then some of the former members to talk about Mark?’ I ask Dorothy.

She seems unsure, but she has a suggestion: ‘Why not interview Mark, see how you get on, and then hopefully he’ll put you in touch with some former members?’

Thus, I find myself hurtling in the Fiat Punto to Manchester’s Malmaison, wondering which Smith – born 5 March 1957, whose name, Mark, is Hebrew for ‘warlike’ – I’ll get today. My only previous interview with him took place in 1997, when *Melody Maker* had the idea to put Smith together with New Order bassist Peter Hook and The Beautiful South’s singer Paul Heaton to debate the burning issues of the day. Smith turned up complaining of an attack of tinnitus, caused by a bang on the head sustained in the course of sacking his latest line-up two nights previously, and with a limp he suggested was the result of being mis-sold some ‘corrective shoes’. It then transpired we’d have difficulty finding a venue for the interview because Smith was at the time barred from most of Manchester’s city centre pubs. We finally found a suitable, if insalubrious, bar where I felt a tiny bit apprehensive regarding Smith’s grouchy reputation. However, Smith was nice as pie with me, perhaps because he was more preoccupied with hilariously destroying Heaton, who had made the grievous mistake of confessing to be a huge fan of The Fall.

The session went on for hours and hours, during which we somehow managed to tackle subjects as diverse as the Spice Girls, the Teletubbies, the IRA and why electioneering Conservative politicians in Smith’s native Salford have to don balaclavas if they dare to knock on doors, before I passed out on the train home.

The interview had already been postponed twice. Ominously, we were supposed to meet on the Friday, but Dorothy phoned to say Smith had suddenly had to dash off for some ‘urgent business’ in Austria. Whatever could that mean? Then I got halfway across the M62 to Manchester when Elena called to say Smith had been ‘unavoidably detained’ a second time. Two days, two hours and ten minutes later, he cascades through the Malmaison revolving doors – it’s a chic establishment, suggesting the ban no longer applies – wearing a leather jacket that seems to be struggling to stay on his shoulders. When he sits down with the inevitable pint of their strongest

lager, I notice his blue shirt is peppered with iron burns. Smith may be a musical genius, but he has clearly yet to master the more demanding domestic tasks. Later, when I mention the shirt to a friend, the friend comments, ‘That sounds quite trendy.’

So how was Austria?

Smith looks bemused, then erupts in laughter. He hasn’t been to Austria at all.

It wasn’t planned, he explains. The thing was, he’d met some football fans on the Friday who ran a fanzine and they’d included a chart of all-time favourite Fall songs and ‘Paranoia Man in Cheap Sh*t Room’ – one of Smith’s personal favourites – had made it to Number 5. He’d originally planned to nip out for an hour, but one thing led to another and he was enjoying himself so much he hadn’t realised he’d been out with them most of the weekend.

Smith admits he’s ‘a bit hazy’. However, he wastes no further time in setting up one of his favourite pre-interview gambits: the erection of barbed-wire fences between The Mighty Fall and all those Other Groups.

‘They’ve started manufacturing “alternative” groups now,’ he begins, in his inimitable Salford slur. ‘The last two awards ceremonies I went to, the arse licking when they went onstage was intolerable. Thanking the publisher, the manager, the record company, the one who started us off . . . and they’re supposed to be alternative groups. It was sickening, actually. We were like “Shut up!”’

‘They all want careers in music. You’d think they’d be up for a party, but my mates who are builders have more fun than half these bands.’

He pauses, then explodes. ‘And make more money, arrarrarr!’

This seems to be a recurrent feature of Smith’s interview technique: establish camaraderie between artist and interviewer, and align us both against everybody else. He has been known to take a similar combative approach both with and against his own musicians. He soon reveals there’s been yet more turmoil in the camp.

Spencer Birtwistle – a long-lost drummer who Fall fans had thought lost to the mists of time (or wherever Fall drummers go when they suddenly disappear) – is back in the band.

‘He left a year or two back, having a hard time with his wife or some-

thing. When I rang him up he'd just packed his drum kit away for good that morning. He wasn't in a good state, actually. I said "I'm not doing this for therapy. I need you now!"

And that was that. More curiously, guitarist Ben Pritchard – who after four years is a relative Fall veteran – has apparently resigned and been reinstated in the space of the last three days.

'He took three days to write the resignation letter,' explains Smith, trying hard to stifle a cackle.

Almost imperceptibly, we're onto the major topic of the interview: the hiring and firing of musicians, and Smith's seemingly lifelong philosophy of 'freshening up' The Fall, which he compares to managing a football team: 'Every so often you've got to replace the centre-forward.'

There seems to be quite a lot of this in Fall world. People exit, usually amid much rancour, then suddenly come back. The oddest instance of this was in the mid 1990s, when Brix Smith, Smith's long-suffering first wife and Fall guitarist, didn't let divorce or the fact she'd been out of the band for six years stop her popping up onstage, unannounced, in York.

'I call it the "two-year gap",' says Smith, pondering his lager. 'They think I'm a dictator. But after two years they come back and say they never had as much freedom.' Smith admits he can be 'a bit of a sod sometimes' but insists he's on 'fairly good terms' with most of the ex-members – the more recent ones anyway – even someone like former guitarist Neville Wilding, who Smith says 'could really be a nutcase'.

Smith goes on to explain that at one point – shortly before going onstage at the prestigious 1999 Reading Festival, no less – he and Wilding had been 'at it with knuckle-dusters' backstage, eventually taking to the stage covered in each other's blood. And now?

'We phone each other every month. All forgiven.'

A likely story? In *The Wonderful and Frightening World*, you never really know what's real.

I stare across the table. The crow's feet he sang about two decades ago in the song 'Living Too Late' are even more entrenched now, telling their own story of a life fronting The Fall. But when he smiles – and today he smiles surprisingly often – the years seem to melt away and he looks for all the world like a mischievous schoolboy.

Do people get too comfortable in The Fall?

'In the past very much so,' he says. 'Job for fuckin' life, you know. It's not like that in this business.' He says he sees membership of The Fall as a 'two- or three-year cycle' and he has two principal requirements of musicians. They should not 'think they're it', nor should they be 'fans of the bloody group!' because that always 'backfires'. He rightly insists turnover is common in orchestras or Northern Soul bands, but those organisations tend to be full of session players performing old material, not hungry young musicians making edgy music and having punch-ups.

When people leave The Fall – or even when they are in The Fall – they often say it's responsible for the best times of their lives and also the most terrifying. Whatever do they mean?

'There's been some big fights,' he confesses, lighting up a fag before he goes into the particular perils of foreign tours. 'You get to America and people pull a gun out. That's happened in Europe too. Someone jumps onstage and goes for the bass player, and he's never been out of Manchester before, it's his second gig. Welcome to The Fall!'

Projectiles are common at Fall gigs. Microphone stands were particularly popular for a while.

'Us throwing them at people or them throwing them at us?' Smith chorales. 'Both? Hahhahahahaha, call it a draw.' And yet, over the years, it has often seemed the greatest threat to a Fall musician's wellbeing or sanity can come from the man employing them. Fall gigs routinely see Smith jostling one of his musicians, standing over them like an intimidating schoolmaster as they play.

In recent years, a favourite trick has been to dismantle the band's equipment – while they are playing. 'When you're playing five or six nights a week, the group get slick,' Smith says in his defence. Some of this is tongue-in-cheek but Smith is deadly serious when he points out that for him, and thus The Fall, routine is 'the enemy of music'.

Thus, Smith has become not just a director of musicians but some kind of experimental psychologist. In the past, he's admitted to giving musicians the wrong address to the studio, on the grounds that by the time they arrive they'll be so flustered they'll play better. His onstage instructions range from the sternly encouraging 'Give it some guts' and

‘Fucking get it together and stop showing off’ to a simple, bossy ‘Hit it harder’.

‘What’s wrong with that?’ he protests. ‘It works. Admittedly it can be a problem if you’re the guitarist.’

Another pint is drained and he describes his employment of the ‘European phrasebook’, sending guitarists to say things like ‘I am a flower’ in German.

‘In Germany, when they’re ordering breakfast you’ll get them to shout the German for “Excuse me, stick it up your arse, will you?”’ He is laughing so much he can barely speak.

Then, suddenly, he looks sad. ‘[The musicians] are getting wise to it now.’

On tour, he says, he sits at the back of the bus, like a manager with his players, to retain ‘detachment’. ‘That’s the key to it, really. You can be matey and have a pint but you don’t want to be round their houses.’

However, he suggests he’s mellowing, talking benevolently of the latest line-up as ‘my lads’. This means bassist Steven Trafford has been allowed the rare privilege of his own band on the side, which would never have happened before because he used to have ‘that thing where if you played with any other group yer dead’.

Except it wasn’t always like this. In fact, the original Fall line-up – Smith, Tony Friel, Una Baines and Martin Bramah – was a quartet of pals who spent a lot of time at each other’s houses, listening to music and talking about the future. But at some point, fairly quickly, Smith became a ringmaster.

He ponders this for what seems an age.

‘It wasn’t . . . well, it was sort of intentional,’ he finally concedes. ‘But I wasn’t thinking on those terms. I don’t really plan though. I can’t really plan ahead of next week. I certainly don’t plot sackings like they say.’ He looks wounded.

Perhaps the most vulnerable position in The Fall is the drum stool, and over the years there have been more incidents involving drummers than any other members.

Smith is a connoisseur of percussion – ‘It’s like Captain Beefheart said, “If you can’t hear the drums, it’s not there”,’ – and has a strong idea of how Fall drums should sound – not ‘flashy’. He describes how the mysterious Karl Burns used to receive a five-pound fine ‘every time he hit the tom’.

Have you never considered a drum machine?

He chokes on his pint. ‘The first thing I have to do in every studio is get the bloody click track off,’ he spits, sounding like a manic Victor Meldrew. ‘Every bloody engineer, whoever they are, they think you don’t notice, y’know, ’cause Mark Smith’s the singer and he’s had a few, you know. They’ll go, “It wasn’t quite in time, Mark, so I added a bit of drum machine.”’

‘It’s bloody stuff like that,’ he rages, aghast. The other thing that drives him mad is when producers make the drums all sound in time; drummers love this ‘because it makes them sound technical’. He suggests a lot of ‘revered’ groups only use machines because the drummers are rubbish and insists he could do better on a ‘bloody typewriter’. That’s debatable – and if it were true, Smith would surely have done it by now – but what is certain is that Fall musicians are never allowed to forget they are replaceable. If they forget it, Smith will less than subtly ram the point home. Once, when the rhythm section were late for a gig, he brought on players from the support band and was delighted when the errant drummer and bassist walked in to see their replacements on stage.

Perhaps the only certainty of being in The Fall is the knowledge that one day you will be out – although musicians are never privy to the knowledge of when this might happen. Members have even been fired during gigs, which Smith sheepishly says he is trying not to do now because it gets ‘a bit tricky’.

Once, onstage in Stourbridge – the sort of off-the-beaten-track location that often features on Fall tours – a guitarist, Ed Blaney, was booted offstage by Smith after just two songs.

Smith roars with laughter. ‘It wasn’t working, was it?’ He splutters. ‘Some people are brilliant in rehearsals, they go onstage and they crack up.’

So you usher them off?

‘It’s for their own good,’ he insists. ‘People get nervous.’ It’s worth pointing out that Blaney had been in The Fall for four years at the time. However, Smith suggests he too gets nervous: ‘After all these years, I do.’

This is an intriguing statement. It suggests that, for all the hiring and firing in the group, the person most feeling the pressure of carrying a legend like The Fall is Smith – because, after all, it’s his reputation on the line.

As we touch on the stresses of fronting The Fall, he suddenly changes the subject, but interviewing Smith is often like this: ask one question, you'll get another answered. Often, he'll deliver his thoughts on something unrelated. Over the course of three alcohol-fuelled hours, Smith's train of thought careers like The Fall's line-up. Subjects covered range from his distrust of gadgets – 'I have these things lying around the house. They're useless!' – to why people in Hull think the singer from AC/DC is a 'fucking singing gnome' – Humberside is an unforgiving place, where fools are not suffered gladly – to the fact that Smith is under the impression Morecambe is in Yorkshire, whereas it lies on the coast of Lancashire, unless the site manager has recently had it moved. After two hours he spies my tape machine a foot in front of him and asks, 'Are we recording this? I thought it was your portaphone.'

More surprisingly, he often veers into the relatively uncharted waters of his personal life. I have followed this man's music since 1980 but know very little about him, which is probably how he likes it. Today I discover a few things. He's lived in the same house in Prestwich for 'a very long time'. He has thought of moving but says, 'By the time you think about it seriously, you've got something else to do.'

He hasn't taken a holiday for 'a very long time', although he eventually mutters something about 'a couple of trips to the Lakes'.

His front lawn is tended every fortnight by a local Irishman who calls him 'Mr Smith'.

He has no children, saying, 'It's enough with the bloody group!' This hasn't stopped various people hitting him with parentage claims. 'I must have seven around the world, all trying it on!'

He met Elena – née Poulou, some 20-odd years his junior – in Berlin, where she was working as a DJ, promoting a gig by The Fall. He courted her by touring not graves of former drummers but Northern fish-and-chip shops. He remembers a particular establishment in my hometown, Leeds. 'She said, "This is great. Can we live here?"'

Intriguingly, Poulou moved to Prestwich and joined The Fall before she married Smith. Somehow, we were back to the group. With Smith, everything seems to revolve around the group.

'I try to take some time off from The Fall,' he muses. 'I don't get very far. I try to keep Saturday clear!'

More pints appear and suddenly we're talking about one of the cornerstones of The Fall: Smith's formidable work ethic.

'I suppose it is a result of my upbringing,' says Smith (first job, meat factory; second job, docks clerk; third job, this one). 'When I started work – left school – you had to fight for your Saturdays off. It was a five-and-a-half-day week. They were just getting down from six.' But, ironically, most people work longer hours now than they did then.

'I could see that coming,' insists Smith, pointing out a parallel with record companies: in the 1980s, you'd get six sheets of royalties statements, how many records sold, how much money due. Whereas now, 'You get reams and reams of paper, designed to confuse you'. Bizarrely, he insists he receives royalties intended for The Cure's Robert Smith.

'There's more paper in my house than ever. I spend more time in studios just ploughing through sheets of paper.'

What's your house like?

'Modest . . . I throw things out.'

Like musicians?

He doesn't flinch.

'You wouldn't believe the things I throw out. You know, when you're a bit depressed and you see the *NME* from 1986 . . . you need a clear mind.'

This loathing – or even fear – of the past is fundamental to Smith. Today's music is fuelled by nostalgia. He knows this, he's had the offers – to reform a certain line-up of The Fall or perform a certain 'classic' album. He's been tempted, when the band were really broke, but he'll always fight it. He learned very quickly that the business is 'full of people who live in the past'. Surely he can't mean me?

However, the Fall factory must roll on. The means to the end – and perhaps the end in itself – is production. Without production, The Fall would cease to exist and Mark E Smith, as everyone has known him for as long as he can remember, would cease to exist. And that notion must be truly terrifying.

We're getting strangely melancholy now. Have you ever thought it was all over, that the group was going to finish?

'Lots of times,' he says. 'About once every three years. No, seriously! But what would I do?'

He genuinely doesn't know. There have been offers, for magazine columns and short stories. Short-story writing interests him and he's written a few, two-and-a-half pages long, examples of what he considers the 'great British short story'. But he says the publishers don't want them; they want books like, 'what they think Fall lyrics are like, y'know, alcohol, violence, industrial estates'. Which is about one per cent of the picture. In this moment, he sounds truly depressed.

We talk a bit more about his personal life and he reflects that, for all the chaos around The Fall, he likes some things to be solid: 'a settled back four, if you like'. He agrees he probably makes his best music when his personal life is settled and thus marriage to Elena in 2000 – 'third time lucky, it's going marvellous, touch wood' – had to be a good thing from every perspective. But it wasn't always like that.

In 1998, when The Fall fought each other in New York and split up, he came very, very close to losing everything.

'I wouldn't go through it again,' he says candidly. The calls from London stopped. The business he loathes shunned him. But it was an 'eye opener'. His friends, his few real friends, from before the group, rallied around him.

'It was builders or people who've been on the dole all their life that said, "You've got to get a meal inside you, Marky Parky".' Perhaps the experience cemented his distrust of musicians.

'It makes you think.'

Did you ever think you were losing it?

'Me personally? A little bit . . . I was fed up.' There's a long and silent pause, but just as Smith frequently hauls The Fall back from the abyss, he brightens, explaining how The Fall were having financial trouble and he was depressed because he couldn't afford to take 'the girl' out for a drink. And then he broke his leg.

'I fell out with The Fall one year, then broke my hip the next,' he chuckles. He spent five hours in "Cheetham Hill Hospital" (North Manchester General).

'You can't walk out because you can't walk!' He is laughing like a drain. A week later, Smith led yet another Fall line-up onstage and opened with 'Walk like a Man'.

I tell him I don't think a lot of people get the humour in The Fall and he agrees. He even saw the humour in the infamous cigarette incident,

pointing out the journalist ‘had an attitude’ and ‘the bloke in the newsagent said it was one of the funniest things he’d read in ages’.

Do you ever read stuff about yourself and think, who is this man?

‘All the time,’ he sighs. ‘I sometimes think there’s a Mancunian or Northern sense of humour that doesn’t travel. They don’t get the glint in your eye. But you’ve got to watch it,’ he scolds. ‘All that professional Northerner stuff, you know, “Aye up mate”. That’s the end of the line. I’d rather walk the streets. You get these professional Mancs, fuckin’ professional people like the *Guardian*.’

I feel a rapier slip beneath my Yorkshire born-and-bred shoulders.

‘The accent’s false! They say now you can get on in the media if you have a regional accent.’

He’s smiling. The rapier is removed.

Regrets?

He pauses. ‘About once a week.’

We’d touched on the New York fracas, but it’s time to get into specifics. When he became a solo artist overnight, was that one of the ‘regrets’?

‘Nah . . .’ Deep breath. ‘Nah.’

So, conversely, was it planned? Another Machiavellian way of jettisoning the band?

‘Not by me,’ he insists, adding that it was the other musicians who planned it. ‘I’m not joking. They had studio time booked by themselves, I found that out later. They engineered it, not me. They had another band, The Ark, that was their great idea. Mark without the M. Sank without trace, The Ark! But I’m too much of a gentleman to respond.’

I realise the room is silent, the barman hanging on Smith’s every word like a Fall audience. I remember an open-air gig at the Phoenix Festival in Stratford-upon-Avon in the mid 1990s where I stood on the front row watching Smith pour out his vocals in the pelting rain, as if relishing unleashing his words in such a charged environment. His face was gnarled but twisted in some distant, knowing pleasure. Then – like today – it felt like him and me. It often feels like that when you watch the man perform.

But what we are discussing seems poignant. It resulted in Smith losing Steve Hanley, a bassist of almost 20 years’ service whom Smith had once said ‘defined’ the sound of The Fall.

Did you not trust him, after all that time?

'To a certain extent, I suppose. You trust some . . . but you keep 'em on a short leash.'

But you yourself said he 'defined' the sound of The Fall.

'Correct. But it was coming.'

Smith says when he got back to Britain he phoned the newly departed members to give them a mouthful for leaving him in prison, but they'd 'changed all their fuckin' numbers'.

However, Julia Nagle – the keyboardist whom Smith was charged with assaulting – subsequently rejoined the band and stayed for another three years. Was a mountain made out of a molehill?

'Yeah. No regrets at all.'

Smith has been uncharacteristically open, but becomes defensive on the subject of Karl Burns, the now AWOL drummer who initiated the New York punch-up by walloping Smith onstage.

'Can we have two more beers here, sir?' he shouts to the watching barman.

Smith is evasive.

Burns attacked you first?

'Two more beers, please!'

Then he suddenly answers the question. 'I thought it [the attack] was very good. Best bit of the gig.'

I seize my chance. I ask about some of the former members, people like Una Baines and Martin Bramah, who were Smith's close friends many years ago. He insists they won't talk to him.

'I can never get hold of any of them. I think it's guilt. See, most of them left me, not the other way round.'

Then it dawns on me. Despite Dorothy's best intentions, there won't be any contacts given for former members. Nor does Smith want to talk about them. However amicably, he has controlled the boundaries of the interview as effectively as he controls The Fall. I feel he has told me a lot yet no more than he wanted to.

But we part on good terms. He buys me more beer in a pub over the road and even gives me the autograph I didn't get in 1981 – for my Fall-loving partner, Suzanne. Always a gentleman, Mark E Smith.

But after walking around Manchester for a while to sober up, I end up

driving home to be met with a problem. My editor is keen to stick with the original idea, to talk not just to Smith but also to former members.

He's given me hours of his time, I don't want it to be all for nothing.

So, I realise I'm just going to have to find them. All of them.

