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The Fall: Ersatz G.B.

By [John L. Murphy](#) 5 December 2011

A stripped-down, solid stomp

With a studio album each year since the punk era broke, I was wondering, as this year neared its close, if The Fall would deliver its annual contribution to my not-so-short shelf. I've been listening to this Northern English band before their albums appeared in the U.S., and their career has found them on many labels, with some records never released overseas, others released in the U.S., and most re-released over and over, adding (for better or not so much) to their legacy. Live, they prove unpredictable, and within a studio, they prove recognizably innovative if often infuriating in their truest commitment to punk's iconoclasm. They refused to conform to punk in the late 1970s, and they refuse to play by anybody's rules but those broken by their leader, and sole founding member, Mark E. Smith.

Studio record No. 29, *Ersatz G.B.*, delivers a heavy, ornery style of discontent. It's one of their best. For a singer nearing his mid-50s, Smith insists upon his idiosyncratic approach. His mumbling, self-referential, literary, and demotic blend of insider jokes, baffling references, sly narratives, and winking humor remains intact. His band, cemented here by his wife Elini Poulou's keyboards, works mightily to satisfy its leader's difficult standards. The music, I am pleased to report, responds to Smith's challenges, and it's a tough, sassy album. Not as melodic as recent triumphs from the past decade, but it works by its own unrelenting concentration upon a stripped-down, solid stomp.

This starts off with a febrile, dense "Cosmos 7" compressing words and snarls from Smith into a mash of Elena Poulou's keyboards and backing vocals and the band's assault, until it suddenly ends, in less than three minutes. It's a promising opening, recalling the best moments from The Fall's strong albums five years or so ago. It swaggers but does not brutalize, with meaty production. "Taking Off" sounds similarly cosmic. It features an off-center dub rhythm section, with a repeating riff over keyboards which skitter against the confident anchor of Keirion Melling's drums and David Spurr's bass. It stops with a nod to an Eastern snatch of a pop tune, barely registered in its final moments.



The Fall

Ersatz G.B.

(Cherry Red; US: 6 Dec 2011; UK: 14 Nov 2011)

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"Nate Will Not Return" comes back to the opening sound, very "live" and jittery with Pete Greenway's guitar and growling keyboards in another strong mix of direct, congealed melody. Smith mutters about deception over a chordal pattern recalling the experiments of PiL decades ago by Keith Levine; the vocal here rejects John Lydon's wails, however, for insisting that "I am Nate" in a tale about Ukrainian imports of sinister fashion and "maybe New Jersey state".

Lacking liner notes, the listener must depend on the passing reaction to what the words at the moment suggest. Repeated listens to albums by The Fall bring out their nuanced layers of assault and delicacy, and their wordplay and considerable, if wry and dry, wit. At six minutes, compared to some tunes on recent records by the band, "Nate" moves with catty precision and never wears out its initial promise. "Mask Search" brings back in a brief tune a familiar pattern for longtime fans: a hint of the American rockabilly roots that tangle some of the more obscure cover versions that Smith favors. It's a somewhat simpler delivery than the previous three songs, yet its production, as relentlessly determined as before, matches the mood of the CD.

"Greenway" finds Smith straining his voice: "it's good enough for" a variety of targets, until it segues into a typically bizarre tale of the singer watching a video in a Danish hotel of a man who looks like him. He goes to a neighboring room to ask for a way to record this astonishing sight. This leads to predictable complications: "people like that really get on my nerves." Here, the famously cranky Mancunian vocalist adopts a different tone, grainier and even more raw than his usual tipsy warble, and the band follows suit in a backing support of male voices that channel the sound into a tunnel of dark threats.

Keyboards find a simple way into a tune that Poulou delivers, as a "Happy Song". It's not quite Nico alongside Lou Reed, but her articulation of similarly careful English reminds me of that avant-garde European predecessor. It's rare on an album from this version of The Fall to promote for an entire song one by another vocalist, so this variety helps. It's musically not as intriguing as the five songs so far, but it does not depart from the style of *Ersatz G.B.*. This record is far more consistent than many of the band's hit-and-miss output.

The saying among fans goes that a weak album follows a strong one, but the previous *Our Future Your Clutter* was respectable. All the same, *Ersatz G.B.* easily betters it, for its devotion to a more monolithic construction. Far from this weakening the structure, the preparation of deceptively simple rock band ingredients sustains a firm, weighty, and smooth direction that rarely wavers or wobbles. This album benefits by concision. Any listener of the band can volunteer past Fall tracks which wore out their welcome, so the seven minutes of "Monocard" serve as the test drive for the handling of this year's model. It doesn't wander into wankery or get mired in silliness. "Laptop Dog" returns to the album's first half, and while not very distinguishable from those tracks, continues the progress where parallel stretches in other Fall albums have sagged and the pace has slackened.

"I've Seen Them Come" swings back to the PiL template, with a rowdy call-and-response siren call tucked into the male backing vocals for Smith, and the interplay of guitar-bass-drums with the competing and overlapping voices keeps this an exciting song. Six minutes does not diminish the focus of this track. The impact of early 1970s German progressive rock on PiL as on The Fall must be acknowledged, and if Lydon had persevered as has Smith, one wonders how the best of post-punk's pioneers 30-odd years on would have evolved. The slap of the drums and the whirl of the keyboards keeps this song punchy to its end.

So does the percussion opening "Age of Change". Blocks might be thudded; it's hard to tell in the sonic fog. The production staggers the vocals slightly, and keeps backing voices martial against a static-frosted Smith. The textures, throughout this sprightly record, above the phasing of the keyboards, make this closing track wonderfully propulsive. Forty-one minutes produce a wonderful album by Smith and his willing musicians, who rise to his exacting leadership, until he cracks up declaiming the last lines about a "dam of vast proportions will break over hawk's hahahah"—or something. With him, you're never quite sure what he's onto. This keeps The Fall like Smith: fresh and sour.

Rating: 



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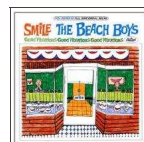
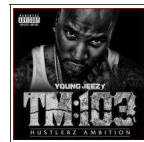
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
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