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Album: The Fall, "Ersatz GB" (Cherry Red)

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Yes, it's album No. 637 for **The Fall** in a career spanning more than 12 centuries involving a revolving-door band roster that includes the entire population of Altrincham, Greater Manchester (as well as parts of neighboring Timperley, hometown of the late, great Frank Sidebottom. But nobody really cares, generic Internet record reviewer: if your name is Mark E. Smith and the year is 2011, there is nothing left to do but make records. Nothing.



So why does he sound so uninterested in the process?

Nothing on "Ersatz GB," the legendary post-punk, post-everything band's quick follow-up to last year's strong "Your Future Our Clutter," is necessarily awful, but much of the spirited claptrap of last year's set has gone missing, replaced by a nagging feeling that Smith, now onto his third studio release with this particular set of bandmates, is simply going through the motions. Can another round of wholesale personnel changes be far off?, you'll wonder, as you listen to the group slog through one monotone shout-trope after another.

Those paying attention at this point had to be wondering when the ax would start swinging again; though Smith has long denied his reputation as an impulsive sacker of band members, you have to remember that he also considers his crew (aside from his wife, keyboardist Elena Poulou, one hopes) glorified session musicians. Just like the knobs and cords he famously twiddles with and rearranges during live performances, the maestro will inevitably grow tired of his creation and begin the process of smashing it.

"Ersatz GB" sounds like the process of smashing things, or at least the beginning of a tantrum. It kicks off reasonably well with the frisky "Cosmos 7," ramping up a modified rockabilly rave-up shuffle to Smith's entrance via much growling and malevolent whispering (having lost most of the high-end of his yelp, the singer -- who was never much of an actual singer, to be fair -- has adopted a sort of throaty gurgle to replace the high-pitched squeals which used to punctuate much of his ululating). The tune is sprightly but mysterious, and the lyrics seem to mean even less than usual (something about psoriasis and a "mythical European lifestyle," maybe.)

Following the extremely minor ramble "Taking Off" (think old man shouting over Spinal Tap playing free jazz concert), the crankiness begins to set into hard stone form on the magnificently unyielding "Nate Will Not Return," which tells the story of a "man called Nate" who decides "to sublimate." The entire song has the feeling of an extended intro to a bigger tune that never comes. A build-up to a dead end. Although it runs in place quite impressively: some of Smith's bellows here are quite fearsome, as his ability to rhyme "Nate" with various things: late, fate,

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mate, gate, New Jersey State. The list is not quite endless, but here we have undeniable proof that it runs at least six minutes long.

After the ubiquitous rockabilly (Smith is allotted one per album, by order of the Queen) throwaway, we're treated to the hilarious "Greenway," a quasi-cover of Greek heavy metal band Anorimoi's "Gameboy." Most people will hate it, but "it's good enough for you," Smith pronounces. The delightful "Happi Song," sung by Poulou, lightens the mood a bit -- it almost sounds like Bjork in her immediately post-Sugarcubes era. But the pop fun only lingers in the room for the briefest of moments before the monolithic "Monocard" comes on and completely blots out any hint of cheeriness. The "tune" (it's eight minutes of single-chorded musical hegemony, Smith figuratively making his band do push-ups until he grows tired of the game) is classic any-era Fall, the singer loud-talking over a towering wall of feedback drone until you get the sick feeling that somebody, somewhere, has done something *wrong*. But Smith won't tell us who or what: he just keeps feeding you the feeling without paying out the punchline. "Felicitatious malefactions," he intones; "When will I get a grasp of monocard?" he teases. Never! The answer is "never"!

"Laptop Dog," the album's single, attempts to climb out of the gloom with a semi-jaunty tune that at least partially involves Keith Richards following people to their hotels, but it never really gets to where it wants to go. If there's hope for the band's precariously current incarnation, it comes in the penultimate "I've Seen Them Come," an unsettling punk rouser that could reasonably pass for an outtake from the band's mid-'80s baroque period (echoes of "R.O.D." or "What You Need" both come to mind); it's the closest this album gets to carving out a strong sense of identity as *The Fall*. Similarly, closer "Age of Chang" continues the hot streak: Smith has done the tinny-bullhorn-over-guitars act before, of course, but it remains an effective tool in his arsenal. The band at least sounds interested as it sings about its own impending execution ("Time for change," they shout; "T for change," Smith answers, concluding with something about a dam breaking over Hawksmoor, which is either a famous steak restaurant in London or something else entirely) and the song seems to point a way forward through the current malaise. But maybe not with all of the people currently wearing the "Hello, We Are The Fall" name tags.

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Roland Getn

About time somebody called it like it is with the Fall. The last 3 times I have seen this band I have vowed "never again". However living in Manchester, as I do, the law of averages says that I will be in a bar at some point and The Fall will appear. Smith is now beyond a joke. Read the book "the Fallen" it is tragic. Somebody needs to tell him he's not the messiah, just an old drunk. Maybe he could star in an anti drugs advert? "Look at my face-ah, this is what booze and speed do to you-ah "

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