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A Quietus Interview

We Only Have This Excerpt: Mark E Smith Of The Fall Interviewed Kevin E.G. Perry , November 24th, 2011 09:29

Mark E Smith has a drink with Kevin EG Perry and tells him about literary influences and Ersatz GB. Photograph by Valerio Berdini

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“It’s a shopper’s paradise, isn’t it?” says Mark E Smith as he surveys ‘Smoak’, the inexplicably Texan-themed bar in Manchester’s Malmaison hotel. It’s a Saturday afternoon a month or so before Christmas, and both the hotel bar and the adjacent lobby are crawling with families laden with expensive-looking carrier bags. We collect our beers, chosen at random from a long list of imports, and Smith spots a quiet corner on the other side of the lobby: “We’ll go over there.”

He moves in a shuffling gait, and already seems older than his 54 years, but his wit and his work rate haven’t slowed. In the 35 years since he and a handful of mates formed The Fall in an apartment in Prestwich he has released 29 albums under that name. Although his bandmates have long since become the subject of regular rotation, over the years Smith has crafted for himself a complex, literate authorial voice which is as unmistakable as his own Salford anti-vocals. The new record, *Ersatz G.B.*, is out in time for the Christmas shoppers, at his own insistence.

Is he happy with it? “Yeah!” he grins as we get settled on a sofa, “but I wouldn’t mind a copy! Have you got one?” He lets out a cackle. Over the course of the evening, Smith laughs long, and hard, and often. It’s an expressive laugh, and depending on the subject at hand it ranges from a chesty death rattle to whooping back in his seat. His tongue emerges regularly. It looks like a gila monster, and in his long career it seems to have gotten him in and out of trouble in roughly equal measure.



Where did the title *Ersatz G.B.* come from?

“Well, it’s one of them word things. I came up with the title before I started writing half the songs. That’s what they like, the record companies. They like the title first, because I was insisting on it being out by Christmas.”

What’s the thinking behind it?

“Well... what do you think the thinking is behind it?”

I tell him it sounds like a state of the nation address. That Great Britain isn’t what it seems to be, or perhaps what it used to be. Smith, however, has never been one for nostalgia.

“There’s always that rose-coloured glasses shit, but people forget how crap it was in the Seventies. All you’ve got to do is to look to your right to know what the title means. Ha ha ha ha” To our right, a woman with a toddler in a pushchair has taken a seat. The handles of the pushchair are heavy with shopping bags. “What surprised me was that a lot of people didn’t know what ‘ersatz’ was.”

That British people now read less and have smaller vocabularies would seem to validate the point.

“I think that’s probably right, yeah. I don’t think they appreciate what they’ve got, but you’ve got to be careful because you end up sounding like a grumpy old man. It was like this when I was fucking 12. I used to read all the fucking time, but I was the only one at the fucking school who did. I went to a grammar school but I was the only one who actually read anything. It’s not because of computers or anything. People have always been pig ignorant! Ha! There’s nowt you can do about it! Ha Ha Ha! Cheers!”

It’s Smith’s turn to ask the questions, so we talk for a while about The Quietus and about how much I’m getting paid to do this interview, and then about our shared love of Hunter S Thompson and conversely about the lad’s mag journalism he

unsurprisingly abhors: “I’ve never been into cars or looking at birds. I don’t understand that. It’s funny because when my book came out, I went to this writing convention in Wales. It’s like where all these writers congregate. Very famous.”

The Hay festival?

“Yeah. So that fella was there. The Top Gear fella. Jeremy whodyamob. Jeremy whatisface from Top Gear.”

Oh, Clarkson.

“I dunno, I know nothing about cars at all. Even my dad was like that. My dad had a Lada. Ha ha ha. What happened was, I was doing this thing about my book, and there was about 500 people there. But for this geezer there was thousands. You couldn’t get out of the place. There was about a million cars on this camping site. It’s almost like you’re drowning in people who look like him!” Smith points at a balding, middle-aged man reading a newspaper on the other side of the lobby. “Fucking thousands of them! I had this fucking co-writer with me, the ghost-writer. The fucking idiot is shaking hands with the fuckers because he thinks they’ve all come to see me, or ‘im. So I fucking bottled him! Ha ha ha ha. I bottled him in the car park! He was shaking hands with fucking every fucker you’d see! I just wanted to get out, it was that frustrating. It was horrible.”

It’s a pretty damning indictment of people’s reading habits that Jeremy Clarkson is the most popular man at the Hay Festival.

“I know, yeah, but there weren’t like young girls there. It was people like him.” He points again. “It was quite frightening! Thousands and thousands of thousands of them, and they must be parents so you can’t really blame the kids who aren’t reading. A lot of fellas my age, they won’t fucking grow up.”

Who were your literary influences?

“When I was about your age I used to like Burroughs and stuff like that.”

You can hear echoes of Burroughs’ fragmented narratives in some of Smith’s most glorious lyrics, like this, from 1982’s ‘The Classical’: “You won’t find anything more ridiculous than this new profile razor unit, made with the highest British attention to the wrong detail, become obsolete units surrounded by hail”. Like Burroughs, Smith gets his hands dirty operating down in the bowels of language.

“Yeah, I think his influence is apparent. I used to read a lot of Nietzsche. Still do!” A sly laugh, before he deadpans: “He’s not very popular.”

Are you attracted to the idea of the übermensch?

“No, I think that’s all bullshit. Arthur Machen, you know, the horror writer. HP Lovecraft, who I still read, sadly. I could go on forever really. All the Pan Horror classics.”

What about Ballard? I’ve thought I heard his influence a few times?

He turns the question around: “Do you like him?”

Yeah, I do. How about you?

“Well, I don’t know. I like that one where the world’s underwater. He did ‘Crash’, though, I didn’t like that one. I prefer Clarke. Arthur C Clarke, people don’t like him but I do. He’s very underrated, I think.”

What about playwrights? There seems to be an obvious parallel between the use of repetition in Samuel Beckett’s work and in the music of The Fall.

“It’s funny you should mention that, because we’re playing the Royal Exchange tomorrow and I saw ‘Waiting for Godot’ there. We’re the first rock group to play there. Personally I don’t know how much he had an influence. Do you like Beckett?”

I do, yeah.

“All me mates do. They really love him. I can’t see it myself. Although, I did see a version of it where it was set in the Weimar Republic and it was really good. The big bully boy was a Nazi. I like Shakespeare a lot, though. Macbeth, in particular. I think Shakespeare’s very, very underrated. Henry V. Every American film you can see they’ve just nicked bits from it. Do you like film?”

I do. Have you seen ‘Naked’ by Mike Leigh?

“Yeah! I’ve got it. It’s good, isn’t it?”

Johnny driving down from Manchester to London and being stuck outside all night.

“I can relate to that, ha ha ha! Seriously, I can relate to that!”

I mention it because in your book you talked about travelling being overrated because: “Where you’re living is in your head.” Johnny says something similar in the film, about never really being outside “because you’re always inside your head.”

We talk a bit more about travel, and touring, and he says:

“I’m in two minds about travelling. The good thing about it is it keeps the group on their fucking toes. They have to be tired for two or three days. A lot of groups nowadays they just think they’re in their little shuttle-bus. The wife’s not very pleased and the group aren’t very pleased, but I just think it’s just good to keep them on the fucking go all the time, even if it’s for useless things. I’ve always been like that. What you get then is ‘Why did we travel for two days just to be onstage for fifty minutes?’ and I say: ‘Because you fucking do.’ If you don’t like it you can fuck off. You’re very lucky to have a job.”

By this point our glasses are empty, so Smith hands me £20 and sends me over to brave the bar. “Do you want to get another one? Could you please? I’ve got something on my feet,” he says. He’s been rubbing them underneath his shoes and it’s clear they’re causing him some pain.

When I get back he says:

“What the fuck is that buffalo doing there?”

He’s been inspecting the bar’s mock saloon decor and faux animal skulls. I tell him it’s not what I expected when I heard I’d be meeting him in a Manchester bar.

“It’s not like people come here expecting a buffalo is it? Ha ha ha. Sorry!”

I ask him about what the music scene was like in Salford in the middle Seventies, and he talks about rebelling against the hippies but taking a lot of acid: “It was proper acid. In my experience, hippies didn’t take acid, they just smoked dope. The bikers sort of controlled it in North Manchester, for a while. If you want a confession, I took acid before I smoked. Before I smoked cigarettes or had a drink. You can’t say that now. I particularly object to ecstasy. It’s a horrible drug, sub par to acid.”

But ecstasy became such a big part of the Manchester scene.

“That’s why I moved to Scotland. It’s true. I’d rather drink whisky, thank you very much. I don’t relate to other groups. I never have. I don’t relate to a lot of musicians to be quite frank. I don’t relate to anything from Manchester and I never saw us as anything like that.”

I take it you won’t be off to see The Stone Roses reform at Heaton Park then?

“Oh no, it was bad enough when Oasis played. I’ve got this really mad mate from Liverpool, and he lives just the other side of Heaton Park. He knocked on me fucking door when Oasis played: ‘What you gonna fucking do? You’ve got some influence in the fucking music industry! Can you fucking tell them to fucking shut up? Every

fucking day!’ I said, ‘I can’t do anything about it! I can’t tell ‘em to stop sound checking!’ He said: ‘You fucking know ‘em! Otherwise I’m gonna get my fucking crossbow out!’ I said: ‘DO NOT do that.’ He only likes metal groups. But it’s reformation, innit? ‘Reformation!’ That’s what the song’s about. But you must know this, Kevin: the reason they reform is that the tax bill’s coming. I don’t relate to ‘em at all, really. I don’t see myself as in any way having anything in common with them. I mean, Mike Joyce rang up the other day and I mean, I can get on with some guys, the Gorillaz and all, but I can’t really relate to musicians. How about you, do you play an instrument?”

I don’t, no. I’m a writer.

He laughs and pats me on the shoulder. “Good lad! Correct! So am I. That’s what it’s got on me passport.”

We talk a bit more about writing, and agree that although Hunter Thompson was lumped with Tom Wolfe as ‘New Journalism’, Thompson’s writing was out on its own.

“Oh, definitely. Though I had a French friend who used to be a good pal of Thompson’s, and I used to say: ‘Could he do it without the drugs?’ I don’t think Thompson could.”

Was taking drugs a big part of your writing process?

Smith laughs long and hard at this question. “Was the Pope Catholic? Are you mad? Why, have you got any?”

I wish I did.

“I wish you did an’ all.”

But was it something you felt you had to do to write, like you’re saying about Thompson?

“In life, there’s sex, drugs and rock’n’roll. I’ve never been into either three of them, to be honest. I’d rather read a good book. I’d rather get pissed and have a cigarette.”

I take the hint, and we go outside for a cigarette.

Back inside and with fresh drinks, I ask whether they had to turn around the album quickly to meet his self-imposed Christmas deadline?

“No, it was quite a long process, for me, really. Started about April, so about three or four months. The main thing was to get it out before Christmas. Which is sacrilege in the music business because you can’t bring out things then because there’s a Christmas rush. ‘Best Hits of Robbie Williams’ or whatever, so the factories are all clogged up with crap.”

But you wanted to make sure you were in people's Christmas stockings?

"Yeah. Definitely. I don't wanna wait behind 'The Best of Barry Manilow', you know what I mean? That's what The Fall used to be about."

Getting a record out every year?

"Yeah. As I'm sure you've found out most groups are very content to sit on their fucking arses. With Cherry Red we want to bring out a single or two and a fucking LP before Christmas. As opposed to the last record companies we've had. It's more economical for record companies nowadays to bring out 'The Best of the fucking Three Welsh Dwarves' or whoever. So I'm pleased that it's out. I've got back to my bloody roots really: 'Our cassette will be in your shops next week'. People just look at you: 'We need six months to do it. We need six weeks to develop the marketing.' All this shit. 'We need six weeks to do the marketing, six weeks to do the interneting.' Can't you just get the fucking thing out?"

You'd think the internet would speed all this up, but the big record companies still seem just as slow.

"If not more."

Do you use the internet yourself?

"No, not a lot."

But you own a computer?

"Yes."

So the possibility's there.

"My wife is really good at it, so she does it, but sometimes I'm just like: 'Turn that fucking thing off!' We've got the lot: iPad and that. We've got a lot of young friends, so we've got the fucking lot. I mean we buy it off 'em but they give it us, so it's all there, but it's what I've always said: it's the tongue of Satan."

Why's it the tongue of Satan?

"I don't know! Somebody said that to me!"

It's a good phrase anyway.

"I do realise you work for an internet magazine which I think is good. I've read the stuff and I think it's fucking excellent, but what I'm saying is I can't go over and..." He does a comic mime of a man trying to type. "I can just about turn Channel fucking 26 on, you know what I mean? I'm allergic to machinery and machinery is allergic to me. Nothing's changed. I've got four mobile phones and they all just break. Watches explode. Think I'm kidding, don't ya?"

Not at all. Do you read the papers regularly?

“I do, yeah.”

Which paper?

“Well they’re very few and far between where I live. It’s not like London. It’s North Manchester, innit. People don’t bother.”

That’s interesting.

“It fucking is interesting, isn’t it? They’re all trying to work out that...” He mimes typing again, “which is maybe what Blair’s plot was. If people spend so much time on their computers, they’re not reading Marx, are they? They’re not reading anything else either... This beer’s great, isn’t it?”

It’s not bad. Speaking of Blair, do you vote?

“Sometimes, yeah.”

Who did you vote for at the last election?

“Council. The anti-Zionist Jewish something for the restoration of payments in North Manchester. Oh, you mean in the main election? I did the one but last one. The last one I just defaced the card. What a bunch of tossers the Lib Dems turned out to be, eh? You wouldn’t have thought that would you?”

I asked about newspapers because I wanted to know whether you use them in your writing: re-appropriation of texts, Burroughsian cut-up and that sort of thing.

“I like crap, me. The local advertiser and all that. The rubbish that’s written in there is quite fascinating. Free newspapers, the Metro and all that shit. What kind of person writes that? You look at it and think ‘whoever told this cunt he could write?’ It’s gotta be said, hasn’t it? I have wrote letters to the paper, under pseudonyms: ‘As an Australian living in Manchester I am appalled at the standard of writing by your main editor.’ Manchester Evening News. It’s gotta be said, hasn’t it? They have me on page three about how I kill squirrels in me backyard. It’s the Manchester Evening News, you cunts. It used to be a respected newspaper, didn’t it?”

We move on to whiskies, and when I return from the bar he’s spotted “the fucking referee from the bleeding game, Burnley vs. Leeds” checking in. I tell him I saw the comedian Jimmy Carr here just before he arrived. It’s obviously a celebrity hangout.

“Nah! No, ‘cause they’ve all moved up to Salford with the BBC, haven’t they? I know who you mean, that fucking dick. The unfunniest man in the world. None of them are funny, are they? None of them are as funny as Thompson.”

Absolutely not. Has Manchester changed a lot?

“It changes every fucking ten minutes.”

I start to ask about class, but Smith is momentarily distracted: “That fella keeps making gestures to me. I’m gonna hit ‘im in a minute. Is he security or something? Probably a United fan, bet you any money.”

I ask again about changes in class terms.

“I don’t know really, the working class doesn’t exist. I mean, look at this lot.” He indicates the shoppers milling around. “What are you gonna do? ‘Don’t get upset about it,’ that’s what my working class friends say. Leave ‘em to it. Can you see a fucking recession going on here? I fucking can’t. They don’t know what a fucking recession is. No fucking idea. There’s a recession in Greece. People can’t afford to eat. They fucking can round here.”

What do you make of the Occupy movement?

“What made me laugh about the Wall Street one is that it started off a thousand and then 800 of them went home. I said to the wife, they’ve gone home to their mam and dad’s haven’t they? It’s like the hippies. It’s got a bit cold. New York police have stopped treating you with the respect you used to get off them. I fucking hate New York coppers. I was arrested, I was in jail there. Only for a day or two. In New York, in America, it’s like, how much have you got? They don’t go: ‘In the van, mate.’ They go, ‘Who’s your fucking dad?’ You get my drift? They don’t go: ‘Get in the back of the fucking van you’re fucking busted’, if you go: ‘Oh, I’m John Von Dyke the fucking third’, it’s: ‘Oh, sorry sir!’ Ha ha ha. ‘I’m Al Capone’s fucking nephew.’ ‘Release him now.’ ‘My dad’s in the mafia’ Ha ha ha. If you’ve just taken a bad trip, or you’re black, fucking smack in the back of a van. The black fella’s going: ‘You’ll get used to it!’”

What were you arrested for?

“Fucking nothing! Smoking in a hotel room. The police were saying to me: ‘Do you know Freddie Mercury or David Bowie?’ and I said, ‘No, and I don’t fucking want to!’ ‘Do you know New Order?’ ‘Unfortunately, but I don’t fucking like them.’”

He flicks a wrist at my whisky glass. “Do you wanna finish that off then, kid? Do you wanna go somewhere else?”

We get in a taxi and drive to Gulliver’s, on Oldham Street. It’s much more like the sort of pub where I would have expected to find Smith, and it couldn’t be more different from the Malmaison. He tells me: “It’s a hard case bar, so you don’t start laughing too much or anything.” From the Hotel Amnesia, to the Hotel Aggro.

He asks me about where I grew up, and then we talk about relationships, about how ‘Perverted by Language’, the book of short stories inspired by his music was “just crap... using my title and writing a load of gibberish”, and about how he prefers Bernard Manning to Stewart Lee.

It’s starting to get late, and Smith is growing increasingly truculent and irascible. We’re both a bit drunk by now, and he says a few ugly things which are maybe intended as a bit of idle provocation. I don’t want to leave on that note, so I try to steer the conversation back towards writing. Did he ever want to write a novel himself?

“No way,” he snaps.

“Fair enough,” I say, “Your songs tell your stories. That’s what makes your music great. That’s what people like me love about The Fall.”

He winds down and looks away from me, at the empty bottle in front of him. “Cheers, Kev,” he says softly. He rubs the sides of his feet and we’re both quiet for a while until, still speaking softly, but in the unmistakable voice of Mark E Smith, he says: “I think I’m becoming very, very tired, Kevin.”

12 comments

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Rory Gibb · New Music Editor at The Quietus

This is a delightful read from start to finish. Kudos Kevin (and MES, naturally).

[Reply](#) · [2](#) · [Like](#) · 24 November 2011 at 09:35



Richard Gray

Brilliant stuff. Shakespeare underrated!

[Reply](#) · [1](#) · [Like](#) · 24 November 2011 at 08:22

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Chester Whelks

Nov 24, 2011 3:15pm

Fucking wonderful.

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Nov 24, 2011 6:30pm

A fine piece Kevin. Actually I am pretty sure David Thewlis credited MES as an influence on his self-created character in Naked, you can certainly her him in there. Just one reservation: why not publish the "ugly things" he said at the end rather than just mention them teasingly in passing? Warts and all, surely?

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Nov 24, 2011 6:54pm

Great interview. Loved every word of it. With the new album the group and Mark at the top of their form. Long may it continue.

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Paul A Garrity

Nov 24, 2011 7:22pm

Great stuff...would LOVE to spend an afternoon bevvyng with MES!

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Rooksy

Nov 24, 2011 7:36pm

"The Best of the fucking Three Welsh Dwarves".

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Anna

Nov 24, 2011 9:09pm

what were the 'ugly things' that were said?

Bet you would have printed them if another person had said them.

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Erica L Pardee

Nov 24, 2011 9:53pm

Brilliant article.... well done. One of the best MES articles I've ever read.

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Stu

Nov 24, 2011 10:33pm

It must be great to be right about everything

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-An Australian Living in Manchester

Nov 25, 2011 1:32am

In reply to [Anna](#):

Yes I agree, like MIA or Morrissey to name but two obvious examples. they'd print every "ugly" remark (or, *sigh*, "tweet")- zero in on them, even - and make a big deal of how offensive it was.

I say this as a much (much!) bigger Fall fan than of those two. And yes I think that they say offensive crap on purpose just to get a reaction, it's their schtick. but still: with

MES it's like "Good ole Mark what a card, surely you speak in jest", it's blatant favouritism. Stop giving the man a free pass, it's sycophantic.

I loved this interview btw, read Quietus everyday, I mean God, features on Coil and MES on the same day??? I'm in heaven. I'm not deliberately trolling, but it's just too blatant for me not to have noticed, and I'm glad I'm not the only one.

Mo P

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Nov 25, 2011 5:28am

saw royal exchange gig, was amazing. but the guy he talks about bottling writes for this very magazine and he will tell you its all just wind, and the guy he talks about decking in the hotel.... come on smith, you are built like mr. burns..... give it a rest.

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Billy Pilgrim

Nov 25, 2011 11:40am

I agree. You get the feeling he's a bit liberal with the truth sometimes. Renegade is great. A genuine cult read. Why he feels the need to say he's bottled the writer - who I know - is just childish. Have some class. Austin's a good, up-coming writer and film-maker. Stick with the microphone and leave the boxing gloves behind in your Prestwich mansion.

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kenny powers

Nov 25, 2011 1:24pm

I've read so many of these sort of interviews over the years, dating back to the 1970's. Mark always makes for good copy, but as above I know Austin Collings and Mark himself, and though i'll always like his music, his cheap back biting is getting tiresome and almost embarrassing. when mark and austin were working on the book they were as thick as thieves. i sometimes bumbled into them in prestwich. the best parts of Renegade are the VOICES sections which i know were the work of austin, mark even told me they were. he should be thankful it didn't end up like a million other biogs, and that it's a brilliant read. i await austin's new film and novel and future book with the artist george shaw as much as i do the next fall album. good to see you're putting a bit of weight on anyway mark

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Nov 25, 2011 1:57pm

How funny. I was a bit-part in austin's film. all the best with it if you're reading. top bloke. top writer. his article on gordon burn on this site is awesome. not so sure about

the new fall album yet. am I alone in thinking reformation was a real high-point? oh and gulliver's is a great pub too. way better than the castle over the road!!!!

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Anonymanc

Nov 30, 2011 8:57pm

Mark Smith is clearly a dick, but at least he's entertaining. There are too many people around nowadays who fall into the first category without being in the second.

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Survival Bag

Dec 8, 2011 11:53pm

Great interview - unflinching but not mythologising either. Would love to know more about the literary influences. He's probably hard to keep on track though. Panic in Granadaland!

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jizzbag

Dec 13, 2011 1:09pm

"I think I'm becoming very, very tired, Kevin." Beckett

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deborah sprague

Dec 16, 2011 1:17pm

wonderful and enlightening interview. one side note, though. smith's new york arrest was for violently assaulting his then-girlfriend, who was part of the band. i'd call that marginally more serious than violating a smoking ban.

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sie norfolk

Jan 1, 2012 10:35pm

da boss

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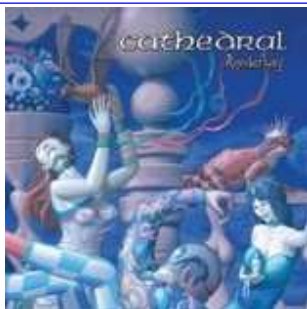
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