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The Fall

Ersatz G.B.

[Cherry Red; 2011]
By **CARLOS ROMÁN**



STYLES: prosodic post-punk
OTHERS: Gang of Four, Mission of Burma, Von Sudented

The unique and dispersed thinker Slavoj Žižek has referred to the phenomenon of the voice as having, implicitly, an obscure, traumatic dimension derived from the fact that it presents itself as a non-organic feature, originated somewhere in between the body, a freely-floating foreign entity. Through 29 studio albums (plus a countless number of EPs, singles, live albums, and compilations), Mark E. Smith (The Fall's lead singer and only permanent member) has managed to achieve a skillful *domestication* of this 'object-voice,' projecting it into a tangible plane, taking its disturbing qualities and making them the source of the band's identity, leading to an immediately recognizable configuration of himself as a 'voice-subject.'

Smith's vocal style does not emerge from the musical realm — that is, it does not come to life as belonging to a particular singing technique. Certainly, the spoken voice and the singing voice are not opposite categories — as some traditions have insisted upon — but rather they conform an antithetical pair where melody and prosody, tuning and intonation originate within the same space and develop in parallel simultaneously, never disconnecting from each other. Smith has always exploited this intrinsic — and inseparable — musicality of the spoken voice (even when *enunciating colorless, neutral — and eventually irrelevant — data*), but at the same time undermining its identification with rap or *other acts* that employ the spoken voice as a means to deliver discursive poetic statements. In *The Fall*, vocal physicality and expressiveness come first, and the semantic signifier is only secondary to the overall aesthetic communicational substance.

Thus, *Ersatz G.B.* presents yet another set of unexpected pairings of distinct musical settings and prosodic characterizations: the confused drunkard sibilantly babbling to a frantic punkish rhythm ("Cosmos 7"); the old man grumpily vituperating to steady, easy riffs ("Mask Search"); the growler moving comfortably from a childish three-note piano melody to a pounding heavy metal section ("Greenway"). The lengthy pieces are proper showcases for Smith's penchant for postbeat poetry, which influences not only the lyrics, but their structure as well; the classic nonsensical responsorial chants (remember "*What's a computer?! Eat y'self fitter!!*") appear with a repetitive but effective polyphony in "I've Seen Them Come" or the forced, assonant rhyme in "Nate Will Not Return" conducting the rhythmical vocal presence and stretching it asymmetrically throughout the piece. The most shocking moment of the album arrives precisely with the charming "Happi Song," when the fragile voice of keyboardist and Smith's wife Eleni Poulou — always on the verge of breaking down — leads the listener into a completely different territory. (It might be even argued whether, ontologically, this could really be considered a song by The Fall.)

If we analyze John Peel's famous saying about the band, the "always different" part in The Fall has to do not with the variety of musical genres the band covers but with the multiple vocal mutations (voice as expression-of-the-self), while the "always the same" relates to the perceptual timbral dimension belonging to one particular individual (voice as affirmation-of-the-self). This 'sameness' and 'differentness' work by focusing on a cyclical externalization and internalization of the role of the voice, almost to the point of making any musical discourse, rhythmic development, instrumental arrangement, or studio



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(dis)embodied entity representing his powerful persona in its entirety. Through clever use of alliterated prose and off-the-beat melismatic techniques, Smith has long ago acquired a mastery of a histrionic *arioso* for modern psychotic times.

This aptly titled album (Ersatz = the surrogate factor, the obvious reinvention, the affordable replacement, [repetition-repetition-repetition](#)) could be criticized for being less polished than last year's *Your Future Our Clutter*, containing a set of willingly — and often tedious — half-finished songs, forming a clumsy collage (cover art reference) that is actually more coherent and better enjoyed when contextualized within the band's 34-year trajectory. But at this point of The Fall's career, who cares? Certainly not Mark Edward Smith.

01. Cosmos 7
02. Taking Off
03. Nate Will Not Return
04. Mask Search
05. Greenway
06. Happi Song
07. Monocard
08. Laptop Dog
09. I've Seen Them Come
10. Age of Chang

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