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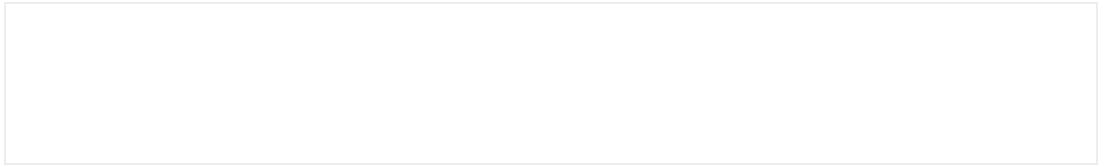


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The Fall

Re-Mit

[Cherry Red; 2013]

By ALEX GRIFFIN

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Weber may have been talking about religious figures and fascists when he developed his conception of charismatic authority, but he may as well have been outlining Mark E Smith. For decades, he's commanded his musicians and his fans chiefly by virtue of the notion that he can do things they can't or won't, and then following through on it. Through abuse, acrimony, and violence, he's remained unperturbed and unperturbable in authority for 30 albums, navigating the enthralled, the devoted, and the should-know-better through an endless storm of his own devising. Those who come along for the ride do so with the self-flagellating knowledge that they will be let down at any point, but will continue on anyway. Through turmoil, The Fall have been thrilling, weird, and pungently unpredictable, even fascinating at their worst. People come to Smith and stay in the cult, fixated on and uncertain of what will issue forth from him next, like how van Loon described Napoleon. Of course, as Weber had it, loyalty to the genius chief is contingent on their ability to keep pulling rabbits out of the hat, to maintain the same level of spontaneity and insanity in new ways. Since humans converge towards order over time, the power that a charismatic leader holds inevitably fades into tradition as they are replaced by a systematic version of their ideas. The experimental becomes convention, and the individual and unique becomes structural, routinized, and repeated on automatic by people without the same insight or creativity.

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And so we have *Re-Mit*. It's oceans better than last year's *Ersatz GB* and maybe the most consistent album they've released for the best part of a decade, but ultimately it establishes the band as an entity out of touch with their ability to conjure miracles, minor or substantial. *Ersatz GB* was a disaster, but it rang with effort and spontaneity: something was going on. *Re-Mit* is defined almost entirely by its solidity, by the lockstep repetition of the rhythm section, the reliable Mancabilly-cum-Sonics riffage, the sheer anonymity of the playing, the dialed-in gargle over the top. Basically, terms like "regression" and "return to form" now mean exactly the same thing when it comes to new albums by The Fall.

Sure, there's weirdness and riffs and all the regular Fall stuff, but it's grafted over the top, sutured in over a band that's solid at best and beyond anonymous at worst. There's a strange dissociation going on between the self-consciously raucous blend of football chant and garageabilly, with the volume always either at 11 or just about to be, and the doodling around the corners courtesy of Smith and his keyboardist wife Poulou. Riffs exist on a kind of abstract level when they appear, repeat and disappear after a few minutes, interchangeable and present almost by accident; like, some of these songs could have been the result of ingredients plucked off a shelf at random for all the character and craft they have. For the most part, Fall songwriting is increasingly like a low-tech Kasabian for weirdos: sweaty, streamlined and unimaginative. The more promising bits are the least consequential, when Smith turns in noise collages ("Pre M.D.M.A. Years" or "Noise"), but elsewhere, the bulk of the album ("Jam Song," "Hittite Man," "Sir William Wray") are thoroughly unremarkable excursions in play-the-riff, all flatpack, threadbare, and nowhere.

This is made worse by how lifeless the band feels at points, for all their forward propulsion; leaving alone the dry songwriting, the low points here happen because of the application of merely competent musicians to frameworks that pretty much beg for some kind of individuality considering how readymade they are. "Irish" kicks off bizarrely like the band trying to meet The Pogues halfway, which means military rolls too fat to swing and a bass too swarthy and thick to fit on a barstool. Smith's crew sturm-und-drang out a copy of a copy of his old obsessions, without the kind of invention, first-hand devotion nor chaotic desire all of his earlier groups have had to some extent. Considering this is the longest serving lineup he's had, the tree needs a shake.

In such a drab environment, Smith has to do the heavy lifting, but he's not able



John Dawson (Magnetic South): "Magnetic South has never been a commercial recording studio that is open to serve the needs of the general public."

Northside Festival 2013: Something like that...

Xavier Dolan (dir. "Laurence Anyways"): "These characters are inspired by who I am, and I am not a transexual lady. I am not a bourgeoisie mother. I am not an old drag queen."

Ashley Paul: "Someone said that it helped them, as a member of the audience, to close their eyes, because it felt so intimate — like they shouldn't be watching me."

to. Smith's voice — decayed and shredded by age and pharmaceuticals — is now set to yaps and yups over the top, like something scribbling with a puce texta instead of doing anything with substance. Sure, the bizarre vocalese in "Victrola Time" is invigorating, and he's not altogether without humdingers here and there, but much strains to nowhere, especially on the empty lurch of "Hittite Man." "Jetplane" presents a return to old-fashioned Smith narratives, but it falls increasingly flat as it barbles on into nothing-phrases to tread water. The increasing self-referentiality is concerning, too; his new habit of self-mythologizing his bandmates (for example, the muttering about "displays of Fall talent") finds an apotheosis on "Noise," a monologue on his feelings towards current guitarist pedal-fiddling Peter Greenway, and he continues to diss those who have been influenced by him (James Murphy cops it in "Irish"). It's a bit off, compounded by the lack of other things he seems to have to talk about these days. His obsession with being imitated and the increasing tenor of self-referentiality scans as much an assertion of his own importance as it is a defense of a dwindling ability to summon forth the charisma that once flowed so easily.

Part of the problem feels like the fact Smith doesn't really do artistic "foils" anymore; there's no messing around with equals who can give him something to really dogfight with. All this holds except for when someone new is thrown into the pot; numerous writing credits from ex-guitarist and White Fence dude Tim Presley seem to explain the move towards songwriting and actual instrumental interplay on traxx like "No Respects Rev.," "Victrola Time," and "Kinder of Spine." When they get further away from washed-out Xeroxing into actually aping source material, like how "Kinder of Spine" apes The Doors ("W.A.S.P."), it feels like the band is getting closer to stretching out into what it can do instead of marooning itself in paint-by-numbers yob-rock. Presley is better off doing his own thing, but it's downright tantalizing to see what happens when there's something else injected into the template, let alone someone with tangible songwriting chops and a strong understanding of the source material that's been motivating Smith since day dot.

What I'm getting at is that the real problem with *Re-Mit* hasn't got much to do with quality (this is maybe the most what-you-see-is-what-you-get album of the year) per se, but something more subtle: do you take an album like this as proof of decline or declining proof? Is a Fall album even necessary when it's this predictable? Are these questions even relevant 30 albums in? Do I care? People have been writing off The Fall for decades, but *Re-Mit* feels like the sound of them bedding down all by themselves. For a band that has always been of the ineffable, weird, and chaotic — even when mired in dreck — the only real symptom of decline has to be complacency. With certain types of dudes, chaos is a necessary ingredient, and a stable, enduring Fall just rings with the creep of a missed opportunity. This album is no disaster, no *Moonbeams and Bluejeans*, but the benign flatness here suggests the ineffable whatever that made The Fall fascinating has fallen away, and it looks very far gone. What Beefheart did after losing his mojo was disappear, shake off his cobwebs, find a new band, and finish his career by indulging himself and his talent properly. Smith could stand to take a risk and make a leap, because for now, the magic is well and truly wearing off. Heck, he could make a more Fall record with Microsoft Songsmith.

01. No Respects (instrumental)
02. Sir William Wray
03. Kinder Of Spine
04. Noise
05. Hittite Man
06. Pre-MDMA Years
07. No Respects rev. (featuring vocals)
08. Victrola Time
09. Irish
10. Jetplane
11. Jam Song
12. Loadstones

LINKS: [The Fall - Cherry Red](#)

