

By ROBERT PALMER

The Fall has been active, in one form or another, since the beginnings of the punk rock scene in the British industrial city of Manchester, in the mid-1970's. But mention the group to most American rock fans, even Anglophiles, and you are likely to draw a blank. You won't find a representative range of Fall disks in many import stores, and with one or two exceptions the group is rarely featured in the music press.

Nevertheless, the Fall is part of a continuing and vital British rock underground. The group's disks, recorded for independent labels, sell well enough in Britain to keep company and group going, to a following substantial enough to fill a crumbling old vaudeville theater like London's Lyceum to near-capacity. And while the range of styles and stances within the British underground is broad, and quality varies, the best of the music is well worth the trouble it may take to seek it out.

Earlier this winter, in concert at the Lyceum, the Fall was so transcendent that this listener cheerfully spent the entire set hanging precipitously over the edge of a high balcony above the stage, with other late arrivals pressing in on both sides. It was the only way to determine what the various players were contributing to the music's deftly controlled intensity.

Mark Smith, at right, the founder and frontman of the Fall, and Nick Cave, heard with the Bad Seeds, typify the vitality of the British rock underground.



Out front, Mark Smith, the Fall's founder and frontman, casually reeled off his half-sung, half-chanted tales of transformation, whimsy, oppression, and bedlam, hands in his pockets, disdaining all showmanship, resolutely untrendy. Behind him, Craig Scanlon tore waves of feedback from his guitar, while the drummers Karl Burns and Paul Hanley and the bassist Stephen Hanley threw up a hard, imposing wall of rhythmic thunder. Periodically, this magnificent pulsation was topped off by chiming melodic figures, voiced by Brix Smith's guitar and Paul Hanley's synthesizer keyboard. This was music of unmatched spirit and determination, made by a band that seems never to have considered compromising with fashion's passing parade.

The present Fall lineup is able to summon at will a richness of musical and semantic referents and a controlled ferocity that earlier versions of the band only achieved intermittently. "Perverved by Language" (Rough Trade), a 1983 album whose title strikes to the heart of the Fall's concerns, first revealed this ripening. "The Wonderful and Frightening

World of the Fall" (Beggars Banquet), effectively captures the tensile strength and hypnotic flow that made the Lyceum concert so compelling. "Call for Escape Route," a five-song EP from the same sessions, is an even more potent distillation of the Fall's essence. Its most spellbinding performance, "No Bubs," crunches along on a chunky guitar riff and builds tension by stirring more sound-layers into an already explosive mixture.

The week of the Fall's Lyceum show, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds gave a different sort of performance at the Camden Electric Ballroom, a club as dark, seedy and uncomfortable as any in New York City. Mr. Cave was lead singer and prodigious wordsmith for a band of Australian expatriates called the Birthday Party, who broke up in 1983. He spent much of 1984 recording and touring with the Bad Seeds, a temporary aggregation of underground all-stars. The drummer was from the Birthday Party, the bassist from Magazine. The guitarist, Blixa Bargeld, was on loan from Einstürzende Neubauten, a West German band that uses jackhammers, cement mixers, and other

industrial paraphernalia as rhythm instruments and has been one of the more talked-about underground bands in Britain and Europe this year.

On the album "From Her to Eternity" (Mute), Mr. Cave's picaresque tales of "Saint Huck" (in search of a bargain basement American dream), Black Paul, and other morbidly love-sick malcontents are so vividly verbose that the musicians are reduced to the role of colorists. Mr. Cave's lyrics, unlike most, seem to work better on the page than as songs. Live, however, the Bad Seeds played grip-

ping post-punk blues, punctuated by Mr. Cave's wolf howls and harmonica flourishes and Mr. Bargeld's vocally infected slide-guitar scrapings and scuffling.

Jim Thirlwell, another Australian émigré, has been at the top of Britain's independent album charts recently with a bracingly original, ironic, and often hilarious album titled "Hole" (on the Self-Immolation/Some Bizarre label). Mr. Thirlwell is a man of many aliases (Frank Want, Clint Ruin) who plays and sings every part on his records — a virtuoso of

sorts, inventively mixing rock, funk, electronics and noise, and an acidic satirist in the tradition of Swift and Rabelais. On "Hole," Mr. Thirlwell takes aim at the myth of romantic self-destruction that infects the rock world, demolishing the Jim Morrison/Iggy Pop-style character with "libido in limbo, legs akimbo" who claims he "never even ever read a word of Rimbaud," the type who complains, "I found there was a hole in my spiritual parachute — after I'd jumped from the astral plane."

Recording for an independent label
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SOUND

HANS FANTEL

CD's and Laserdiscs At Home in a Sing

Audio and video used to inhabit different spheres, serving different publics. Even technical standards were far apart, with the video audience being less demanding in terms of quality than the seasoned audiophile. But now the gap has narrowed, and unified audio/video home entertainment centers with high technical performance standards seem to be a rising trend.

A milestone in this development is Pioneer's CLD-900, soon to be available in this country. It does the unique trick of playing both videodisks (picture plus sound) or digital compact disks (CD's) with sound only. A single unit thus does double duty in the formerly separate realms of audio and video.

Mainly responsible for this unification of functions is the fact that both CD's and videodisks share the same technology, based on laser beams. The same laser can thus be used for the playback of either kind of disk, making the combination player more economical in terms of size and — at least potentially — in terms of cost. The latter, alas, is not yet reflected in this model's \$1,200 price tag, which is actually more than one might pay for buying separate videodisk and CD players.

Considering the multiple functions served by the CLD-900, its controls are surprisingly simple and easy to operate. On the wireless, hand-held remote control, the buttons are conveniently color-coded. Blue buttons govern video function, green buttons are for audio-only, and the rest can be used in either video or audio for selecting specific portions of the program.

In the process of putting all the eggs in one basket, a few refinements were dropped. For example, when playing CD's you cannot pre-program your selections by storing the track numbers you want to hear in a memory device so that they will be automatically played in whatever sequence you prefer. But you can easily skip back and forth from one track to another by means of the remote control. You can even fast-scan the music without raising the pitch to find a particular spot you want to hear — something impossible to do on ordinary phonographs.

Video programming features are not curtailed at all, and you'll find the usual search facilities, slow motion, fast motion, and freeze-frame. One unique aspect of the

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As a basic player is too i to permit spe video or the i their stereo i may well opt who feel attr

ertainment systems will find in the Pioneer CLD-900 a keystone to such integration.

Rock

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in Britain doesn't have to lead to obscurity in the United States. The Smiths, who record for Rough Trade in Britain, are on Warner Bros. in the United States. Unfortunately, one still has to go to import stores to find their latest release, "Hatful of Hollow," an album of recent singles and live sessions from BBC radio that is more impressive than their Warner Bros. debut. At their best, the Smiths' chronicles of romantic disillusionment and insecurity are bittersweet, haunting. At worst, the songs' mixes of romantic crooning and rock textures never quite match. But the more recent the recordings, the more assured is the blend.

Later this week, Ze/Jem Records (P.O. Box 362, South Plainfield, N.J. 07080) will release American versions of Jim Thirlwell's "Hole" and of the Einstürzende Neubauten album "Drawings of O.T.," previously available on Britain's Some Bizarre label. Each album comes with an additional 12-inch disk, containing music not on the original British releases; sometimes, it seems, waiting for an American release pays off. But don't wait too long for "Hatful of Hollow" or "The Wonderful and Frightening World of the Fall." For maximum impact, these are albums that should be heard right now.