Britain's Rock Underground Is Worth Exploring

By ROBERT PALMER

The Fall has been active, in one form or another, since the beginning of the punk rock scene in the British industrial city of Manchester, in the mid-1970s. 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 discs in any major 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 discography, collected for the Record Collector's Guide to Rock, tells only enough to fill a crumbling old record store like London's Lyceum to near-capacity. And while the range of styles and textures 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 year, in concert at the Lyceum, the Fall was so transcendent that this listener zealously scanned the entire set to record 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, with the Bad Seeds, typify the vitality of the British rock underground.

Out front, Mark Smith, the Fall's founder and frontman, casually reels off his half-sung, half-chanted tales of transformation, whimsey, oppression, and boredom, his hands in his pockets, disdaining all showmanship—resolutely unambivalent. Behind him, Craig Stormont's waves of feedback from his guitar, while the drummers Karl Burns and Paul Harney and the bassist Stephen Henderson threw up a hard, imposing wall of rhythmic thunder. Periodically, this magnificently pulsing sound was chopped off by stunning melodic figures, voiced by Nick Smith's guitar and Paul Harney'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 an air of richness of musical and semantic referents and a controlled ferocity that earlier versions of the band only achieved intermittently. "Perverted by Language" (Rough Trade), a 1981 album whose title strikes at 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 hypersonic 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 Bullets," crescendos on a chunky guitar riff and builds tension by stirring more sounds 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 producer, and he was accompanied by a band of Australian musicians known as the Birthday Party, who broke up in 1983. He was here to record and tour with the Bad Seeds, a temporary aggregation of underground all-star. The drummer was from the Birthday Party, the bassist from Magazine. The guitarist, Blixa Bargeld, was from Einstürzende Neubauten, a German band that uses machine, hammer, cement mixers, and other industrial paraphernalia as rhythm instruments and has been one of the most talked-about underground bands in Britain and Europe this past year.

On the album "From Here to Eternity," the Bad Seeds' most recent LP of original material, "Saint Rock" (in search of a beggar's basement American dream), Black Paul and Mr. Cave's incredibly low-key vocals are so vividly beautiful that the musicians are reduced to the role of colorists. Mr. Cave's lyrics, unlike most, seem to work best on the page than the stage. Live, however, the Bad Seeds played gripping post-punk blues, punctuated by Mr. Cave's wolf-howl harmonica flourishes and Mr. Bargeld's vocally inflected slide-guitar scrapping and scuffling.

Jim Thirlwell, another Australian, signed by the Fall, has been the lead vocalist for the Fall's latest release, "If I Could Change the World," a song driven by a great blast of rhythm, a popular character with "slide guitar" in the Middle East. Mr. Thirlwell claims he never even reads a music book. "I don't know how to read in musical terms," he explains. "I found there a couple of notes in my spiritual performance—after I'd played them I could figure them out on my mind's ear."

Sound

RICHARD COOPER

The Fall, as recorded for an independent label, continued on Page 25.

CDs and Laserdiscs

At Home in a Single LaserVision

Audiophile and Hi-Fi magazines were previously the only way to keep up with the latest releases of CDs and laserdiscs. But now, with the advent of the Pioneer CLD-9000, these audiophiles are not alone. The CLD-9000 is a laser disc player that can play both CDs and laserdiscs, and it is easy to operate. The wireless, hand-held remote control, which is conveniently color-coded, blue buttons govern video functions, green buttons govern 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 a CD, you cannot pre-program your selections by storing the track numbers you want to hear. The only procedure is to listen to the program, then stop it, and choose the track you want to hear. This is a problem for small players, but it is not a problem for large players. For these players, the CD player is too large to allow for the CD player to be called up on the screen. The CD player is designed so that they will be automatically played in whatever form of small player it is played. The CD player has a unique feature: the laser disc player's buttons are not curtailed at all, and you'll find the laser disc player's buttons to be like no other.