



Against the '80s: the Felt NME cover that never was; (below) LPs *Forever Breathes The Lonely Word* and *Let The Snakes Crinkle Their Heads To Death*.



an invitation to the gallery," he says. For Lawrence, he saw it as his first crack at the charts. "I thought Index was so off

the wall we might've ended up on Top Of The Pops," he states. The following year, Lawrence reconnected with fellow Water Orton resident and classically trained guitarist Deebank. On March 11, 1980, after signing on at the Chelmsley Wood dole office, the two made a pact to form a group, with Lawrence promising fame within six months. Later, as by day Deebank worked as a "degreaser and pickler" in a metal works while Lawrence was a cellerman in the Birmingham Rep, at night they worked on songs or rehearsed in the Balsall Heath rooms of local rockers Money. Lawrence's childhood friend Nick Gilbert played bass, but early drummer Tony Race was soon dropped – he had curly hair – in favour of the unflappable Gary Ainge, an image-aware Subway Sect fan from Walsall.

"At my first rehearsal Lawrence told me about the '10 year plan,'" remembers Ainge. "I didn't know what he was on about and he didn't mention it again. Maurice was a strange character, but as soon as he started playing I knew he was a genius, as good as Tom Verlaine. I remember him coming to my mum's pub and at the end of the night, pissed, he'd get this old acoustic out and play The Theme From The Deer Hunter. You'd sit there open-mouthed."

It was this model of Felt that Mike Alway, a mystique-loving A&R man for the Cherry Red label, would sign. "Index was a novelty record, but Felt had gone from a sort of pastiche of The Velvet Underground to a sort of Doors-meets-Jefferson Airplane, with a sort of Julian Bream thrown in," he posits. "I was very comfortable with Lawrence's idea that Felt were a pop band, because I knew he meant pop in a completely reverse way. It was an aesthetic type of pop that really no longer existed at that time."

With their combustible chemistry and career-long lack of manager or live agent – not to mention the indifference of John Peel, who never gave them a session – it was sometimes a wonder that Felt existed either. From 1981 to 1985, they recorded four albums for Cherry Red. Their screwy titles are worth repeating: ➤



Felt in '83 (from left) Gary Ainge, Maurice Deebank, Lawrence, Mick Lloyd.

## the right profile

A limited edition hardback cloth-bound visual document of the self-proclaimed best looking band of the '80s. Andrew Male finds the narratives behind the images.

### Felt

★★★★★

First Third Books, £39

Type the words "80s band" into Google Image Search and the immediate results are horrible; vivid Day-Glo documents of a myriad fashion mistakes in which over-eager innocents embraced each new hair-care and trouser revolution with a misguided, gurning enthusiasm. For any band to have outlasted this strange decade with their integrity intact is a miracle to be embraced and no band survived the fashion pitfalls of the '80s better than Felt. Here is the evidence.

Like the band itself, Felt the book is starkly rigid in its parameters, yet mordantly witty in the margins. Following a four-page prologue of annotated childhood photos – pre-teen Lawrence looking like a junior member of The Velvet Underground, Lawrence the toddler, crestfallen as

his older sister swipes his belongings ("A portentous snap – so prescient. The prize has been swiped and he stands alone") – the book is split into 10 chapters, each detailing a year in the life of Felt; starkly beautiful portraits of Lawrence and the band, prefaced by lists of Lawrence's top films, books and records. As each chapter unfolds the Felt aesthetic appears to remain constant – cold, static, black-and-white images inspired by the sullen New York loner-cool of the Velvets and Television, "neat, groomed, yet still tough", as Lawrence has it.

Yet, to one side of romantic sang-froid, Lawrence's dull, pared-back captions reveal the furious battles that had to be won to achieve such "pristine vision[s] of uplifting beauty".

"Any activity that demanded effort was left to me. Even acts of vanity," recounts Lawrence. "From day one I was reluctant to take photographs outdoors... at the mercy of the elements."

Yet as the minor details of photo-shoot cool are perfected, the slings and arrows of comic misfortune continue to rain down. If anything, the art-book format serves to add an extra layer of black comedy to the band's tribulations: a beautiful double-page black-and-white portrait of a darkly angelic Lawrence, posing next to a broken mirror with eerie passive assurance, is accompanied by a caption detailing their excision from an NME cover in favour of a "Youth Suicide" story, and the tale of how their label boss, Alan McGee, had assured the band sales of 30,000 in Germany "with his usual uninformed hyperbole".

The book concludes with the now famous Paris La Cigalle gig in 1989, Felt sandwiched between The La's and The Stone Roses. "I felt a little old fashioned," writes Lawrence. "It was clear we were witnessing a sea change in popular culture: these bands were showing the way towards a new future... an era was ending and a new one was beginning."

It's a positive spin on a decade's worth of lost chances and ill fortune, yet looking back through this handsomely bound document, you realise that the visual record of those 10 years presents a special kind of hard-fought victory, a triumph of style over circumstance.

Felt is available from [www.firstthirdbooks.com](http://www.firstthirdbooks.com) and from Rough Trade shops and Koenig Books on Charing Cross Road.

