

"For me, business had been done... I was convinced that a great thing had ended, but I couldn't convince anybody else of that fact."

◀ *Crumbling The Antiseptic Beauty, The Splendour Of Fear, The Strange Idols Pattern And Other Short Stories and Ignite The Seven Cannons*. All were esoteric and absorbing, with visuals, music and lyrics ushering the listener into an imagistic internal dream-space, built on the exquisite chiaroscuro of Deebank, Lawrence's poetic intonations and Ainge's often cymbal-less, Moe Tucker-style drums.

"For me it was a beautiful thing I wanted to create, to make people feel emotional, to the point of tears," says Lawrence of the early Felt aesthetic. "Maurice knew what I was on about. He saw music totally different to anyone I've ever met. 'Cos in the olden days music wasn't used for entertainment, it was almost used for healing. I think he's absolutely the best of our generation and I wanted to work with him forever. But he thought he was rubbish, and from the beginning, he began leaving. We'd have to go round to his house, and stay up all night begging him to come back."

DEEBANK'S AWOL TENDENCIES, SAYS Ainge, stunted the band's efforts to build on the albums, as no one else could play his parts live. After recording his prog-leaning solo LP, *Inner Thought Zone*, in 1984, the guitarist returned for *Ignite The Seven Cannons*, produced by Cocteau Twin, friend and tour-mate Robin Guthrie. The album – whose aqueous production Lawrence is now vowing to remix, barred as he was from the original mixdown – yielded the staggering *Primitive Painters*, released on 12-inch in September 1985. An imperious six minutes of anti-hero defiance featuring a kind of autonomous duet with the Cocteaus' Elizabeth Frazer, it hit Number 1 on the independent chart. With typical good timing, the recently married Deebank had already left the band for good and emigrated to Spain.

By then the group had signed on for a free rein at Creation; "There was no fee," notes Lawrence, "it was about McGee and me getting big together." Their next single, *Ballad Of The Band*, was a rollicking post-mortem of Felt's first half-decade that addressed Deebank's departure, with a tutting Lawrence at his most comically resigned. "I feel like giving in," he laments, "where were you when I wanted to work... you're a total jerk... ain't got no money, ain't got no fame..."

However, *Let The Snakes Crinkle Their Heads To Death*, Felt's first long-player on Creation, was a decidedly leftfield way of rectifying such gripes and building on the success of *Primitive Painters*. Lasting less than 20 minutes, it featured 10 jaunty instrumentals – all with organ by teenage keyboard whiz Duffy, who'd taken Deebank's role as Lawrence's main musical foil. Such cavalier, moment-losing moves, plus the Bay 63 fiasco and the underperformance of *Forever Breathes*... would solidify over time into what even the band's frontman would consider the 'Curse of Felt'. Further proof of it came with a proposed NME cover story on the band in November 1986 that at the last moment was spiked in favour of a mostly black front page trumpeting an investigation into 'YOUTH SUICIDE.'

"Those in favour of the suicide cover saw it that Felt was good but not really cover material," explains Lucy O'Brien, who wrote the piece. "It was also at the point when hip hop was emerging as a real force and indie rock was seen by some NME writers as ineffectual and bourgeois."

Re-confronted with this woeful episode, Lawrence refers to the Felt photo-book: "The NME seemed to be mocking us... it made me feel so incidental," he reads. "Says it all really. I knew, it was like a game, and we were never gonna be let in."



Down but not out: at 96 Richford St, London W6, 1987 (from left) Lawrence, Duffy, Phil King, Ainge, Marco Thomas; (below) 1990 compilation *Bubblegum Perfume*.

during the eighties Felt made ten Lps & ten singles. Here is a collection of songs from the Creation years.

In place of TOTP appearances, the music press created curious legends about Lawrence. He was a cheesophobic cleanliness obsessive who ate no vegetables, only meat. This, plus the singular name, made Lawrence a strange analogue to Morrissey. He famously banned anyone from using his toilet except for brisk micturition, and was known to

have left a Lloyd Cole concert in disgust when the Perfect Skin hit-maker was seen eating a banana on-stage. Rumours that new members were obliged to allow Lawrence to vet their clothing were proved correct. Tony Willé, whose acoustic-electric playing graced *Forever Breathes*... recalls the conditions attached to him becoming a full member of Felt; "He'd arrange for me to go with him to the Oxfam shop in Moseley and donate my clothes. I would be expected to wear what he deemed to be OK even down to the socks. It would have been like joining a cult, so I refused." By concentrating on the minutest details, it seemed that Lawrence distracted himself from any rational pursuit of fame.

"With *Forever Breathes*... Felt made the best Creation record of the '80s, possibly of all," says Creation publicist Mick Houghton, "But instead of building on it the records that followed only appealed to the faithful... it was like he had a self-destruct clause in his own personal contract."

But to admirers the later Felt discography is still packed with intrigue and magic far exceeding their indie chart peers. 1987's *Poem Of The River* was a kind of nighttime corollary of *Forever Breathes*... while *Under A Pale Light* on '88s *The Pictorial Jackson Review* has suggestions of the hard drug use fleshed out in Lawrence Of Belgravia. Was the song written out of experience, even then?

"We always used to talk about it," Lawrence says. "Are you going to step over that line? I was always going to be that person. I was just waiting to meet somebody, my whole life... sex, drugs, I used to fantasise about it. A lot of the songs are about wish fulfilment, dreaming I suppose. It's best not to know which are true and which aren't. To this day I don't know if Heroin's true or not, and that's the ultimate song in the rock'n'roll canon (*pause*). Let's just not talk about it."

There was, however, little time to sink into Lethean languor in the increasingly active later '80s, with each release showing how removed from the indie charts Felt had become. With sleeve art resembling a ticket for the subway, August '88s *Train Above The City*