



Issue 77 August 17 – 23, 2006

## Band of brothers

A new biopic revisits the monks,  
one of the greatest lost bands of the '60s.

By Jake Austen



**JUST A LITTLE OFF THE TOP** The monks get uniformly shorn.

The shaggy-haired rockers attending the U.S. premiere of *monks: the transatlantic feedback* at the Chicago Underground Film Festival this week will continue a decade long trend of garage-rock genuflection for possibly the best forgotten group of the '60s. After decades of anonymity, the mysterious monks have seen their lone record, 1966's *black monk time*, rereleased, included in the *Nuggets II* garage box set, and had a triumphant reunion at the 1999 garage festival Cavestomp. This revival is what led to this new documentary,



but the filmmakers' motivation sprung, ironically, from a difference of opinion with the monks' new fans.

"What struck us," recalls Lucia Palacios, the film's Spanish-born producer, "was that the monks in the U.S. were perceived as the supreme garage band..."

"I thought, Oh, no, you got it all wrong," the film's German director Dietmar Post says. "I first heard the monks within the context of German punk in the early '80s...at parties it was not uncommon to listen to the Clash, Wire and the monks. To me, from the first moment, they were conceptual art."

Confusion is understandable—the monks' story is so bizarre it would be hard to believe they existed if not for the group's jaw-dropping German TV appearances. After the Beatles conquered the world, America responded with the Monkees, a friendlier version playing Brill Building hits. Inversely, in Germany, a pair of avant-garde geniuses conceptualized the monks, a group of bizarre anti-Beatles who would write their own dark minimalist rock. The gifted band, a group of five Americans who had recently finished their U.S. military service at a German base, had honed its skills by playing up to 40 hours a week in the same beat clubs that provided the Beatles' training. The musicians' new managers dressed them in black, shaved their heads like monks, provided them with a series of manifestos, and coached them to reconfigure their band to feature tribal drumming, feedback and electric banjo. Somehow, this resulted in one of the greatest albums in rock history. Despite experimenting with minimalism, tension and antipop sensibilities (backup vocals are sung in creepy unison instead of sweet harmony), the record is danceable and joyous.

The story of the monks had first been told by Eddie Shaw, the band's bassist, in his 1995 book *black monk time*. A novelist, Shaw is the first to admit that his version is subjective. "Everyone lies," he bluntly offers. "You see it in this film how each one of us remembers his experience differently. Or how Larry doesn't seem to remember anything at all."

One of the most fascinating aspects of *the transatlantic feedback* is seeing the five contemporary monks discussing the history they had all buried upon returning to America in 1967, after the band's dissolution. Larry Clark, the Chicago-bred R&B keyboardist, won't allow himself to attach any significance to his work with the monks. Absurdly, of the five articulate interviewees, only



guitarist and lead singer Gary Burger is willing to attribute political significance to the Vietnam lyrics in their theme song. With this lack of singular vision, it's not surprising that the filmmakers framed their story by focusing on the conceptualists' vision.

"The managers liked the fact that they had been GIs," Post says, "that they had a certain discipline, could work in a team/collective, and of course that they were good musicians. What they probably didn't like about the five individual monks was that they still wanted to please the audience, whereas the managers wanted to be more confrontational, more like a minimalist theater piece by Beckett."

Burger, who will be in town for the premiere and makes his Chicago debut this weekend at the Empty Bottle, concurs. "In the movie you see the list of directives we were given about monk behavior. We did take some of them seriously—whenever we'd go out in public we'd be dressed in black, monks 100 percent. But we also weren't supposed to smile onstage. That one never took...if you look at film of us, that's a happy bunch of guys having a hell of a time."

*Burger will play with the Goblins at Empty Bottle Sunday 20. See listings. For the complete CUFF screening schedule, see Film listings, Indie & revival.*