



The Monks at Volksbühne Berlin

How I wrote Monk Time

"I see no great difference today between James Last and the Beatles" Jochen Irmeler (Faust)

In 1966, when Beatlemania was at its height, five ex GIs in Germany set about creating something akin to an Anti-Beatles. Liberated from all commercial and conventional structures, The Monks fashioned a manic and hypnotic sound that was pure rhythm and noise, and at the same time rock 'n' roll in its purest form.

Picture this, if you will: while the Beatles were running around as the perfect pop band with their hip mop-tops, a noisy avant-garde band was playing dives in Germany wearing the habits and tonsures of monks! Hardly surprising that at times they came over as somewhat laughable. However, the five coenobites known as The Monks were among the punk movement's most salient influences. Today, we can safely characterize them as a 'cult band'.

"In 1966, when you sang *I wanna hold your hand* in the Top Ten Club in Hamburg, the audience shouted 'I wanna fuck your hand'. They knew all that already. They'd seen it all and wanted to hear something new – like us. Admittedly Tony Sheridan used to stand in front of the stage screaming: 'You arseholes! That's not rock 'n' roll you're playing!' but the people thought we were great."

No wonder. With their monotonous, highly rhythmic, almost tribalistic, sound – austere and extremely loud – and their sparse, direct lyrics, The Monks were decades ahead of their time. Not until the end of the 1970s, when (Art School) punk bands like The Fall, This Heat, Pere Ubu and the Einstürzenden Neubauten began to play similarly forceful, hypnotic and conceptual music, were The Monks acclaimed as precursors of this avant-garde movement. Unlike The Velvet Underground, however, they never achieved the



recognition they deserved, though there's one thing that can be said of both: the extent of their influence was inversely proportional to the amount of success they enjoyed commercially; the Monks' album, for instance, was a complete flop in terms of sales, but almost everyone who bought it went on to found a band that aspired to sound like The Monks.

In 1964, the five GIs based in Germany - Gary Burger (lead guitar/vocals), Larry Clark (organ/vocals), Dave Day (rhythm guitar/vocals), Roger Johnston (drums/vocals) and Eddie Shaw (bass/vocals) - began playing rock 'n' roll standards, as well as surf and beat hits from Chuck Berry and the Beach Boys, in pubs and beat clubs, calling themselves "The Torquays". It was only when Karl Remy and Walther Niemann, both from the advertising industry, began managing them that the characteristic Monk sound was born. It was Remy and Niemann that came up with the monk image with the ridiculous tonsures. Imposing rules such as "behave, at all times, like monks", the pair set about boiling the band's music down to a concentrate of aggression and rhythm, and whittling the lyrics down to bare minimum; liberating, in the process, the intense and powerful energy that can be felt on the band's first and only album, "Black Monk Time"; an album that casts an irresistible spell on all who hear it.

"We talked about the power of communication, rage, image, minimalism and deconstructing the songs. We had eight chords here; could we get by with only two? Let's just use one. How many words have we here? Fifteen? Could we reduce that to three?"

[Quotation taken from documentary film "monks – the transatlantic feedback"
<http://www.playloud.org/monks.html>]

Over the staccato drumbeat, you hear the shriek of a heavily distorted guitar and a whimpering, squealing organ; the bass part is pure violence and stamping rhythm; the banjo scrubs away tirelessly with the same chord and to the same rhythm as the hi-hat; whilst the lyrics convey a depth of disillusion that seems unthinkable when you consider that 1968 and the birth of the hippy movement was still two years away but in which the nihilistic spirit of punk is already unmistakably present: "*Why do you kill all those kids over there in Vietnam? Mad Vietcong! My brother died in Vietnam*" run the lyrics to the intended theme, *Monk Time*. "*People kill, people will for you. People run, ain't it fun for you. People go, to their deaths for you*" is the indictment in *Complication* – another protest song, and one more vehement than any thrown up by the entire peace movement – whilst in the lines "*I hate you with a passion baby! And you know why I hate you? It's because you make me hate you baby!*" we have the extreme negation of the love songs of the period.

Tirelessly The Monks toured the German provinces, playing in small towns and villages at the beat evenings held every Saturday, always aware that they were hated by an utterly uncomprehending public. But rock stardom eluded them; instead of a second album, a mere two singles, betraying the first concessions towards commercialism, were



recorded.

And as the management duo began to quarrel, The Monks ran out of steam; the planned Asian tour fell through because Roger Johnson failed to show up at the airport, preferring to fly back to Texas instead. Soon after, the others returned to the USA, bringing the chapter of their lives entitled 'The Monks' to an end – an end so bitter they were ashamed even to speak of it later.

“When I heard The Monks’ album for the first time in the early 1980s, it was a revelation,” recalls Dietmar Post.

After eight years of research, Dietmar Post and Lucía Palacios have managed in their documentary “Monks – Transatlantic Feedback” to create an impressive and intimate retrospective upon which their own judgements never intrude. It follows The Monks from their spells in the army and as the Torquays and the creation of their distinctive sound all the way through to the reunion of 1999, painting an affectionate portrait, rich in details, in which songs, television recordings, post cards and other original documents are interspersed with interviews that allow each of the five band members (Remy and Niemann did not want to participate in the project) to give his own account of The Monks – the occasion for some priceless anecdotes.

“Another of the reasons we wanted to make this film is that they’re funny”.

And funny, the five most certainly are, with none of the pretensions of rock stars, coming over instead as likeable, ‘normal’ people, who just happened to have produced some great rock ‘n’ roll. If you think of the canned laughter they add to American sitcoms, it’ll give you some idea of the audience response to the first public showing of the film “Transatlantic Feedback” in Germany; peels of genuine laughter punctuated the viewing at regular intervals. What also makes "Transatlantic Feedback" extraordinary is that it paints a portrait, from the standpoint of enthusiastic but critical fans, of a fascinating band that richly deserves greater recognition.

It wasn't until 1999 that the five friars once again shared a stage. This time, it was in the USA, and the audience included some of their most ardent fans: people like Genesis P. Orridge (Throbbing Gristle / Psychic TV) - “You have to know your roots”, he explained - and Jon Spencer (Pussy Galore / Blues Explosion), who commented: “I’ve waited all my life for this evening; I’m trying not to expect too much, so as not to be disappointed”.

Personally, I'd be amazed if Spencer were anything but inordinately enthusiastic about the band's performance on that occasion, since as recently as the 23rd October 2006 in the Volksbühne, Berlin, with only three of the original members on stage – Johnston died two years ago and Clark no longer wished to participate – I, like everyone else in



the audience, was spellbound by the sheer intensity of this band. Unlike other veteran rockers (like the Rolling Stones, who are just too embarrassing these days!), the Monks have managed to grow old gracefully. They have none of the airs and graces of rock stars – which, admittedly, they hadn't back in the 1960s either; but I've never seen a band that played with so much joy and produced music of such vitality and honesty. "This music has survived over 40 years," says Eddie Shaw, who likes Nine Inch Nails and Mouse on Mars; and he's right. Anyone tempted, with Thomas Meinecke, to compare The Monks with techno has overlooked the fact that techno has never evinced the same rage, energy and soul as The Monks.

The guest appearances by Schorsch Kamerun (Die Goldenen Zitronen) –disguised, naturally, as a nun – Peter Hein (Fehlfarben), Mark E. Smith (The Fall) – who came over as a grouchy and somewhat sozzled old preacher – and Raincoats Ana da Silva and Gina Birch cloyed somewhat. Despite their socialisation in punk, not one was able to switch off their 'star allure'; alongside The Monks their performances smacked of routine.

Post and Palacios brought The Monks back to Germany after forty years away, making a whole legion of fans (that included themselves) happy: "We'd always dreamt of seeing the Monks one day live in Germany".

Despite the seating, the concert in the Voksbühne was anything but a sit-down occasion; the audience sweated and danced as much as The Monks as they feted their 'heroes'.

Produced by the filmmakers, "Silver Monk Time" (which was to have been the title of The Monks' second studio album) is a 2 CD tribute containing Monks covers by well-known bands such as The Fall, Fehlfarben, Gudrun Gut, John Spencer, Psychic TV, FSK, Mouse on Mars, Alec Empire, Int. Noise Conspiracy, Faust, The Gossip, Goldene Zitronen feat. Chicks on Speed and many others.

As far as their influence on contemporary music goes, Shaw says modestly: "We were not the first people to use feedback, which technological improvements had only recently made possible; we were just the first to capture in on vinyl."

Unlike contemporary exponents of minimal music such as Steve Reich and La Monte Young, from whom John Cale derived his distinctive style of guitar- and violin-playing with The Velvet Underground, The Monks – for all their minimalism – never sought to be anything other than a rock 'n' roll band. So forget the Beatles (they're totally overrated anyway): it's Monk Time!

Chris Wilpert

All quotations in this article are excerpts from the documentary film "monks – the transatlantic feedback", except where noted.