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Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback

This is the story of five ex-G.I.s in Cold War Germany who briefly found liberation in rock 'n' roll -- before surrendering again to drill-sergeant discipline at the hands of two admen who shaved their heads and christened them the Monks. The group, including Minnesota singer/guitarist Gary Burger, never got beyond a certain notoriety in Europe as the "anti-Beatles" before splintering in 1967. But this film makes a compelling argument for their influence -- as proto-punks and art-rock pioneers -- while also serving as a lesson in corporate imagemaking, with a little conceptual-art theory for good measure. "You can't just borrow the image; you have to own it," one member says. "We were too normal." After Thursday's screening, Burger will play a short concert with a group including local rockers and Monks fans Keith Patterson and Adam Fesenmaier (Spectors, Conquerors), who helped rediscover the band's legacy. (7:15 p.m. Wed., Riverview, and 7:30 p.m. Thu., Bryant Lake, 100 min.) **TIM CAMPBELL**

How Minnesota musicians revived '60s rockers the Monks

Living Like a Monk

 by [Peter S. Scholtes](#) August 16, 2006


The cutting edge: the Monks back in the day

Image: Play Loud! Productions

One of the weirdest and greatest rock 'n' roll albums ever recorded opens with the following outburst from a native of Turtle River, Minnesota: "Alright, my name's Gary. Let's go. It's beat time, it's hop time, it's Monk time. You know, we don't like the army. What army? Who cares what army? Why do you kill all those kids over there in Vietnam? Mad Viet Cong! My brother died in Vietnam. James Bond, who is he?"

The words pile atop each other over a war-drum beat until a spasm of electric banjo interrupts. "Stop it, stop it, I don't like it! It's too loud for my ears. Pussy Galore is coming down and we *like* it. We don't like the atomic bomb."

The singer is Gary Burger, and the band is the Monks, whose only album, 1966's *Black Monk Time*, has gained enough stature over 40 years to inspire a new documentary, *Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback*, which screens August 23 and 24 as part of Sound Unseen. German producer-directors Dietmar Post and Lucia Palacios interview a series of art and music luminaries to parse what your ears tell you right away—that the Monks sounded like nothing else, that their unity behind beats (off-kilter but severe) and riffs (like the Hulk playing James Brown) anticipated a spectrum of crazed modern music, from heavy metal to dancehall.

The Monks were five American G.I.s who had been stationed in Germany

during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and decided to stick around once they were out of the army. Like the Clash after them, they benefited from visionary management—and required total commitment. The band members shaved the tops of their heads, wore nooses around their necks, and reduced their music to bare shards of feedback and harmony, with Dave Day (banjo), Eddie Shaw (bass), Larry Clark (organ), and Roger Johnston (drums) singing backup for yodeling soul man Burger (on fuzztone guitar). They edited their lyrics down to Dada: Burger didn't actually lose a brother in Vietnam; he mourned the dead as brothers. "Reality for me," as Shaw later wrote, "was being a monk, playing music seven nights a week, wearing black and singing I hate you."

The moment was loud and brief. Calling themselves the "anti-Beatles," the Monks took a standing gig at the Top Ten, the same club in Hamburg where the bigger-than-Jesus originals cut their teeth. "The Beatles crowd would come in, and we'd always do covers of 'I Want to Hold Your Hand,' stuff like that," Shaw told me in a 2003 interview. "Our crowd was a harder crowd, so to speak. We'd play that song very sarcastically, and the whole audience would sing, 'I want to fuck your hand.'"

But Polydor wouldn't release *Black Monk Time* in the U.S., pressuring the band for more commercial sounds. By 1968, the Monks had disappeared, soon to become regular guys back in the States. "We didn't talk about the Monks to anybody," says Burger today, speaking by phone from his home in Turtle River (population: 72), where he serves as mayor. "We were burned out on the whole Monks experience to the degree that we pointed ourselves in totally different directions."

Transatlantic Feedback tells much of this story with jolting vintage footage, while also capturing a sweet coda—the band's 1999 reunion as old men (two years after *Black Monk Time* was issued on Henry Rollins's Infinite Zero label), when the Monks re-shaved their by-then-balding (or graying) heads to play their first concerts in New York City. (Those shows would be their last with all five members.)

Less known, and entirely left out of the film, is the small but important role played by Minneapolis musicians in the band's revival. On August 24, after a screening at Bryant-Lake Bowl, Burger will perform Monk music with Adam Fesenmaier and Keith Patterson of the Conquerors and the Spectors. "Keith and Adam had a lot to do with stimulating us to start thinking about the Monks again," says Burger.

Both Burger and Shaw moved to the Twin Cities in the late '60s, and soon Shaw was playing trumpet in the fusion big band Copperhead (one of the first acts to play the Depot), while Burger took a gig singing at the Bullpen



in Hopkins, then the Rusty Nail in Crystal, with Denny and the Tornados. "It was sappy, and quite a difference from the Monk music, but it was a job," he says.

The two friends attended Brown Institute with Adam Fesenmaier's father Vaughn, and the Monks myth passed into family lore. "My dad remembers hearing *Black Monk Time* and going, 'What the fuck is this?'" says Fesenmaier. "And those guys just wrote it off, I think. When I was 13 or 14, just getting into bands, my dad put me on the phone with Eddie, and he said, 'That's the last thing in the world you want to do.'"

Years later, Fesenmaier had to convince his record-collecting pal Keith Patterson that, yes, he knew those crazy guys who shaved their heads in Germany. Patterson wound up interviewing Shaw and Burger for a San Diego punk/psych/garage zine, *Ugly Things*—the first article to "solve the mystery" of the Monks. Shaw had moved back to Carson City by then, so Patterson drove through the desert with his editor Mike Stax. "We got there and we knocked on the door, and we were expecting this monster," says Patterson. "Here was this guy who was 5'3" and wearing pink socks. We did the interview wearing the Monk robes."

Soon Fesenmaier and Patterson were covering the Monks' "Oh, How to Do Now" with the Sectors for a 1993 OXO Records single recorded in Burger's Bemidji studio. "They stayed at the place here and had a huge party," says Burger. "Hell, they were crazy." Shaw and Dave Day flew in for the sessions, and Shaw wrote liner notes. Shaw's memoir *Black Monk Time* appeared the same year on Carson Street Publishing, and a Monks revival seemed underway. Before the reunion, drummer Roger Johnston moved up to Bemidji from Texas, and appears in *Transatlantic Feedback* cleaning a church there. "Roger wasn't doing real good before," says Burger. "He had an alcohol problem, and during that time he went through treatment. But he never really was top notch physically again."

Johnston was unable to participate in shows after the 1999 event. He died in Bemidji, shortly before the Monks' last reunion, a 2004 gig in Spain, and was buried by his friends and bandmates in Minnesota. "Roger had a tough life," says Patterson. "But the Monks was definitely something he was most proud of."

At the graveside, each of his fellow Monks took turns with the shovel, saying quietly, between tossed mounds of dirt, "It's beat time...it's hop time...it's monk time."