



Silver Monk Time - A Tribute To The Monks

Music Review: The Fall, *Higgle-dy Piggle-dy*

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Picture, if you will, a group of American GIs stationed in Germany in the mid-1960s. They dress up as reclusive clerics, shave tonsures into their hair, and call themselves the Monks. They are – in the loosest possible sense – a “beat group”.

They're a beat group with a banjo player, a singer who screams the same lines over and over again, feedback, and insanely repetitive grooves that last for a whole song. The white-man-blues elements of Rock & Roll seem to have bypassed them completely; instead, their grooves seem driven by the oom-pah of the German Bierkellers they frequent.

In 1966, *Black Monk Time*, their only LP and one of the greatest proto-punk records ever made, is released and sinks without trace.

Fast forward to 1990, when Mr. Mark Edward Smith of Prestwich is given an unlabelled cassette tape of The Monks. Their kinship with his band, The Fall, is apparent to him immediately. They cover two songs – “I Hate You” and “Oh How To Do Now” – straight away. As they don't know the track titles, the recordings are respectively released as “Black Monk Theme I” and “Black Monk Theme II.”

In 1994, The Fall makes another excursion into Monkland, covering the scabrous “Shut Up!” (“Shut up!/Don't Cry!”) as the closer track for the relatively mild-mannered *Middle Class Revolt* LP. It features Smith



making curious gargling noises and extra vocals by Karl Burns, the drummer at the time.

In 1999, The Monks reform for a one-off gig. Everyone who cares is amazed. Their fiery, obsessive, insane racket is undimmed.

Time passes. Somebody makes a film about The Monks. The Monks play some more concerts. Then comes the tribute album from Playloud.org. It features some big names from alternative/electronic/noise music, most notably Alan Vega, Alec Empire, and, of course, The Fall.

Their reading of "Higgle-dy Piggle-dy" is an entirely worthy tribute, battered into life by a man who truly understands what makes it "monk time". But it's not just a worthy tribute; it's possibly the most exciting thing you'll hear all year. Or any year.

The now-departed Fall rhythm section of Ben Pritchard, Steven Trafford and Spencer Birtwistle grind along as though in a state of blind panic or else being chased down the road by a lorry-load of Lovecraftian demons. Mark Smith's distorted vocal is both a knowing imitation of Gary Burger's yelpy hollering and something unique in itself. By turns it's enraged, indistinct, and downright hilarious.

And then there's Mrs. Smith's synth. Eleni Poulou's playing has become a more and more fundamental part of The Fall's sound over the last year. Here, the unpleasantly edgy sounds she coaxes out of her old Korg play a similar role to the banjo in the original recordings.

It shouldn't really work. But thanks to Smith's (and increasingly *the Smiths*) rare alchemical ability, the whole thing fuses together just fine, and burns ridiculously brightly for the few minutes that it lasts.

It's *always* monk time.

"Higgle-dy Piggle-dy" is available on the *Silver Monk Time* compilation and as a split 7" single (with Alec Empire and Gary Burger) from playloud.org