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Documentary looks at unusual story of Monks

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One of music's greatest cult stories, the Monks inspire excited devotion amongst their fans. The fans will therefore eat up a new documentary, "Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback," and the uninitiated will get a crash course in a rock classic.

The story behind the Monks is so strange it's a wonder the film wasn't made before (and the Hollywood version can't be too far off). Formed by five U.S. soldiers stationed in Germany in the early 1960s, the band was first known as the Torquays, with a good but somewhat familiar rock sound.

After their military service ended, the five guys played around Germany and fell under the gaze of two managers, Karl-H. Remy and Walther Niemann, avant-garde types who guided the band into its next phase as a kind of "anti-Beatles." Not unlike such disparate groups as the Monkees and the Sex Pistols, this was a band with dominating managers.

They shaved bald spots into their hair, adopted black robes, and called themselves the Monks. More importantly, the music turned aggressive, non-melodic and a little crazy.

Unfortunately, heavy metal and punk had not even been named yet, and audiences wandering into clubs looking for music to dance to were bewildered. After a couple of roller-coaster years, the band imploded.

Happily, they were re-discovered in a major way in the 1990s, as a new generation went crazy for their music. The documentary ties up the story by including footage from a reunion show in New York -- the band's first-ever show in the United States, 32 years after they broke up.

Since shooting of the film was completed, a couple of the band members have



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died, but they are all interviewed in the movie. They all have distinct personalities, with Gary Burger and Eddie Shaw the most sanguine about their long-ago experiences. Roger Johnston and Larry Clark, both of whom seem to be involved with religion, appear most eager to put it all behind them.

The most jovial of the bunch is Dave Day, who was raised in (and in January of this year, died in) Renton. He's a voluble character, eager to describe the highs of being a young musician and the nuances of playing electric banjo.

Filmmakers Dietmar Post and Lucia Palacios allow the rockers (now balding for real) to narrate the story, which means that some questions aren't really addressed or answered. But there are some terrific clips of the band from their rare TV appearances in Germany, and a wealth of atmospheric images from the period.

I admit to being a fan of this hugely unusual group. But even if you just have a taste for past eras in rock 'n' roll, the movie will satisfy.

"Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback"

Documentary: Film about one of rock's greatest cult stories, the Monks. Formed in Germany by American G.I.s, the band fell into the orbit of some avant-garde managers, and briefly turned out some heavy punk stylings that were way, way ahead of their time. (In English and German, with English subtitles.)

Rated: not rated; probably PG for language

Now showing: Northwest Film Forum, 1515 12th Ave., Seattle; 206-329-2629