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Forget the chanting, these Monks rocked

By [Chris Morris](#)

The Loyal Order of the Monks convened at REDCAT in the Disney Concert Hall on Saturday for the Don't Knock the Rock Festival's sneak-preview screening of "Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback," Dietmar Post and Lucia Palacios' documentary about one of the most intriguing prophetic cult bands of the '60s.

Eight years in the making, the film follows the musical transformation of five American GIs who met when they were stationed in Gelnhausen, Germany, during the Cold War. After apprenticing as the Torquays in the same rough "beat clubs" in which the Beatles were schooled, these strangers in a strange land acquired a pair of managers, the image-savvy advertising men Karl Remy and Walther Niemann, who re-conceptualized the group as the Monks.

As bassist Eddie Shaw says with precision in the film, the Monks were "an art band working at a grass-roots level." Clad in black, wearing rope neckties, their hair close-cropped and tonsured, the five musicians ground out an unprecedented style mating yelping vocals, primitive beats, percussive electric banjo, screaming keyboards and high-volume guitar work featuring forward-looking feedback, distortion and wah-wah effects. The band's lone album "Black Monk Time," released by German Polydor in 1966, was a dizzy, wondrous combo of Teutonic austerity and American exuberance. But it flopped, and the group fell apart in 1967.

The Monks were wrested from obscurity three decades later, thanks to the ardent embrace of garage-rock fans, the well-received release of Shaw's self-published 1994 memoir (also titled "Black Monk Time") and the first American issue of the album in 1997 on Rick Rubin and Henry Rollins' label Infinite Zero. In the late '90s, the band's credo "Monk Time" was featured in a national TV ad for the sports drink Powerade. "The Transatlantic Feedback" climaxes with footage of the band's debut U.S. gig at New York's Cavestomp Festival in 1999.

Co-director Post's fascination with the Monks long predated America's interest in the band. He recalls that in Germany's early punk era, the group's album was played at parties alongside the Clash and Wire. "I knew from the first time I heard the Monks in 1981, this is something different," he says. "To me, it made total sense."

Like Shaw -- who attended the REDCAT screening with banjoist Dave Day -- Post dismisses any notion that the Monks were a garage band. "Bullshit," he says, instead relating the band's development to such artistic movements as Bauhaus and Fluxus, which clearly had an impact on managers Remy and Niemann.

"The five Americans were able to fill the concept with their own ideas and background and music," Post adds. "They swung."

Palacios continues that the bandmates "had nothing in common. ... If they were not in the Army, they would never have been together."

After the REDCAT screening, Shaw told his audience that the diverse tastes of the band members -- swing and modern jazz, country and '50s rock 'n' roll -- and an accommodation bred by Army life forged the Monks' bizarre sound.

"The Monks are five different guys from five different genres of music," Shaw said. "We had to adapt to each other. We all had to compromise. ... (But) being in the Army creates strange bedfellows. We were already used to working out of our own realm."

Post and Palacios are seeking international distribution for their penetrating, loving documentary. In the meantime, their production company Play Loud! is readying a tribute album, "Silver Monk Time." And -- hold on to your cowls -- the Monks are contemplating a late-2006 tour.

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