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The Monks getting their famous haircuts.

IT'S MONK TIME, AGAIN

American GIs, Shaved Heads and Cold War Music History

By David Gordon Smith in Berlin

Everyone knows the Monks, right? That anti-war group of American GIs who dressed up as clerics and changed rock history in 1966? No? Find out how the most important rock band you've never heard of are being rediscovered.

All right, my name's Gary . Let's go, it's beat time, it's hop time, it's monk time now! 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 ? -- "Monk Time" by the Monks

Right from the opening seconds of the Monks' one and only album, "Black Monk Time," it's obvious that this is no ordinary 1960s beat record. The album's first track, "Monk Time," begins with a keyboard playing a single telegraph-transmission note as a robotic drum thuds down on the beats in a techno-esque rhythm. Then an electric banjo



comes in, thrashing percussively on the backbeats, followed by a crunchy electric guitar riff. The vocal is a deranged rant about the Vietnam War. Monk Time indeed.

Yet for all the dissonance, the Monks -- made up of five American ex-GI's in Germany -- built quite a following after the record's 1966 release. And these days, the band is experiencing something of a second coming. A star-studded tribute album came out last fall, complete with a release party in Berlin -- the group's first show in Germany in 40 years. The re-united Monks went on to play in London and Zurich and are currently in discussions about possible shows in Europe later this year.

Furthermore, a fascinating new documentary film called "**The Transatlantic Feedback**" -- which tells the story of how the five working-class American soldiers made rock history -- has won awards at film festivals the world over, most recently being screened over the weekend at the Gothenburg International Film Festival in Sweden, and will get a cinematic release in Germany in May. And despite their advanced ages, Monk music is as fresh as ever. "It was a pleasure to see those old-timers enjoying themselves the way they did," says Alexander Hacke of legendary German industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten, who was at the Monk's recent Berlin reunion show. "The music still hadn't lost any of its aggression and anarchy."

But it wasn't just the music, which won them an audience. The group took its name seriously -- they took the stage in black monk outfits and even went so far as to shave the crowns of their heads in a monk-style tonsure. (Think the Velvet Underground meets Umberto Eco's "Name of the Rose.") Plus, there was a certain novelty factor to ex-GI's -- they had sat in their tanks, engines running, during the Cuban missile crisis -- singing anti-war songs.

As the film, which took eight years to make, reveals, the image was at least partly the brainchild of the Monks' two managers, Walther Niemann and Karl-H. Remy. The two intellectual art-school graduates took the five GIs' beat group, The Torquays, and re-invented them as a concept band. Niemann and Remy, who were also responsible for the innovative Bauhaus-influenced album cover of "Black Monk



Time," gave the five Monks list of rules for how to behave in public and stay on message -- including always dressing as a monk.

The band even achieved fame in 1960s Germany due to appearances on the hugely popular TV music show "Beat-Club." Dietmar Post who co-directed "The Transatlantic Feedback" together with Lucia Palacios, was amazed to find that the locals in the village where the Monks had been stationed as GI's still knew the band when he filmed there. "Every single person over 60 who had been into music remembered them," he says.

To some degree, they would be hard to forget. The Monks, says Post, were the first punk band -- "except they could really play their instruments" -- and they've also been credited with inventing heavy metal and even techno, due to their love of noise and minimalist repetition.

Their egalitarian approach to music -- they played in a row on stage, pre-figuring techno pioneers Kraftwerk -- and their John Cage-style every-note-is-equally-important aesthetic were also innovative. They were probably also the first band that ever put a mic on a banjo and use it as a percussive instrument -- something, which caused jaws to drop then and now. Guitar feedback is another one of their inventions -- Jimi Hendrix himself described their music as "strange" when he met the Monks backstage in Germany.

German electronica artist Alec Empire, who says he was "massively influenced" by The Monks, feels there is a line running through German rock music from 1960s' Krautrock, to Kraftwerk in the 1970s, through to Einstürzende Neubauten in the 1980s. "If you take these extreme bands, then the Monks are arguably the starting point for that," he says. The five Americans, in other words, may have laid the foundations for German rock.

British musician Genesis P-Orridge, a pioneer of industrial music with his bands Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV, goes even further. "In a way they're the missing link between beat music and the Velvet Underground," he says. "If the Monks had only played more concerts, or if they had gone to England or gone to America sooner, they would



have been huge."

The Monks' lack of commercial success seems to suggest otherwise, though. The music was simply too unconventional to attract a large number of fans at the time. "The Transatlantic Feedback" includes footage from "Beat-Club," showing confused audiences standing around while the Monks smilingly sing "People cry, people die for you / People kill, people will for you." "It's the strangest thing I've ever seen," Post admits.

Indeed, the band's experimental nature contributed to its eventual break-up in 1967. "The music was hard, it was minimalist, and at the time it could not find an audience," Monks bass player Eddie Shaw recalls. "The record companies could not continue to record us and so we had to stop."

And for years, they were largely forgotten, apart from a cult following among musicians in Germany, until Post came around -- the filmmaker is also the driving force behind the "Silver Monk Time" tribute album and the reunion shows. Post says his motivation for making the film was to set straight the widely held idea that The Monks were just another 1960s garage band. "Their music was much more important than that," he says. "Forty years later, the record is still interesting to listen to."

So too are the live shows. Singer Gary Burger has brought "Monk Time" right up to date with a new electronic version recorded with Alec Empire for "Silver Monk Time." But now, instead of singing about Vietnam, Burger rants about current US missions: "Why did you kill all those kids over there in Iraq? George Bush, who is he?" "The Monks were an anti-war band," he says. "The messages that they gave in the '60s hold true today."

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