



Movie review

## "Monks":

### The avant-garde Fab Five that time forgot

"Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback": This terrific documentary from Germany offers a belated but well-deserved tribute to the Monks, an innovative yet almost-forgotten rock combo comprised of five American GIs, based in West Germany, who flirted with fame on the same Hamburg club circuit that launched the Beatles.

By [Jeff Shannon](#)



The Monks, also discovered on the Hamburg club scene, were dubbed "U.S. Beatles with sunroofs."

Shortly before Jimi Hendrix opened for the Monkees in July 1967, he shared a bill in Germany with the Monks. Who were the Monks, you wonder? If pop trends had favored avant-garde innovation over the British Invasion, you probably wouldn't have to ask.

As revealed by German filmmakers Dietmar Post and Lucia Palacios, the story of the Monks is familiar but fascinating: The almost-forgotten combo formed in 1961 when five American GIs posted in West Germany started playing music in army bars as the Five Torquays, eventually playing the



same Hamburg club circuit that launched the Beatles.

A pair of trend-savvy German ad executives discovered them in 1965, giving them an art-school makeover that included black suits and monklike tonsures, prompting one scene-watcher to dub them "U.S. Beatles with sunroofs." In 1967, they faded into obscurity, having bridged the gap between Cold War paranoia and the war in Vietnam.

The Monks saw themselves as the anti-Beatles, and their music proved their point: Aggressively beat-driven with sparse lyrics and progressive instrumentation (including percussive banjo played by Dave Day, a Redmond resident who died last January), the Monks' music was ahead of its time — a bold precursor to punk, industrial and techno, with an experimental sound closer to Captain Beefheart than the Beatles.

Post and Palacios make a compelling case for the Monks as neglected pioneers; a 1966 clip from the German TV show "Beat-Club" offers ample proof of the band's astonishing originality. All five original bandmates are interviewed (two have died since this film was completed in 2006), and their insightful anecdotes reveal another irony: The loose-knit Monks could only thrive under the guidance of managers Karl H. Remy and Walther Niemann, whose eventual split prompted the band's demise.

A well-received reunion gig in New York in 1999 sets the stage for a low-key happy ending: We see each of the Monks leading very different but basically happy lives, fondly recalling their flirtation with fame. They never got rich, but as this film attests (along with the 1994 reissue of their only LP, "Black Monk Time"), the Monks have achieved rock immortality.

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**"Monks: The Transatlantic Feedback,"** a documentary directed by Dietmar Post and Lucia Palacios. 100 minutes. Not rated; suitable for general audiences. In English and German with English subtitles. Northwest Film Forum.