



# The Road to Grunge

In an exclusive excerpt from **Stephen Tow's** Seattle music history *The Strangest Tribe*, the author shows how the U-Men bridged the path from punk to grunge.

## The Strangest Tribe

By Stephen Tow  
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*When you look at really where the Seattle thing started, and how it got off the ground ... I mean once there was [Nirvana's] Nevermind, it's not hard to figure out why there was a Pearl Jam and a Soundgarden and everything else—because the phenomenon fed on itself quite easily. But how do you get to a Nevermind?*

—Leighton Beezer, The Thrown Ups



### LAUNCH PARTY

Oct 18 at 7, The Feedback Lounge, 6451 California Ave

### STEPHEN TOW READING

Oct 19 at 7, Free, Elliott Bay Book Company, 1521 10th Ave, 206-624-6600; [elliottbaybook.com](http://elliottbaybook.com)

If one band symbolized musical evolution in Seattle, it would have to be the U-Men. The U-Men created a bridge between late '70s/early '80s punk/new wave and late '80s grunge. The fact is, though, they were neither. The band was too arty for the hardcore punks and too punky for the art rockers. The U-Men were their own thing.

The band formed in 1980 in the basement of Rob Morgan's U-District house with Tom Price on guitar, Charlie Ryan on drums, and Robin Buchan on bass. Practices were primitive at first. Nobody had any money. Price and Buchan plugged their cheap Japanese, hollow-bodied electric guitars into one cheap thirty-watt amplifier. They channeled their vocals through a cassette-era microphone, plugging into the same amp. Ryan owned about half a drum kit with no cymbal stands. He attached his cymbals to the ceiling using rope. If he broke a drumstick, he had to raid Morgan's kitchen for a wooden spoon or similar substitute. The tiny amplifier

would typically begin to crackle after just a few songs. "And they would practice in my basement," Morgan recalls, "and...drive me crazy 'cause they'd play the same song for hours."

The band began to write some offbeat songs, and their rudimentary practices soon evolved into rudimentary shows. The U-Men's growing audience rewarded the band by dropping off beer at performances.

The U-Men's inception may seem fairly unremarkable, somewhat typical for a young impoverished punk rock band, yet there was something a little off about them from the start. Their name, for one. The members were big fans of Ohio's arty post-punk Pere Ubu and named themselves after an Ubu bootleg. Furthermore, like Pere Ubu, the U-Men became fascinated with French surrealism, thus displaying a sophistication beyond the range of typical teenage punks.

Price, who had played bass in the Show-box-era Psychopop, switched to guitar for his new band. He drew from early Northwest

COURTESY CHARLES PETERSON