

garage rock—especially the Sonics. He also added offbeat jazz chord progressions to the mix. He had taken guitar lessons for a few months, and his teacher forced him to learn complex jazz fingering. “And then when I started playing with the U-Men,” Price explains, “I was just kinda like, ‘Well, I know all this shit. I might as well use it.’”

Up to this point, the band had no full-time vocalist. That changed when Price met John Bigley, who turned out to be an important piece of the puzzle. Bigley became the band’s shamanic leader. His growling vocals and intense stage presence often left audiences in a trancelike state.

Bassist Jim Tillman completed the picture. Replacing Buchan, Tillman contributed a high level of musical professionalism. The U-Men intrigued him, but Tillman immediately began upgrading the band, like a new coach rebuilding a team. “He [looked] at Charlie’s drum kit and [said], ‘Dude, you can’t have cymbals with big chunks missing from ‘em,’” Price recalls. “‘Tom, you can’t have a guitar that’s completely impossible to tune.’” In exchange for his band-parenting skills, the rest of the U-Men forced Tillman to cut his long locks and exchange his glasses for contacts. (Note: Tillman disputes this.)

With the lineup set, the U-Men began to develop their personality. Most great rock bands have one, perhaps two members at their artistic center. The U-Men had four, yet somehow they coalesced. Bigley became the consummate front man, typically roaming the stage in black, leading the audience with his growling/shrieking, barely intelligible mantras, creating a feeling of danger at shows. Like all great punk rock singers, Bigley’s onstage charisma left the audience wondering down which path he was leading them: to destruction or salvation? “John Bigley...[had the] ability to get himself into a trance...he [was] having fits up there,” remembers Stone Gossard, later with Green River and Pearl Jam.

Charlie Ryan was not just a drummer. He synthesized the band’s varied musical personalities and made the U-Men swing. Price referred to him as a traffic cop, because he would direct the other players during gigs. If things didn’t sound right to him, he would sometimes force his bandmates to stop and start over. Perhaps more than anyone in the U-Men, Ryan created the band’s swagger. “Charlie was a really

innovative drummer,” says Mark Arm, later with Green River and Mudhoney. “And he was able to play a whole show and keep his top hat on the whole time.”

Bigley and Ryan developed a bond and a shared musical experience. Both explored postpunk pioneers like Joy Division, but it was Nick Cave’s Birthday Party that most intrigued the pair. Following the Birthday Party’s 1981 seminal “Release the Bats” single, Bigley and Ryan immediately drew on Cave’s dark, shrieking vocals and avant-garde dissonance. In retrospect, the U-Men have been compared to the Birthday Party—sometimes even accused of imitation. Yet, while Bigley and Ryan were responsible for moving the U-Men in that direction,

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the band had a much different perspective and approach.

Price and Tillman provided the contrast to Bigley and Ryan’s eccentricities. Price in particular was rooted in punk rock and ’60s garage rock. Because of him, the band would play Sonics covers at almost every show. But it wasn’t just the covers: the U-Men had an older vibe about them. “There was just something about ‘em that was unique,” recalls James Burdyslaw, later in the grungy 64 Spiders, “that made ‘em seem like, if the Doors were a punk rock band, they’d be the U-Men.”

At that point, punk nationally (and in Seattle) was dominated by hardcore bands. Hardcore punk required its adherents to play loud and fast, and typically limited lyrics to anti-Reagan rants. Shows turned into slam fests laced with violence, making the earlier Showbox era seem tame by

comparison. The U-Men had a foot in that world, sharing bills with some of the local hardcore acts.

U-Men shows, like the band itself, were inconsistent. Sometimes the band played tight and grooved together seamlessly. Other times Ryan and Bigley would veer off into uncharted waters, leaving Price and Tillman to pick up the pieces. Occasionally, as is typical with any punk show, amplifiers blew and PA systems didn’t work. The U-Men were forced to adjust on the fly. The band quickly adapted to inevitable equipment maladies by turning a musical presentation into performance art. “We [became] used to the fact that any piece of equipment could crap out at any time,” Price explains. “John could crap out at any time.... Any of us could be too drunk to play at any time. And so, you have to be prepared to deal with that. And how you deal with that is by going avant-garde. If the music isn’t actually happening, do something crazy. Turn your amps up louder and set your hair on fire or something. And it generally worked.”

The band slowly built a cult following based entirely on their live act. Their performances could be chaotic, tight, or horrible, but they were never boring. Audience members often left shows with their collective mouths open.

The U-Men remained a self-managed act until June 1982, when Bigley attended a Fastbacks show at Larry Reid’s Rosco Louie gallery in Pioneer Square. Bigley urged Reid to see a U-Men performance. “And then I kinda went to see ‘em,” says Reid, “and all hell broke loose. Oh man, it was great. It was just utterly chaotic. I don’t even know if they performed. It was just kinda this riot going on. That totally appealed to me.”

Reid was sufficiently impressed and decided to manage the band. His first show was that August, at the Oddfellows Hall. The U-Men opened for the Blackouts, who were playing their last Seattle show. Having reached a level of preeminence in Seattle, the Blackouts felt they had outgrown the region and had decided to move to Boston. No one realized it at the time, but in a sense this show symbolized a transfer of power between the Seattle syndrome era and a new musical age. The U-Men had effectively become the harbingers of Seattle’s next wave. ✨

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