

# ASHFIELD VALLEY HEADKICK

## THE STORY OF

# UNTERMENSCH

Though the term "untermensch" can be traced back to the 1800s, it's mostly known for its association with Nazi ideology and propaganda. In 1922, American propagandist Lothrop Stoddard wrote *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man* using the term "untermensch" essentially as an opposite of Nietzsche's "ubermensch." That book, an anti-Bolshevik rant describing how Russia was now run by "under man," was published in Germany in 1925 and was celebrated by the Nazis. The book's racism against Slavs and criticism of the Communist Party would be expanded by the Nazis to include what they considered to be all degenerate groups justifying their policy of genocide. In 1942, Himmler published *Der Untermensch*, a tract of anti-Soviet propaganda.

Dave, bass player for Untermensch: "We chose to align ourselves with the Untermensch, picking up on the Nazi's reference to the Jews, Slavs, and gypsies who were less than human in their eyes. By some convoluted logic that we were applying at the time we were saying, sort of, that if we are the Untermensch, and we can produce music, and a fanzine, and arrange gigs, and create some scene around ourselves, then you can do as much as this, if not better. Maybe it was a bit complex as it caused us some problems when people didn't understand the reference. We were forever having to explain it. As 'brand management' it was crap!"

Like so many others, Dave came to punk and its suggestion of sweeping change in pop music and youth culture.

Dave: "It was like a breath of fresh air—music and lyrics that really spoke to us about our own lives, rather than the mindless disco drivel or esoteric meanderings of prog rock that preceded the punk revolution."

With a name like Untermensch, it's no surprise that the group was originated cerebrally and less out of any rock clichés.

Dave: "Mark and I were close friends and we decided to form a band. It was very 'punk rock'—an ideological decision to form a band. Neither of us had been in a band before. Mark owned a guitar so he was gonna be the guitarist. I bought a bass. Four strings. I thought I could manage that 'cause I'd played a violin before. We roped in Mark's next-door-neighbor, Terry, to play the keyboards. He, at least, was reasonably proficient!"

From the start, the group was leaning to the left. In some ways, the group might have had more ideologically in common with non-anarchist, socialist-leaning groups like Crisis.

Dave: "Mark and I were probably more left-leaning but admired the commitment and soul of the anarchist movement at the time."

In fact, it was more the momentum of the times and the friction of quick growth that made the anarchist scene appealing.

Dave: "Probably just the energy of it. It felt like people were actually *bovvered* about something and wanted to do something to change it. There was a sense of common purpose. Lost it a bit since..."

Soon, the group wasn't tangentially involved with the anarcho scene and found real allies.

Dave: "The band was more than just a group of musicians playing songs. We were involved in disseminating information with the fanzine and bringing anarcho-punk bands to play in our town. We were mates with Andy T, who was another local *artiste*, and so we supported each other even if we had some ideological differences."

One of the drawbacks of a group of friends spontaneously deciding to make music, punk or otherwise, is the fact that there is a long, painful period of complete inability. Untermensch had their growing pains.

Dave: "Fucking terrible. We had nine gigs cancelled before we ever got to play. I recall hilarious things like Terry's synth failing to work and then suddenly coming to life like an aircraft was landing on the roof. Another time, Mark forgot the song which he kicked-off when Untermensch had a 'big break' playing at the town festival in front of just about *everyone*."

But the group actually gelled pretty quickly. Thunderous bass playing and rhythm section that felt somewhere between the Stranglers and pre-Theater Of Hate group the Pack. The keyboards and the somewhat sinister melodies are reminiscent of Killing Joke. In fact, there is an element of Crisis in the songwriting as well.

Dave: "Every member of Untermensch would give a different answer to that. It's the reason why we had our own sound, because we had different musical influences."

The group would only venture once into the studio recording a six-song demo. Though never officially released, the tracks were popular on a number of tape compilations of the time.

Dave: "There was a six-track demo. At least a couple of the songs were released to the public on compilation cassettes."

The Untermensch songs, taken from the group's peak, reflect many of the leftist concerns of the day as well as personalized stories.

Dave: "'El Salvador' was about the US interference in El Salvador. We compared this to the greater media coverage of Russian interference in Afghanistan. How things have changed, eh?"

"'Ashfield Valley Headkick' became the most well-known of our songs. It is a true story of how three band members were attacked by 15 skinheads because we were eating Asian food. 'Manifesto' is actually the first few stanzas from Marx & Engels' early pamphlet. 'The Sociology Man' was about a teacher of mine. Oddly enough, both Mark and I studied sociology."

This is 1982

This is sick

This is the Ashfield Valley Headkick

Unfortunately, this great sounding demo is all the group ever recorded. Talk of a vinyl release never materialized before the group split.

Dave: "There was talk..."

Despite everything, the group was still open to the foibles of all groups. The band split after only being together a few short years.

Dave: "My fault. Fell out with Mark over a girl. If not for that we could have become rock legends!"

Though no longer as involved in political punk, which in many ways they were only tangentially related to anyway, the former members continued playing music for years in different capacities.

Dave: "Mark, Terry, and Jimmy worked in The Monkey Run, bagging a Peel Session and several records. I joined Black Alsatian and later Sister Rain, making three discs and touring France and Germany."

Guitarist Mark went on to form Pomona Records and then Pomona Publishing. Originally involved in the group's fanzine, he in more recent times has published a book of Crass lyrics (*Love Songs*) and a fantastic autobiography from Boff of Chumbawamba (*Footnote*) as well as his own writing (*Believe in the Sign*).

Dave: "Mark had always been a writer and so publishing music and books was a natural progression."

However many years later, Dave now feels even more connected to anarchist values with growing national cynicism of Labour once again.

Dave: "I actually feel closer to it now than I did at the time. The anarchists were right. The Labour Party of old has become a hideous war-machine overseas and clamping down on civil liberties at home."

As can be imagined, he can also fairly evaluate the group and look back on it fondly.

Dave: "The Untermensch songs are good songs. Would I do it again? Yeah, too bloody right! Time for another revolution, and this time we don't get fooled again!"