



THE GREATEST BAND YOU'VE NEVER HEARD

The Embarrassment were, and are again for at least a little while (I to r, or not), Brent Giessmann, Ron Klaus, John Nichols, and Bill Goffrier, as far as we know.

By **Tom King** ([Contact](#))

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Wichita, Kansas, 1979: Blondie, Donna Summer and Kenny Rogers dominate the AM airwaves; FM radio is home to REO Speedwagon, Styx and Foreigner. Four high school buddies, unimpressed with the radio, form a rock and roll band called **The Embarrassment**.

From 1979 to 1983, The Embos — as they were known to their die-hard fans — release six critically acclaimed recordings and tour incessantly, opening for such rock royalty as the Ramones, Iggy Pop and John Cale. Just as their star begins to ascend, The Embos disband. More than 20 years later, The Embarrassment's unique synthesis of garage, punk, art rock and popular music has earned them cult status. Vocalist and keyboard player **John Nichols** talks about days gone by and The Embarrassment's upcoming reunion.



Interview highlights sans music

Back to 1979, 1980 — this is a quote from you: “Four guys out there making their own music, dissatisfied with what’s being played on the radio.” What was on the radio?

Nichols: Well back then it was a whole lot of heavy metal, Southern rock, tail end of the disco era—that was about it, especially for Wichita radio. There was country music of course, but nothing new or progressive going on with rock and roll.

So with Southern rock and heavy metal being the standard, you guys decide to cover the Chambers Brothers and Roxy Music and David Bowie ... and a particularly memorable version of Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song”. Was the fact that you were focused on such different music an aspect of your appeal?

Nichols: We were interested right away when Ramones came out and the Sex Pistols came out. ... I think the first introduction we had with new music was the Ramones. We opened up for them when they came to Wichita.

You also performed with Iggy Pop, William Burroughs, John Cale...

Nichols: Yeah, that was fun. We opened up for Iggy in Chicago ... and John Cale played an old ballroom in Tulsa, Oklahoma. We did that very early on with John Cale, and we managed to get a relationship going with him years later. We talked to him about maybe producing a record for us. We didn’t culminate that, but he was quite the gentleman—he took us by his house and his favorite drinking joints in New York. He gave us a tour of the Record Plant while we were there.

Do you think that being from the Midwest, from Wichita, had any effect on your music?

Nichols: I’m sure it had an effect on us. We were permeated with everything that was around us. Take a song like “Sex Drive”—the melody part of it is actually “Cat Scratch Fever” [by Ted Nugent]. We just worked it around a little bit differently. It was the result of radio at the time in Wichita. It was Top 40, it was automated, you heard it once

an hour... We just decided "Hey, let's see what we can do with this".

Between 1979 and 1983, you released six recordings on vinyl and cassette, and a great cover of The Seeds' "Pushin' Too Hard" for a Bomp Records compilation.

Nichols: That Bomp number was off our first recording session in Wichita, where we came up with "Sex Drive" and "Patio Set". It was our also first large pressing experience. The first 45 we did, "Sex Drive," **You had a lot of positive press all around the country.**

Nichols: We did well being critical darlings, I guess you could call us. We were always shopping ourselves to major labels and usually the response we got was that our name wasn't right and they didn't feel they could market it.

Did you ever feel like you were too smart and too hip for Wichita?

Nichols: Yeah (laughing), we were ahead of our time. That's why we're coming back right now. We're going to hit everything on the button this time.

The Embarrassment (from [Wikipedia](#))

The Embarrassment were a quartet formed in Wichita, Kansas that existed from 1979 to 1983. They were: guitarist Bill Goffrier, lead singer and organist John Nichols, bassist Ron Klaus and drummer Brent Giessmann. Although some people considered the band punk rock, the band itself liked to describe themselves as "Blister Pop."

The band stopped performing when two of the members moved to Boston. Giessman drummed for The Del Fuegos, and Goffrier formed the band Big Dipper with former members of the Volcano Suns. Several of The Embarrassment's unreleased songs were recorded by Big Dipper, including "Faith Healer," which was later covered by Japanese all-girl group Shonen Knife.

The "Embos," as fans call them, have played several reunion concerts in the years since their breakup, and have planned a show in Lawrence,

Kansas for August, 2006. See the Yahoo! group listed in external links for details.

Kansas-born political writer Thomas Frank quoted lyrics from their song "Sex Drive" in his bestselling 2004 book What's the Matter with Kansas? (page 57 of the paperback edition).