

Perfect Sound Forever
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The Embarrassment



by Jason Gross (March 1997)

Ever vigilant of art, record company executives fruitlessly scavenge around looking for the next "Seattle" - an area providing a goldmine of marketable bands. One place they may never consider is Wichita, Kansas. Luckily, the state is not only home to Bob Dole and hurricanes (who can say which is worse?). There in the late '70s and early '80s, a number of bands sprung up, mostly centered around the Fresh Sounds label. The most remarkable of these bands was a bunch of four-eyed, messy misfits that made the Feelies look like body-builders. They called themselves the Embarrassment, naming themselves after what they thought of our condition in life as being.

Originally the Mainliners, a group of high school buddies bought instruments one-by-one until they had enough to form a band. The band started out (around 1979) at the time when most of the original English and American punk/new wave bands were on the wane and the West Coast punk scene in the States was just getting started. Cheerfully aware of standing WAY outside of all of this, the band had the misfortune of a really spotty recording career - their gigs ranged from New York City's famed Danceteria to a local reform school. They only reached major label-dom in the guise of Big Dipper and then they didn't have the half the spirit that was there before. A full length album was never made until after the group reunited in the late '80s. Before this, their work was only found on singles, EPs and compilations by Fresh Sounds and various other labels (Sub Pop and Bomp among them). As most of this is now long out-of-print, it's a joy to find that the majority of their early work is now pieced together into a double CD appropriately called *Heydey* on Bar/None, home of their previous reissue of material and their less-than-inspiring reunion. Don't let the ugly cover or slightly elevated price scare you - this is a great undiscovered heartland band, hailing from William S. Burroughs territory (literally!). If you won't believe me, surely the accolades heaped on them by *Spin*, *Trouser Press* and *The Village Voice* may mean something to you.

What makes them worthwhile wasn't so much the workman rhythm section so much as what was on top. Bill Goffrier's guitar dripped with scabrous, garage-band grunge, used more as a blur of noise than for notes or soloing. His music was distinctive enough to carry the rhythm of the songs alone. Then there was singer/organist John Nicols coy adolescent voice that could go from croon to a scream in the same song. Together, they were never geniuses or trail-blazers but were definitely a refreshing real alternative to the plenty of skinny-tie bands flooding record stores at the same time they were around. The Embarrassment were a little loose and sloopy and that's what made them (like the best rock) so exciting.

What stopped them from hitting the big time may not have just been their droopy looks or remote local but their bizarre songs. It's one thing not to have a lot of polish to songs but then to hop around all sorts of weird subjects didn't make any A&R man's job the easier. On their first self-titled EP, they were star-struck with a "Celebrity Art Party" (featuring Art Carney) and "Elizabeth's Montgomery's Face" (years before the American Music Club's "Johnny Mathis' Feet") not to mention racing cars, and (from their first single) going on a "Sex Drive" (how's that for slobbering lust?) and their best friend turning into a monster. By the time of the mind-boggling *Death Travels West*, they were travelling not just around the park (in a great pop song) but also along with explorers Lewis and Clarke and to the D-Rings of Saturn. I don't know think this was so much "candor" as much as their unique spin on music where they let voices, choruses and guitar parts split and weave the difference between sweet pop and garage noise. They really were one-of-a-kind.

Even their choice of covers were interesting. They did a real convincing version of the garage staple "Pushing Too Hard" and beat Royal Crescent Mob to Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song" where Nichols delivered a hilarious banshee wail that would have set Robert Plant on edge. Their triumph was to be Michael Jackson's "Don't Stop." Keeping in mind that this was years before *Thriller* and around the time of "disco sucks," this was a pretty progressive choice, probably considered to be "unhip" by some assholes. They did the song proud, making it into a loud stomp but never giving up on the song's tunefulness and happy beat.

Sadly, their legacy remained these EP's and singles and a group of out-takes (personal fave is the catchy "Two-Week Vactation" where they talk about the after-life and leaving their friends) that were collected as *The Embarrassment* (Bar/None) and *Retrospective*, both coming out after the group broke up in 1983. Both were really out-take collections more than "greatest hits." With the recent Bar/None reissue (which has all the out-of-print stuff, out-takes and just about their whole catalog to boot), hopefully the band will be better known.

Maybe the problem was that they were too real without even trying to be. Next to *Breaking Away*, they're the most authentic image of the Midwest you're ever likely to see. After all, this is a place where the campus pizza bar was the center of the New Wave movement in the area. They were never down-and-out or decadent (again, not a good marketing ploy) but they were smart ("Hip and Well-Read" as they'd say) and loads of fun. Is that a winning combo or what?

Four guys out making their own music, dissatisfied with what is being played on the radio.

Many people take enjoyment out of what we do. Influences of the moment and experiences in everyday living- snackum, skank, go-man-go, spatula- still continue to give us a smile.

We probably are not sure why we continue to be creative, some things just have to be done. That's why Mitch Miller was such a dumbfounding success. At no time before had old men been choreographed to walk in circles and sing on TV. People watched, they had to. It was unique.

-- John Nicols

Discography

"Patio Set"/"Sex Drive" (Big Time single) 1980
"Pushing Too Hard" from *Battle of the Garages* (Bomp LP) 1980
The Embarrassment (Cynykyl EP) 1981
(five songs) from *Fresh Sounds Volume 1* (Fresh Sounds cassette) 1981
"Lifespan" from *Sub Pop #5* (Sub Pop cassette) 1981
"Sounds of Wasps" from *Sub Pop #7* (Sub Pop cassette) 1982
Death Travels West (Fresh Sounds EP) 1983
Retrospective (Fresh Sounds cassette) 1984
The Embarrassment (Time To Develop LP) 1987
"Two Week Vacation" from *Human Music* (Homestead LP) 1988
"Train of Thought"/"After The Disco" from *Time For A Change* (Bar/None LP) 1989
God Help Us (Bar/None LP) 1990
Heydey (Bar/None CD) 1995

SPECIAL NOTICE FOR EMBARRASSMENT FANS:

[Matthew Wall](#) sez: I've finally set up an Embarrassment mailing list, which you're hereby invited to join

The list name is: embos-1@cyrusoft.com
To subscribe to the mailing list, send mail to

embos-1-request@cyrusoft.com (NOT embos-1@cyrusoft.com) with the word

subscribe

somewhere in the body of the message. You'll get an automated response back.

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