

East Portland Blog

THE EMBARRASSMENT AND THE KENT 3: TWINS OF DIFFERENT AGES? By Ben Easher

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The Embarrassment

In 1983, a Wichita, Kansas band called [the Embarrassment](#) released the album *Death Travels West*. Fourteen years later, [the Kent 3](#) from Seattle put out a record called *Stories of the New*

West.

Coincidence? Yes, according to [Kent 3](#) leader Viv Halogen, who informed me that he had never heard of [the Embarrassment](#), or even Wichita. Still, the resemblance between the two bands goes far beyond album titles.

Midwest to Northwest

John Nichols (lead vocals, organ, guitar), Bill Goffrier (guitar, backing vocals), and Brent “Woody” Giessmann (drums) grew up as neighbors in a Wichita apartment complex. After playing in high-school bands together, they met bassist Ron Klaus in college and became [the Embarrassment](#) in 1979. The name came from a line in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Bluebeard*: “The human condition can be summed up in just one word, and this is the word: Embarrassment.”

The lineup would remain the same for all of their recordings, though sometimes it changed for reunion concerts. They broke up in 1983, leaving *Death Travels West* (which runs under twenty-five minutes) as their longest release. They finally began work on a full-length album after reforming in 1988. *God Help Us* appeared two years later on the New Jersey label Bar/None, which later compiled the band’s early recordings on *Heyday 1979–83*.

In 1992, two years after the Embarrassment disbanded for good, [the Kent 3](#) formed in Seattle (not Bellingham, as some biographies state, though many of the members had lived there). The original lineup included lead vocalist Mike Pitts (John Michael Adams), guitarist Viv Halogen (Konny Michael Kindlund II), bassist Adam Grendon, and drummer Tyler Long. The name came from a [brand of cigarettes](#), not the [town](#) south of Seattle.



[The Kent 3](#)’s frequent personnel changes began during the recording of their first album, *Screaming Youth Fantastic*, in 1994. Jason Freeman took over on bass, then Bruce Peterson became the drummer, followed by Mike Correa. The band spent most of 1995 in limbo before reappearing with Halogen on lead vocals. Then came an attempt

to reunite the original lineup, but they soon fired Pitts and became a trio for *Stories of the New West* and the follow-up, *Peasant Musik*. Freeman returned in 1999 and played on the *Spells* album, which appeared after the group called it quits in 2002.

The bands' hometowns of Wichita and Seattle have something in common: airplane manufacturing facilities owned by The Boeing Company. Another coincidence?

Similar Music

1960s garage rock and 1970s punk rock/new wave inspired both [the Embarrassment](#) and the Kent 3, but both bands only fit the more general category of rock and roll. Certain well-worn adjectives come to mind when describing either group: *deadpan* vocals, *obtuse* lyrics, *angular* guitars, *cascading* drum rolls. Yet another similarity is the occasional use of electric organ.

Even more than sound, the subject matter of their songs is what unites the two bands. Both groups are obsessed with cars and travel. The automobile as sexual symbol is as old as rock and roll itself, so the Embarrassment take us on a "[Sex Drive](#)" while the Kent 3 ride in an "Estrogen Cruiser."

The trip doesn't end there: The Embarrassment demand, "[Drive Me to the Park](#)," as the Kent 3 participate in an "Amateur Motor Race." The Embarrassment report that "[Death Travels West](#)" but the Kent 3 escape the West "By Heading East." The Embarrassment ridicule arrogant explorers in "[Lewis and Clark](#)" and the Kent 3 offer the aimless wandering of "The Searcher." Ancient civilizations make an appearance: pygmies in the Embarrassment song "[Dino in the Congo](#)" and a medicine man in "The Palms" by the Kent 3. The journey continues into outer space with the Embarrassment's "[D-Rings](#)" and the Kent 3's "Satellite."



Travel isn't the only theme they have in common. The Embarrassment's "[Careen](#)" concerns a teacher losing his sanity, which also happens to a neglected child in the Kent 3's "Soul Commode." The Embarrassment pay tribute to an obscure mathematician in "[Godfrey Harold Hardy](#)"; the Kent 3 describe the gruesome experiments of "The Scientist." The Embarrassment tell us to "[Dress like a Man](#)" and the Kent 3 document the decline of a "Well Dressed Man." Can this all be coincidental?

Similar Fates

Both the Embarrassment and the Kent 3 received praise from music critics. The legendary New York magazine *Trouser Press* raved about the Embarrassment in the eighties, and the current online version also includes positive reviews of the later Kent 3 albums. The Allmusic website rates the two bands highly as well.

Both groups got the attention of popular artists. REM bassist Mike Mills included "Death Travels West" on a compilation disc he put together for a 2005 issue of the London-based *Uncut* magazine. Mudhoney guitarist Steve Turner released Kent 3 records on his now-defunct Super Electro label, and invited them to be the opening act on Mudhoney's 1998 tour.

Both groups appeared on Seattle's most famous independent record label, which began in 1979 as a fanzine called *Subterranean Pop* [and for a time was a column in Seattle music magazine, *The Rocket*]. In addition to the print issues, some cassette compilations appeared, two of which featured the Embarrassment. In 1999, Sub Pop released a limited-edition Kent 3 seven-inch

through their Singles Club.

None of this acclaim added up to national success for the Embarrassment or the Kent 3. Neither band ever signed to a major label or received airplay outside of college and community radio stations. Both groups only toured briefly for financial reasons. They played concerts in nightclubs, not stadiums. The final coincidence is that the two acts fit into one more category: *cult favorites*.

Too Many Coincidences?

I'm not the first writer to notice the resemblance between the Kent 3 and the Embarrassment. An internet search turned up a blog called the [Horn Farm Paste Mob](#), where two contributors had reached the same conclusion in 2003.

If the Kent 3 didn't know about the Embarrassment, what explains the similarities in their music and especially their lyrics? The presence of Boeing in their hometowns? "The Searcher" does ride on a jet plane, but characters in these songs are just as likely to travel by horse or spaceship. "D-Rings" and "Satellite" suggest another possibility: both groups falling under the control of transmissions from a distant planet. The problem with this theory is that aliens would prefer to reach the larger audiences of chart-topping acts.

The practical explanation is that instead of following the half-speed heaviness of 1990s grunge, the Kent 3 looked back to the high-energy sounds that inspired the Embarrassment. As for the lyrics, both bands learned something from books and movies as well as the usual [teenage kicks](#). In other words, great minds think alike.

– [Ben Easher](#)

Selected Discography

Embarrassment:

1980: Sex Drive/Patio Set (Big Time 7")

1981: The Embarrassment EP (Cynkyll 12")

1983: Death Travels West (Fresh Sounds LP)

1990: God Help Us (Bar/None CD/LP/CS)

1995: Heyday 1979–83 (Bar/None 2xCD)

2001: [Blister Pop](#) (My Pal God CD)

Kent 3:

1993: Chromies +3 (Bag of Hammers 7")

1993: Coin of the Realm (Empty 7")

1993: I Am the King +2 (Generic 7")

1994: Screaming Youth Fantastic (Bag of Hammers CD/LP)

1996: Burl Ives +3 (MyFatAss 7")

1996: The Kent 3 (Super Electro 2x7")

1997: Stories of the New West (Super Electro CD/LP)

1998: Peasant Musik (Super Electro CD/LP)

1999: The Sleeper/Hatsov Turod (Sub Pop 7")

2002: Spells (Burn Burn Burn CD / Dirtnap LP)

Further Reading and Listening

Allmusic website: <http://www.allmusic.com>

Embarrassment website: <http://www.embos.org>

Kent 3 on MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/thekent3>

Trouser Press website: <http://www.trouserpress.com>

Blog comment from Bill Goffrier:

Hi all,

Bill from the Embos here. We appreciate the article and wanted to add that the Sex Drive 45 has just been reissued by Last Laugh Records. And a bit of REM trivia: they performed the song Sex Drive at a midwestern concert in the early days, but we only know this from second hand reports.