

## Embarrassment of Riches

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**The Embarrassment remains one of the most legendary bands in Wichita's music history.**

Between 1979 and 1983 the quartet — vocalist John Nichols fs '81, drummer Brent "Woody" Giessman fs '81, guitarist Bill Goffrier '80 and bassist Ron Klaus fs '79 — became one of the best-known bands in the Midwest, without the benefit of a record label or much in the way of radio airplay. Emerging at a time when bands such as Black Flag (based in Los Angeles), Hüsker Dü (Minneapolis) and Minor Threat (Washington, D.C.) began employing the DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic of making their own records, mounting their own tours and relying on word of mouth to promote shows, The Embarrassment (Embos to fans), never reached the commercial heights of success. Even so, the outfit is legendary, garnering respect from members of REM and Kansas-born singer-songwriter Freedy Johnston.

The group grew from the streets and subdivisions of Wichita, but also honed its craft, audio and visual, on the WSU campus -- in classrooms and art studios and at fraternity house parties, seemingly the only place the group could get gigs in its earliest days. This summer, the band reunited for three shows in Kansas: two in Wichita at the Roadhouse Blues (formerly the Coyote Club) and one in Lawrence at Liberty Hall. The gigs marked the first time in more than a decade that the four members had shared a stage.

Childhood friends Goffrier and Giessman wrote at least one song together early on (about a stuffed pink elephant, by the way) but didn't meet again until after high school when they became neighbors. Nichols lived nearby, and the three bonded over shared musical tastes, including the Velvet Underground, Mott the Hoople, David Bowie, Alice

Cooper and Bob Dylan. "We started playing music not just to entertain ourselves," Giessman says, "but because there was a lack of the type of music we wanted to hear around here. We had to create something that didn't exist."

They traveled to the east and west coasts to seek out the music they'd read about in magazines or heard about in the rock 'n' roll underground. In those pre-Internet, pre-MTV days, small labels would place ads in independent rags or fanzines dedicated to underground music; college radio programs such as KMUW's After Midnight would offer kids in basements and bedrooms in nowheresvilles the opportunity to hear bands from similarly under-appreciated locales such as Norman, Okla., and Athens, Ga.

Goffrier in particular was inspired by the punk scene in NYC, home of The Ramones, a band that played loud, fast-paced rock 'n' roll that two decades earlier (in a slower and softer setting) might have constituted safe-as-milk teenage fare. The three not-yet Embos (Klaus had yet to join) visited New York, Los Angeles and Boston, returned with their findings and promptly began playing as a three-piece.

"We didn't really know how to play," recalls Goffrier, "but that was the punk scene. We could start up a band based on enthusiasm and because we understood what made it entertaining. But we had to have a singer, someone to round out the band." At this early stage, Nichols (then on bass) left the band, and for a moment it looked like the project — whatever it was going to be called — was over.

Enter Ron Klaus. The bassist, a fellow WSU student, approached Giessman one afternoon in the pottery studio. "Ron said that he played bass and I said, 'Great, you're hired. We're coming over tonight,'" the drummer recalls. "We had a great screening process," Goffrier jokes. "A nationwide search."

The trio learned the Stooges classic "I Wanna Be Your Dog," wrote a batch of songs and, after several auditions, including several female vocalists, persuaded Nichols to return to the fold, this time as a vocalist. "We were young and relentless and didn't really care what it sounded like," says Giessman.

Before long the name The Embarrassment appeared, trumping other, less inspired monikers. "There were a couple of long lists," says Goffrier, "including The Elastic Waistband. No one wanted that."

Once the quartet had settled into its classic lineup and had enough material to do so, it began gigging around the city at art spaces, basement parties and frat houses. "There was no real music scene here at the time," says Giessman. "Really, the only scene that existed was T-95 playing 'Freebird.'"

The group persuaded the then-owner of The Cedar to host a show. A few empty kegs later, Goffrier says, the owner said, "Hey, this New Wave thing is OK." But the band had difficulties booking gigs at other locations. "Other bars didn't want us until they heard we'd draw crowds and sell a lot of beer," Klaus notes.

There was an artiness about the band that was in tune with other seminal punk and New Wave acts such as Talking Heads (three of whom met at the Rhode Island School of Design) and, earlier, the Velvet Underground (whose ties to Andy Warhol are well-known). The tie between visual and aural arts was not lost on the Embos, and for good reason: All four were WSU art students (with Goffrier and Nichols studying painting, the other two ceramics). But their relationship with Wichita's art scene wasn't always smooth.

"We had a love/hate relationship with the art community," says Goffrier. "I liked being more at the gut level. I liked art that was wild and primitive but where the message was still very clear. I can remember having an argument with someone about conceptual art. I thought that if you had to talk about it and explain it, it wasn't really visual art. It seemed too pretentious."

He recalls that there were other artists at the university who were pushing the boundaries of art, working with

designs that resembled the New Wave art found in New York and LA. The group worked with fellow student Eric Cale '87 for cover art on the *Death Travels West* album. "It was this iconic image that he painted," Goffrier recalls. The image, which Klaus calls "a Conestoga wagon built from a '57 Chevy," replete with red and white tail fins, remains a familiar one among fans. "The lettering he did on the cover looked to me the way that we sounded." The band also used a pair of lithographs by wsu faculty member John Boyd for *The Embarrassment* EP.

Goffrier credits WSU's Ron Christ for introducing him to a number of cutting-edge artists. The group as a whole appreciated American regionalism, while Nichols was specifically interested in the work of Edward Hopper. "We were proud of where we were from," Goffrier notes. "There's nothing less about Kansas than the east coast or west coast." As a ceramics major, Klaus says he was inspired by the fiery elements of his craft: "Making ceramics was crude and violent and that came into my bass playing."

In the four years that the band gigged and recorded, Embos classics such as "Sex Drive," "Elizabeth Montgomery's Face" and "Celebrity Art Party" began to emerge. The songs were filled with buoyant energy, clever hooks and dramatic tension. The group also became renowned for its cover versions of rock and pop classics, each sounding more like originals than original takes on familiar tunes.

New groups, including The Clocks and The Moderns — not to mention friends of The Embarrassment inspired to start their own bands — joined the local music scene, though none resembled The Embos aesthetically. By 1983, when the group called it quits, the band had released a series of records and appeared on several compilations, but wider success was elusive. Goffrier and Giessman eventually migrated to Boston; the former achieved recognition with the noted alternative rock group Big Dipper, while the latter drummed with the critically-acclaimed Del Fuegos.

While The Embarrassment never fully capitalized on its talents, the members say that living in Kansas at the time they did may have actually worked to the group's benefit. "If we'd been in Boston, we might have started doing what other bands were doing just to have a place to play," says Nichols.

And if there hadn't been an Embarrassment in Wichita there might never have been successive generations of bands to emerge in and from the city — with eyes fixed on putting themselves and their home city on the map.

*Photo by Mike Fizer*