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Wichita's indie rock pioneers to reunite for local concerts

BY JILLIAN COHAN
The Wichita Eagle

Ron Klaus wrecked his house.

Ask any local fan of the Embarrassment, the legendary Wichita band of the late '70s/early '80s, and they'll tell you about the house-wrecking party the bass player held at his Indiana Street rental.

The house was scheduled for demolition anyway, Klaus figured, so he partied it down.

Glass flew out windows; doors splintered off hinges. Someone tore a hole in the kitchen floor, and somebody else lit a fire in the basement. The Embarrassment played through it all.

"I guess it got too out of hand," recalled singer John Nichols.

"There was quite a spread in the paper about what a horrible thing and a criminal act (it was)."

The party became a legend well beyond Wichita when guitarist Bill Goffrier set it to music in the late '80s, as frontman of the Boston act Big Dipper.

The house-wrecking might be the famous story, but it's not the strongest memory for the Embos, as their fans call them.

More than two decades later, they still remember practicing in the old Flatiron building on North Broadway, writing tunes together. Locking their equipment in the building's old bank vault when they left for the night. Doing the indie-band thing before "indie" became a buzz word.

"We always worked off each other," Nichols said. "Everyone would throw out ideas and we would try and grab onto the best ones."

He laughs, looking back.

"We probably should have had more recording equipment there while we worked through things. We would come up with a lot of good stuff that we couldn't

remember an hour later."

Almost famous

For a while, it looked like the Embos were going to make it. At the time, acts like the B-52s and the Replacements were hot on college radio. With their misfit rocker attitude and quirky songs -- whose subject matter included theoretical mathematics and astronauts -- the Wichita quartet fit the indie ethos of the time, while developing a sound that was different from anything coming off the coasts.

"As much as Kansas gets knocked for being the middle of nowhere, it was an insulator for us," Nichols said. "We were able to focus on what we wanted to do, not what was necessarily the popular thing to do."

Being in the Midwest had its drawbacks, though. The band had to travel to Oklahoma or Texas to get quality recordings. When they toured, the Embos nursed their beat-up station wagon through thousands of miles, not hundreds, to play in Boston, Chicago, Washington, D.C. They pressed their own records and shipped them to college stations around the country, trying to build a buzz in the days before wireless Internet, MP3 downloads and MySpace.

"They're pioneers, not just here, but nationally, for doing what's become the DIY ethic -- do it yourself," remembered Jim Rosencutter, the band's former sound mixer.

Their hard work brought the Embos to the brink of rock-stardom. Velvet Underground's John Cale was supposed to produce their full-length record, but they couldn't afford it. A little-known group called R.E.M. cribbed elements of the Embos sound and became one of the world's most popular bands.

Breakin' up is hard to do

After a few years of almost-but-not-quite, the Embos broke up in 1983. They got back together briefly in 1988 to record some of their earlier material, but never recaptured the dedication they'd had in the early days.

"I've always had the feeling that, you know, we missed the bus," said drummer Brent "Woody" Giessmann. "We were holding the ticket and we missed the bus. But I went out and saw the world and played music and I don't feel like I lost out."

The band members moved on to lead individual lives in Boston, Orlando, Phoenix. Giessmann played with the Del Fuegos for a while. He now runs a nonprofit counseling center for musicians hoping to kick their alcohol and drug habits. Goffrier is a visual artist and public-school teacher. Nichols sells cargo space for

USAir. Klaus... well, Klaus is saving up to be a sailor in Costa Rica.

The Embos hadn't played together in nearly 20 years. They'd put the band to rest, deposited the good times in their memory banks and turned the key. But a young filmmaker found a way to unlock the vault.

Rediscovered, on film

Daniel Fetherston, a New York University film school graduate who plays drums for the Brooklyn band Oxford Collapse, had always loved early '80s indie bands, including the Embarrassment, who he discovered long after they'd broken up.

"I was fascinated by the story of this little band who could -- or couldn't, I guess -- and how they built the scene in Wichita," he said.

Fetherston contacted the band members last October and started shooting shortly afterward.

"This film is about the characters who persevered and made something in small-town America," he said.

After Fetherston interviewed the Embos in their respective hometowns, the guys started talking to each other again. Now they're tuning instruments, writing songs, and flying to Wichita.

"I remember telling (Fetherston) at one point, 'If you really want to interview us, you should get us together,' " Giessmann said. "There's this chemistry that goes on when the four of us are together that's just hard to describe."

Come Friday, the old friends will load their gear into the Roadhouse, not that far from their old practice space on North Broadway. For two nights, they'll pay homage to what once was, and to what might have been.

The reunion shows might not be as raucous as Ron Klaus' house-wrecking, but the Embos promise a great gig, with some old stuff, some new material, and a few unconventional covers.

Fetherston will be there both nights, filming the antics for his documentary.

Fans from the old days will be there, too, hoping to relive the sweaty nights at the Cedar in the early '80s, when four geeky guys rocked the joint so hard, the bar ran out of beer to serve its thirsty crowd.

"We have some surprises up our sleeves," Giessmann said, sounding giddy at the prospect.

"I can't let this cat out of the bag," he added. "Just trust that it's going to be a rocking show. If anything comes with age, we know what we do best."

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NOW YOU KNOW

THE EMBARRASSMENT

The Embarrassment never recorded a full-length studio album before they disbanded, but their songs have been collected in various forms since the group's heyday.

Several Embarrassment tracks also can be heard on the band's MySpace page: www.myspace.com/theembarrassment.

Discography

- 1980: "Sex Drive/Patio Set" (Big Time, 7")
- 1981: "Fresh Sounds From Mid America Volume 1" (Fresh Sounds, cassette compilation)
- 1981 "Embarrassment EP" (Cynyky)
- 1981: "Battle of The Garages Volume 1" (Bomp, compilation)
- 1981: "Sub Pop 5" (Sub Pop, cassette compilation)
- 1982: "Sub Pop 7" (Sub Pop, cassette compilation)
- 1983: "Death Travels West" (Fresh Sounds, mini LP)
- 1984: "The Embarrassment Retrospective" (Fresh Sounds, cassette)
- 1987: "The Embarrassment LP" (Time To Develop)
- 1988: "Human Music" (Homestead, compilation)
- 1989: "Time For A Change" (Bar/None, compilation)
- 1990: "God Help Us" (Bar/None, CD)
- 1995: "Hey Day 1979-83" (Bar/None, 2-CD compilation)
- 2001: "Blister Pop" (My Pal God, CD)

Sources: *Bar/None Records*, *The All Music Guide*, *Embarrassment.org*,
Embofans.com

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IF YOU GO

THE EMBARRASSMENT REUNION

What: Concert featuring the four original members of the late-'70s/early '80s indie rock group the Embarrassment

Where: The Roadhouse, 3813 N. Broadway

When: 9:30 p.m. Friday, with opening act Local Band and Saturday with openers the Sluggos

How much: \$20 at the door