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LOCAL MUSIC | *The Embarrassment*

Nothing to be embarrassed about

Reunion is good for band members and their fans.

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Special to The Star



MIKE FIZER

Ron Klaus (from left), John Nichols, Brent "Woody" Giessman and Bill Goffrier of the Embarrassment are reuniting in Lawrence this weekend.

Popular college bands usually have a short life span before disbanding, graduating, getting real jobs and fading into obscurity.

The Embarrassment, which played in the region and toured nationally between 1979 and 1983, has survived beyond its college days. New generations of music fans continue to discover the band through rare, worn copies of records and burned copies of long out-of-print CDs, passed down from an older sibling or kind record-store clerk.

This weekend the band, often called the "best band you never heard," reunites for a "tour" that includes a stop in Lawrence on Sunday night at Liberty Hall, where the four former Wichita State University art school students will rev up the amps and guitars one more time.

"We're just as excited as anybody else," said John Nichols, the band's vocalist, guitarist and keyboardist.

It has been 16 years since the band, known for pointed punk-garage songs like "Sex Drive" and "Elizabeth Montgomery's Face," last got together and more than 20 since the days it toured. Back then it reached No. 1 on college radio charts and

opened for legends such as Iggy Pop, John Cale and the Ramones.

Guitarist Bill Goffrier (who later formed Big Dipper), bassist Ron Klaus, drummer Brent “Woody” Giessman (who later joined the Del Fuegos) and Nichols were approached last year by a fan, Dan Fetherston, 27, who discovered the band about five years ago.

Fetherston is a New York University film school graduate and drummer for the Boston-based band Oxford Collapse, which recently signed to SubPop records. He decided to do a film about the influential band, collecting old footage and recording more than 20 hours of interview time with the members.

“It’s a classic story of American failure: the band that could have been big, bigger than God if they’d ever made it out of the garage,” Fetherston said. “But in achieving artistic success as an artistic entity, they succeeded more, as much as you can, in creating this unique vision.”

Spurred by Fetherston’s interviews, the band re-established contact and began to talk to of a reunion. This past week, a fourth-grade art teacher (Goffrier), a cargo-sales manager for US Airways (Nichols), a captain of a whale-watching boat (Klaus) and a substance-abuse counselor (Giessman) have gathered in their former hometown of Wichita for a week of practices, with the tape running, just in case new inspiration strikes.

Heyday for a band

The Embarrassment reached a minimal level of success by 1983 (and re-formed briefly in the late ‘80s), but the golden egg always seemed just out of reach. Topping the college charts and earning high praise from music critics didn’t help their cause with record labels.

“They didn’t like our name; they didn’t feel like they could market it,” Nichols said. “And we looked pretty goofy and didn’t fit a stereotype, so they would always pass on us.”

Just as they were beginning negotiations with a national booking agent in 1983, the band called it quits.

“We were trying to live on such a kind of shoestring level to keep the band going. There were some positive things ahead, but what we were living through was that the whole thing was falling apart,” Goffrier said. “We had someone ready to take over (booking shows) for us, but we couldn’t even hang on long enough to let that happen. That was the end of it.”

Recordings are scarce today — copies of the first single “Sex Drive/Patio Set” sell

for \$125-\$200 on eBay — but they always put money back into recording, which paid off over time.

"We kept being approached by independent labels, long after we'd broken up, to release recordings we had done. We were kind of prolific like that," Nichols said.

In 1995 Bar/None Records released the definitive Embarrassment collection, "Heyday," a two-disc compilation of hits and rarities that *Trouser Press* calls "unquestionably one of the most important documents of the Midwest underground." The CD, long available, has been out of print for three years, and Bar/None has no current plans to reissue it.

Fans attending the upcoming shows will have a chance to purchase new CDs compiled just for the reunions, one of which includes most of "Heyday" and previously unreleased material. (And Lawrence band Kill Creek is itself reuniting to open the Lawrence show.)

For the band, this is a chance to reunite with one another and old friends and do what they used to do best: play music. "It's an artistic quest that can go for a lifetime, as I've come to find out," Goffrier said.

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The Embarrassment perform Sunday night at Liberty Hall, 644 Massachusetts in Lawrence. Kill Creek opens.