

## The College Crowd Digs Me

Classic Rock and Lost gems. Indie Surprises. Revisit old films & books.

Saturday, January 28, 2012

Interview:--> [Bill Goffrier](#)



*"They won't be coming back...  
but their message will reach us."*

--> [The Embarrassment](#) <--

Once upon a time, in the unlikely trend-setting Midwest metropolis of Wichita, KS, local time-traveler, guitarist **Bill Goffrier** and 3 of his college buds (**Brent Giessmann, Ron Klaus, John Nichols**) formed a little group that many fans revere as... "*the best band you never heard of*" ...**The Embarrassment**.

**The Embarrassment** were one of the original **DIY** indie bands. Making tapes in basements and makeshift studios. Flooding mailboxes with music. Leaving phone messages with record labels. Getting their share of late night college radio airplay. And putting in the usual roadwork, playing their way across the country.

But despite receiving great reviews from underground music mags and top-crop critics alike, **The Embarrassment** could never quite swing that elusive BIG record deal.



But they **absolutely** made their mark.

**The Embarrassment** were a **hidden-force-coincidence. A parallel-universe-circumstance.** And a testament that **some journeys can indeed be its own reward.**

I caught up with **post-punk pioneer Bill Goffrier**, who was performing a solo set before a **SRO** crowd at **The Choke** and we hooked up later at **Watermark Books** for a delicious...**hot as lava, pot of java** and a bit of **Q & A**



*Bill Goffrier self-portrait*

**The following is an excerpt:-->(Dec 31, 2011)**

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** I'd like to start off by asking about some of your musical influences.

**BILL GOFFRIER:** The first thing that pops into my head is the **Beatles White album**. It was all over the map. Every style of music was in there. Very personal

stuff. I recognized at the time that it was more individually done. Here's **Paul** doing his thing. Here's **George**. Here's **John**. Everyone doing his thing.

It was kind of like this songwriters collaborative. And I just loved that idea. I'm not saying that's what we tried to do in the first bands that I was in...we were barely able to play. Other than our drummer **Brent** (Giessmann) who was pretty accomplished, hey, we were barely able to play anything. We were just trying to be like the **Ramones** or the **Sex Pistols**.



**CASEY CHAMBERS:** How did **The Embarrassment** come together?

**BILL GOFFRIER:** Well **Brent** and I already knew each other; we met in 3rd grade in a sandbox. **John Nichols** was carrying his trumpet case to school. He was getting on the bus with a little plastic case that had a little trumpet in it and we were kinda making fun of **John**. Although subconsciously, it was drawing us together because **Brent** and I loved music. We'd listen to his older brothers weird rock albums. We were getting into **David Bowie**. **Todd Rundgren**. All this artsy stuff.

It took a couple years until we realized **John** was really into cool music, too. And we'd go over to his mom's apartment and he'd play **Kool and the Gang**. I think he had a **Ringo Starr**. "**Frankenstein**" by **Edgar Winter Group**. Like... 'ahhh, this is cool.' We all liked that song.

We didn't know what we were going to do musically. I think we had like three different punk band configurations before **The Embarrassment**. **John**, **Brent**, and I was the first one. Just the three of us. And that had its limitations. Then **Brent** and I found **Ron (Klaus)** and we had a trio without **John**. We thought that's all we'd need, but then the band realized we needed a front man. A 4th person in the group.

And then we remembered... 'oh yeah, **John**.' We'd heard him sing. He hadn't sung in the other groups. He played bass. He was very shy. Very reluctant to be on stage. He didn't want to put himself out in front, but we talked him into it.

That's where he had to develop his own way of dealing with stage fright issues and

stuff like that. Kind of...create. His **John** persona came out of that. We watched it grow. We thought, he's really cool. He's coming up with some really cool stuff.

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** Where did you guys first start playing?

**BILL GOFFRIER:** It would have been a college party at someone's house near WSU (Wichita State University). Once in awhile there would be these drunken parties and all the cool college art students would come and...y'know...we were hip and cool and we were in the arts, too, so it was like...'Ah! Let's get that punk band to come and play.'

We didn't even have a name yet. I think we played two of those shows around campus before we decided on what the name of the the band was. We also got to go on **KMUW college radio** and play live.

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** You guys started recording some of your music and getting positive reviews...

**BILL GOFFRIER:** We had our manager **Dan Rouser** with us and he was the one making a lot of that happen. We didn't know how to go about it. But he was such a **good PR person**. He'd be on the phone and writing letters. There was no Internet or anything so that was the only way you could do it. He'd be mailing stuff and he'd be on the phone. So we'd see stuff (reviews) like that and think...'oh, this is great'.

But does this mean that we're going to get a better show or we're going to get picked up by a label? Cause he'd keep approaching record labels. 'Sign these guy? Nah. I don't think we need a **Kansas punk rock band**. Thanks but...' **It just wasn't an easy sell.**

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** Did **The Embarrassment** ever make it out to New York's **CBGBs**?

**BILL GOFFRIER:** In the early 80s, we made it out to **New York** and we played...**Danceteria** (famous new wave club). It was a huge multi-floored dance club and the guy that ran it started bringing in some really cool live acts. **Something different every night**. Live bands on one floor...disco going on another. He'd always have really interesting bills.

The same time we were playing there, we got a flyer that had the Club's calendar on it and **R.E.M.** was gonna be playing the very next week cause they were kinda on the same circuit we were at that point.



**Taken backstage after Embarrassment's first appearance at the Danceteria,**

And that was really **good money** for us. That was the only way we could afford going to **New York** and get back. And just knowing we were gonna get a good amount of cash from **Danceteria** allowed us to book other shows.

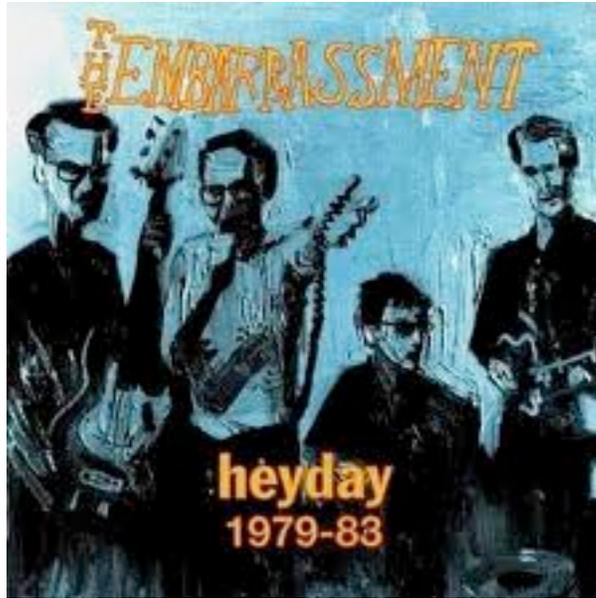
**CASEY CHAMBERS:** You guys had the opportunity to open for some pretty famous artists. **Velvet Underground's John Cale** and one of my favorite guys...**Iggy Pop**...

**BILL GOFFRIER:** Yea, I think we did a couple of shows with **Iggy**. This was at a big **Chicago ballroom venue**. Big theater. And we did a lot of those kind of show openings. **Chicago** was a really good town for **The Embarrassment**. Sometimes we'd headline at the little clubs, but if there was a big show like that, I don't know, I guess we had a good enough reputation that we could get on some of those bills.



We opened for **Pete Shelley of the Buzzcocks** once. He was doing a solo tour. We were excited about that because we were all huge **Buzzcock** fans. Oh and we opened for **Public Image Ltd** in Chicago too. That was big, big hype for us opening for them. They were drawing huge crowds cause that was the only way anybody got a chance to see **Johnny Rotten** at that point. It was such a rare opportunity. Everybody went to that show.

Always up in **Chicago**. Those would be like week long tours for us. If we had a good gig in **Chicago**, then we'd play our way up and play our way back.

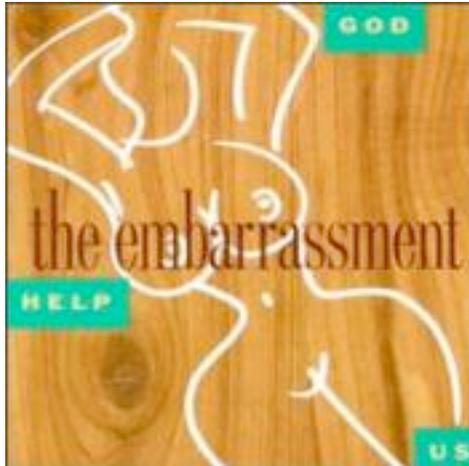


*"Now that I've finally gotten the message, a year and a half after this great lost American band dispersed into the wilds of Wichita, I still can't repeat it back to you." - Robert Christgau*

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** In 1995, **Bar None Records** finally released **The Embarrassment's** double-disc compilation...**"Heyday: 1979-1983"**. That was "manna in the desert" for **embo fans**. How did that come about? What took so long?

**BILL GOFFRIER:** In the early 80's, our paths crossed with **Glenn Morrow** who had his own band...**The Individuals** out in **Hoboken New Jersey**. He later became one of the head guys at **Bar None Records**. So we kind of had a mutual knowledge of each other.

**The Embarrassment** had split up by this time but we were starting to play some reunion shows...at least once a year playing in Lawrence or Wichita. And that grew into the idea of recording some new stuff. So **Bar None** said...'Lets do this! We'll give you a recording budget to do a new album. But we want to reissue all the older stuff too. So it'll be like a 2 record deal and we'll see where that goes.'



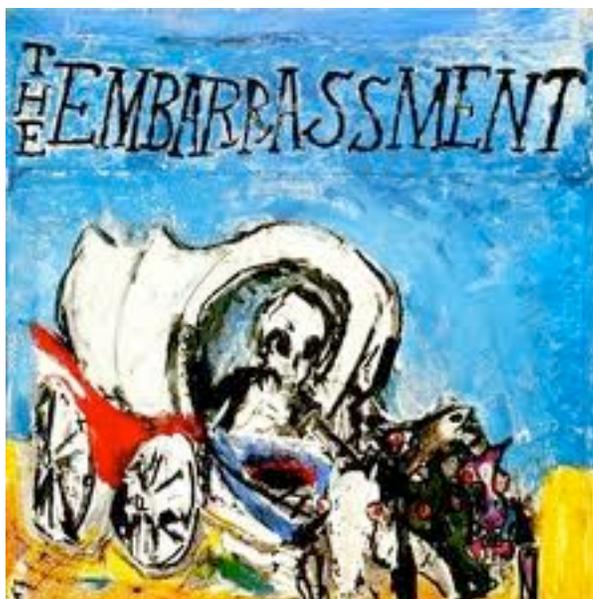
*"One of the main influences on American indie rock's look, sound, and D.I.Y. aesthetic." - All Music Guide*

So we ended up recording and putting the reunion album out right away...**"God Help Us" (1990)**. But the **anthology** reissue thing took like...5 more years to actually happen. I'm not sure why that delay. It may have been a financially difficult time for the label. It was kind of up and down.

So when **Bar None** finally worked things out, our band wasn't very active at all. I don't even think our band played any shows again until maybe 2006. I could be forgetting something. But it finally came out and **it got some good press**.

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** When **The Embarrassment** broke up in '83, you moved out to **Boston** and later formed another great indie band...**Big Dipper**.

**BILL GOFFRIER:** That wasn't supposed to happen, really. I only moved out there because **The Embarrassment** was...we were just kind of on our last legs. We were really down. We had lost our manager friend **Dan** and we were trying to do it ourselves.



It seemed like even though our record... "**Death Travels West**" (1983) was getting **really good reviews** and stuff, it just wasn't paying. And we were trying to do this full time! We were poor and starving. It just wasn't realistic to stay out on the road. It was like... 'Guys, this is just not fun anymore. We can't keep this up.'

So I think **John (Nichols)**, our singer, was the first one to say... 'Well, you know, I gotta get out of this and be doing something else.' I think he was starting to work for an airline that was new in town at the time.

And I was **applying to grad school** to finish my studies in painting. And it was between **Boston**, Chapel Hill, North Carolina and Bloomington Indiana. I was going to go to one of those programs for a **Masters Degree**. And I decided on **Boston** cause we had played there a lot. **Loved Boston**. I wasn't looking for the music scene cause I thought I was completely done, but the art scene was really good so I went out there.

**Brent (Giessmann)**, our drummer, was wanting to get a fresh start, too...so he ended up coming out right after me. While I was in the painting program, he joined the **Del Fuegos** and kind of took off. They had just signed a major label deal. So he ended up becoming a semi famous rock star with the **Del Fuegos** and I was watching that.



**Big Dipper**  
(Bill Goffrier, Steve Michener, Gary Waleik, Jeff Oliphant)

Then at the **end of my 2 years in art school**, one of my painting peers introduced me to **Gary Waleik**. She was telling me, 'I want you to meet this friend of mine cause he's an **Embarrassment** fan. She told **Gary** I'm going to art school with this guy and he was in **some band in Kansas**.

**Gary's** like, 'Yeah great.' But when he learned it was **The Embarrassment**, he got all excited. Cause he was sort of like you...A real cool underground music fan. At the time, he was playing with the **Volcano Suns** with the drummer from **Mission of Burma**.

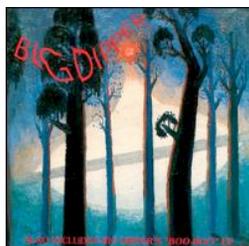
**Mission of Burma** had broken up. We knew all about them when we were still here in **Wichita**. We had their records. So I thought, 'Well that's cool. He's playing with a **Mission of Burma** guy.' I went to see the **Volcano Suns** a couple times and **Gary** was grumbling. He's like, 'Ahhh! I'm not getting along too well in this band. They don't want to do my songs. They want to do the drummer's songs. He's the head of the band. This isn't fun anymore.'

So we just started **sitting around on the front porch** where I live. We had our guitars. It was fun to just write songs together. It was just **a songwriters collaborative**. Not a band. **We didn't even want to be in a band anymore**.

And then he brought another member of the **Volcano Suns**...bassist **Steve Michener**. And I think **Steve** had left the **Volcano Suns** and joined **Dumptruck**. They were an up and coming local indie band. Kind of more poppy. **Steve** liked that. He came on board.

Still we just thought...it's not a band. We just have these 3 different songwriters who get together and hash out our ideas. It turned out the place to do it was in **Gary's** cousin **Jeff Oliphant's** basement. **Jeff** was a drummer and we'd practice there about once a week. And we started feeling like we should record some of this stuff. So we did.

Since we had those connections, it was kind of easy to get gigs. I think our first show was at **The Rat (The Rathskeller) in Boston**. We were opening for **The Mekons** who we all loved. They were one of our British post-punk heroes. I think the new lineup of the **Volcano Suns** were on that bill too.



We just kind of jumped into the scene. Gee, we didn't want to be in a band again and here we are. I guess we had **a different attitude** then. It was like, 'OK, we'll be in a band..as long as it's fun. If people are just offering us shows and want us to put out records, why should we say no?' It didn't seem to be hard work. So we did it.

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** The iconic video game...**"Rock Band"**...wound up using a few songs from **Big Dipper**.

**BILL GOFFRIER:** Oh yeah! A few years ago that came to pass. **Rock Band** is headquartered in the **Boston** area and the main people at **Rock Band** have a lot of **Boston** connections. They wanted to do more independent bands and they thought well, why not **Big Dipper**. And I think since the anthology on **Merge**... (**"Supercluster"**)...had just come out in **2008**, that kind of **brought our music out into the public again**.



*"...(Big Dipper) were making music on par with the best bands of the era." - All Music Guide*

They used three songs and on their budget had our guitarist, **Gary**, go in and do the remixing which was a lot of fun for him. But he also had to make sure they had all the individual tracks 'cause the way it works is, you have to go back to the multitrack masters and **isolate every track** or you can't work it into the game system. So that was a job. **Gary's our studio wizard.**

**CASEY CHAMBERS:** I gotta tell ya, you play a pretty mean paintbrush, as well. I especially like the way you capture parts of the city with your paints and your cosmic take on other-worldly subjects. What medium do you enjoy most and when did you discover this talent?

**BILL GOFFRIER:** Oil is back to being my medium of choice. Sometimes it's watercolors. Back in grade school my parents got me art lessons at what used to be the **Wichita Art Association**. And now it's the **Center For The Arts** way out on east Central. I was able to take lessons from some really good local artists. My high school teacher, **Don Weddle** was a really good painter and was very supportive. He helped me get college scholarships based on my art portfolio so I was able to go full time to WSU.

All of the members of **The Embarrassment** were in the Art program at **WSU**. We were all Fine Art students. But then I'd kind of teeter. If the music was very satisfying, then I'd think...'OK I'm not gonna paint for awhile. I'll get back to it cause I can go do my painting anytime.' It goes like that.

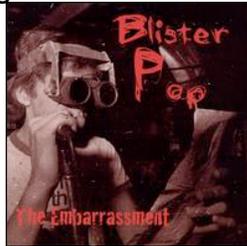
--> **Bill Goffrier Art Studio** <--

When the band breaks up, I'm painting. But then in the late '80s, I was doing more music with **Big Dipper**. Then I wanted to get back to painting in the '90s. Very prolific in the '90s. Now it's kind of a balance. I'm painting regularly enough that I don't lose my momentum completely.

And the music's fitting in much better now. I'm more adaptable. I do solo shows, duo stuff with my girlfriend now, even **Big Dipper** when we're being active. It's great that I can get my musical fix in a lot of different situations. So I feel really lucky about that. Cause I like doing all of it.

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**Bill** was heading back to Boston on an early **New Years Day flight**, so I jumped into my car and drove off listening to the CD below...



*"...the energy of their live shows makes **Blister Pop!** a real thirst-quencher." - **Trouser Press***

...shouting "**I got Blister Pop on my fingers!**"

**Good stuff!**