



The Embarrassment – The Embarrassment

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THE EMBARRASSMENT

You could try as you might, but chances are you couldn't imagine a nerdier 'punk' band than **The Embarrassment**. Four guys from the midwest of America, the band existed as a seminal pulse in the American underground scene between 1979 and 1983.

They looked like they were on the way to bible study, all four had glasses, were thin, wiry and fancied

collared shirts. If you have seen those very early photos of REM, before even *Murmur* was a twinkle in their eye, then just multiply by ten how uncomfortable and nervous they look and you start to get some idea.

Let's approach it like this, then: consider shall we **The Stooges** and **The Velvet Underground**. Pretty seminal groups both. You'd figure we owe them a lot for helping draft some kinda magna carta for what real rock'n'roll should be aspiring to, no? Back in the early seventies, before **New York Dolls** and their ilk you couldn't swing a bottle of cheap plonk in a bar without finding at least a hundred people willing to say "the Velvet who" or "fuck the Stooges, that shit is over!" They were both considered washed up hacks, bit players in the charge of rock music toward the peak of **Led Zeppelin** or **Crosby Stills Nash**. I'm not making this shit up, kids: go read your history books.

Similarly, The Embarrassment will get their dues in helping to kickstart the underground network that now exists. It's just (circa 2005) we find ourselves back in that same cycle of rejection and false prophets. "Ha ha, you almost had me goin' there, buddy! Goddamn! The Embarrassment... I get it!" No, really, I stand by these lavish claims, doubting young scenester. I know it is hard for you to imagine because you have been told **REM** blah blah blah (let alone **Minor Threat** blah blah blah, but that's another story for another time). And then you see this bunch of oldies churning out dogs balls like *Bad Day* and the inevitable greatest hits tour that every washed up creative force embarks upon and you wonder what all the fuss was about. But without REM you can just go forget about a whole lotta your O.C. soundtracks, and without bands like The Embarrassment paving the way with their self-released little oddities, REM can kiss my arse.

And what of them? Nervy jangly adolescent 'punk' (The band were pretty much a marriage of two Wichita, Kansas punk groups, **The Mainliners** and **The Lemurs**), that's pretty much all it was. But when done good, you don't need to justify it. Full of hormone, humour, my hyperbole and slightly hung over, the stuff on the first (self-titled) Embarrassment EP is legendary. (Err, or, it will be).

Celebrity Art Party, *Elizabeth Montgomery's Face* and *(I'm A) Don Juan*: a flawless opening side. Driving beats, skewed rhythms and great Dr Seuss lyrics on the first track

*“Nuance, sifÂ@ance, fiancifÂ@
Easy for you to say, doctor.
What do you think this is?
An artistic party.”*

Before that however, they had managed to leap from nowhere with their debut single (self-released as would be all the titles during their first lifetime) *Patio Set/Sex Drive*. Recorded in Wichita in the final weeks of the seventies, it was a frustrated scream from nowhere. If it had been released on Ork (hello, **Television**) it would be one of the holy grails of rock. The songs captured in February 1981 (on the EP) find an amazing leap in songwriting. The tunes are all hammered 4/4 but the instrumentation jumps in and out like a Beefheart track whilst sacrificing none of the danceability. Like fractured rock. If the imitators were destined to forge some kinda sub-Byrds jangly scene clad in paisley, then they obviously weren't listening hard enough to the playing on some of this stuff. Perhaps because at the time there were so few parallels, The Embarrassment played cluelessly to their instincts. Shifting riffs every couple of bars, choruses barked during the verses, songs ending mid-thought. And let's face it, if you're playing to the same two dozen people week after week you can pretty much do what you want; there's not a lot being asked of you. Just keep it in time and it'll be fine.

The writeups for the EP, whilst encouraging, did up the ante for the band (named by way of a Vonnegut reference – embarrassment being the word best used to describe the human condition). They could no longer believe in their own obscurity in exelsus. They hit the road, mainly to the safe havens of college towns; and the nights of rockin' hard showed on the following mini-LP, *Death Travels West*. During their lifetime it was considered to be their legacy to the kids but its somewhat darker mood and more claustrophobic sound doesn't really win me over. But enough on that: grab a copy of the hard-to-find and somewhat pricey import *Heyday 1979-83* and do the comparisons yourself.

And then it was over. The band scammed a one hour recording stint at a local studio and left the tape

running. The Embarrassment LP is made up of this session from April 1983 (side B) and the original self-titled EP (side A). It was released in 1987. Whereas the EP was put together in full 24 track splendour (they spent so much money recording it they were forced to glue together all the covers themselves), side B was live-to-two track. That there is minimal difference in songs is incredible; they all maintain that air of adventure and those angular glances at 4/4. The main progression to be noticed is the almost Fugazi-like chanting that appears on some of the backing vocals. Not to mention their hilariously ironic take on world politics throughout *Woods Of Love*:

*"Smooth Americans In Cambodia,
Americans In Panama,
Americans In Iran,
Americans In Japan,
Americans
American Barbarians – there's no such thing
It's worldly people giving us the blame."*

The choruses are tougher, the lyrics more bitter, the arrangements tighter and almost dizzying in their complex rhythms considering the band were always just rock. Don't get me wrong, the drumming of **Brent Giessman** is up there with the best, it's just that it aint no **Rashied Ali, Elvin Jones, Jeffrey Wegener** or **Art Blakey**. It possesses the same charisma and colouring of those guys but without ever drawing attention to itself. And then the album ends suddenly, with the band out of money during a thwarted attempt at *Out Of Town*, which barely lasts ninety seconds. There's a pause: "That's fucked, that was fucked." "From the start?" someone asks. "Skip it or do it again?" comes another voice. "Let's skip it," someone decides. "Awhh, shit," ends singer Bill Goffrier. And then The Embarrassment disappear.

p.s. The Embarrassment reunited in the late eighties and released the *God Help Us* album on Bar/None (finally, a label!). For interested comers, give it a google and see what you can find.

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SOMETHING TO SAY?

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