

# A Thing of the Past

By David Menconi, *News & Observer*

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For a couple of minutes, the five musicians in guitarist Rod Abernethy's studio near downtown Raleigh sound just like, well, Arrogance. They're rehearsing a song called "Why Do You Love Me?" that dates back to 1973, but you'd never know it. It's the sort of pop song that never goes out of style, with a chorus tailor-made for a singer with an upper-register wail:

*Why-yi-i do you love me?*

*That's all I want to hear...*

Behind the drums, Scott Davison motors along while pianist Marty Stout leans into the piano riff and Abernethy fills in on harmonica. Then, from across the room, singers Don Dixon and Robert Kirkland lock eyes as they start to harmonize on the song's signature scat -- De de de, de DE, de de DE -- and there it is, the instrumental wallop and distinctive vocal blend of two voices fitting together perfectly, Dixon above and Kirkland below.

They sound just like they did when they were Arrogance. Until, halfway through the scat part, Dixon and Kirkland can no longer keep a straight face and collapse into snickers. Next verse, Kirkland solves the problem by keeping his eyes closed.

Band rehearsals are like planting a garden, a lot of digging that you hope pays off someday. For 14 years, Arrogance did a lot more digging than reaping.

Arrogance was the fountainhead of North Carolina music. From the late '60s to the early '80s, this legendary band pretty much ruled the rock scene from Greenville to Winston-Salem. Ever since they threw in the towel 17 years ago, people have been trying to explain why they never made it.

"My daughter is 12 years old, and when I try to relate to her about Arrogance, it's almost impossible," Abernethy says. "She asked me once, 'Were you guys like the Beatles?' Well...no. We were a very popular regional band that had some bad luck trying to get out there. But you know, every band cries that story. It's like going to Vegas. No matter who you are, it's a crapshoot."

On this evening, the five members are rehearsing for a pair of reunion performances that will be their first time sharing a stage since they parted ways in October 1983. Since February, when the reunion was announced, people from the old days have rekindled memories and theories about why Arrogance remains the greatest band nobody outside this state ever heard of.

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Luck and legacies:

Trying to figure out why one band makes it while another doesn't is akin to figuring out why a tornado destroys one house without touching anything else on the block. You can cite statistics, geography, weather patterns and proximity to trailer parks all you want. But there is no "why" you can pin down, because there's just no accounting for the biggest factor of all: blind luck.

This is a large part of the Arrogance mythology. Arrogance was a band that everybody -- including the members -- expected to be huge, but inexplicably wasn't.

Understand, Arrogance did leave behind a handsome legacy, serving as North Carolina's answer to the Velvet Underground. An inspiration to younger generations of musicians, Arrogance laid the groundwork for bands like R.E.M. and Let's Active. The group also pioneered a do-it-yourself aesthetic that still resonates today with bands like Superchunk.

"Arrogance was ahead of its time," says former manager Randy Crittenton. "They directly inspired and influenced other people who took this do-it-yourself idea another step. Now, I'm not saying [Superchunk's label] Merge Records wouldn't exist without Arrogance. But I can trace it for you -- person by person, friendship by friendship and idea by idea for the last 25 years. It all connects up."

Nevertheless, there's a sense of unfulfillment about Arrogance's history, because the band was of a generation when people wanted and expected more. Arrogance made no secret of its ambition to be famous, yet never quite got there. So while these reunion shows should be fun, they'll also be tinged with the wistfulness of unrequited desire. By now, Arrogance and its fans will have to settle for being an oral regional tradition, because anybody who wasn't here during the band's heyday may wonder what the fuss was all about. None of Arrogance's albums ever made the Billboard charts, and there's scarcely a trace of the group in any of the reference books. The first "Rolling Stone Record Guide" brushes Arrogance off with an entry consisting of a single withering phrase: "Pedestrian mid-Seventies folk rock."

But the faithful still talk with awe about the group's performances during its 1970s prime. Godfrey Cheshire, who was one of Arrogance's confidantes and main propagandists back in the day, says that seeing Arrogance play the Cat's Cradle really was like seeing the Beatles at the Cavern Club.

"All through the '70s, Arrogance was completely magical," Cheshire says. "Their individual strengths as singers, and especially the combination of Don's and Robert's voices, fueled everything. They were great players, projected great personality onstage. And they had a great sense of humor; their shows were a lot of fun. They were serious about the music, but they also made the shows lively and funny."

In terms of songwriting as well as voices, dual lead singers Kirkland and Dixon were Arrogance's Lennon and McCartney. Brooding and intense, Kirkland's songs contrasted with Dixon's lighter pop tunes. And as the "cute" Arrogance member who played bass and had the higher voice, Dixon was a natural Paul McCartney type.

"If I had a dollar for every girl who came to their shows just to see Don with that towel around his head," former Cat's Cradle owner David Robert recalls, "I'd...well, I'd have a whole bunch of money."

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In the beginning:

Arrogance formed in Chapel Hill in the fall of 1969, when Dixon and Kirkland were freshmen in the University of North Carolina's Aycock dormitory. Dixon coined the group's name.

"Yeah, we used to call ourselves 'Arrogance the Band Killers,' 'cause we'd go in and kill all the other bands that sucked compared to us," he recalls sheepishly. "That was, uh, during our loud, heavy period."

Peter Holsapple, who later went on to form the dB's with Chris Stamey, remembers the early Black Sabbath-influenced Arrogance as "heavyosity embodied." But that quickly gave way to more of a folk-rock sound by the time Arrogance made its first two self-released

albums, 1973's "Give Us a Break" and 1975's "Prolepsis."

"They were a great band to know and a great band to watch grow over the years," Holsapple says. "Some of my fondest teenage memories of growing up in Winston-

Salem consist of going to see Arrogance at various church-sponsored coffeehouses. Dixon was a little older, enough that he seemed like my senior and was to be respected. But the nice thing was that he never treated me like the jerky kid I'm sure I was." While the period '70s arrangements date both albums, "Give Us a Break" and "Prolepsis" still hold up well on the strength of the singing and the songs. The fact that Arrogance produced and released these records itself (a rarity for rock bands back then) also cemented the band's stature with its local fans as "the home team." Rather than taking off for New York or Los Angeles, here was a band taking a stand at home. "They really reflected their time," says Holsapple, "the laid-back aspects of Chapel Hill that everybody liked. They weren't aggressive enough to be frightening, yet they were very powerful and played better than just about anybody. There was a coziness about them. They weren't too far a field from your favorite James Taylor record, but a lot more kick-ass than that."

Arrogance finally attracted the industry's attention after "Prolepsis," and signed to Vanguard Records in late 1975. But the Arrogance/Vanguard alliance proved to be an illfated

venture. Vanguard, a label known mostly for acoustic folk acts like Joan Baez, was poorly equipped to promote a rock band. And the Arrogance album that Vanguard released, 1976's "Rumors," was the group's weakest to date.

"It should've been more successful because everything worked on paper," recalls Crittenton, the former manager. "Vanguard wanted to make it happen, and they made the band a priority. But they just weren't plugged into the right network to get a rock band on the radio, which was enough to kill it. Also, the album wasn't as well-engineered as it should've been, which we all knew. But they went along with it."

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Another shot:

After "Rumors," Arrogance parted ways with Vanguard and changed course to more of a hard-rock direction. The lineup expanded to a five-piece with the addition of Abernethy, who served much the same role in Arrogance that Joe Walsh did in the Eagles -- a lead guitarist who was also a songwriter and bandleader in his own right.

The late '70s was the Arrogance phase that seemed to have the most commercial promise. Abernethy blended right in and pushed the band to its live-performance peak, while Dixon and Kirkland were maturing as songwriters. It took a couple of years, but Arrogance finally got another shot with Curb/Warner Brothers Records.

Released by Curb/Warner in 1980, "Suddenly" was Arrogance's best shot at a mainstream breakthrough, a fine pop-rock record with a couple of potential hit singles in the title track and "It Ain't Cool To Be Cruel." But it simply wasn't to be. The band had to struggle as much for attention from its record label as the public.

"Somewhere I still have an internal memo showing the label's priorities in order," Crittenton says. "Arrogance was not at the bottom, but they were nowhere near the top, either. Then again, neither were the B-52's or Talking Heads."

It didn't take long for relations between band and label to sour, and Arrogance opted out of its contract after "Suddenly." That proved to be a fatal mistake.

"Warner wanted us to make another album, and even had a cool producer lined up," Dixon says. "But we hated them. So we should've made another album at Warner, but didn't and I have to take responsibility for convincing the guys to leave. We thought we'd just waltz into something else. But we didn't."

As it turned out, Arrogance's timing to put itself back on the market couldn't have been worse. The group was a classic '60s rock throwback at a time when record companies were more interested in funny haircuts and tinny synthesizers. Music lawyer Josh Grier, who ran Durham-based Dolphin Records in the early '80s, remembers Arrogance's

struggles toward the end of the line.

"They were out of sync with tastes at the time," Grier says. "Their style of music -- straight-ahead rock, with Rolling Stones and Byrds influences -- was just not that popular. Had they come along six years later, they might have done great. But they had nothing to do with synthesizers or drumkits with hexagonal-shaped heads. The stuff I did on Dolphin that the major labels were interested in was like that. Arrogance was an anachronism, but I'm not sure of what era. They could have come along at any time over a 30-year span."

Arrogance kept trying for a few years and put out a live album, 1981's three-sided "Lively," on David Robert's Moonlight Records. Abernethy left after "Lively," and the remaining quartet made one last demo recording. Thinking the name Arrogance might be holding them back, they sent this batch of songs out under another name, 5'11". Even though Kirkland and Dixon both point to the 5'11" material as the best songs Arrogance ever did, they came up empty. There was no record-company interest in the group, although Dixon had some nibbles as a solo act. So Arrogance finally called it quits in October 1983, ending a 14-year run.

"After we couldn't get signed with 5'11", we gave up," Dixon says. "We wanted to quit while people still cared about us. And we were the best we ever were at the very end." Most of those 5'11" songs later surfaced on Dixon and Kirkland solo albums -- including "Praying Mantis," a radio hit that got Dixon's "Most of the Girls Like To Dance But Only Some of the Boys Like To" onto the Billboard album charts in 1987. Kirkland's "Kick the Future" was released only in Europe. When he couldn't get a label to release the album in the United States, that was "the beginning of the end."

Kirkland designs and sells kitchen cabinets nowadays and plays music as a hobby. Post-Arrogance, Abernethy played in Dave Adams' Glass Moon, with the Slackmates, and as Rod Dash. He's still making a living as a musician, doing broadcast and commercial music for clients including Nike and McDonald's. Davison, the drummer, is in real estate and occasionally plays for fun. Pianist Stout is an accountant, and these Arrogance shows will be the first music he has played since the breakup.

As for Dixon, he has had the most high-profile career, primarily as a producer for R.E.M., the Smithereens, Marti Jones, Guadalcanal Diary and many others. Outside this area, about the only time Arrogance gets mentioned anymore is as a footnote -- Dixon's first band.

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A matter of timing:

So why didn't Arrogance "make it?" You could say that record companies never knew what to do with the band and dropped the ball. That they never made the right record at the right time. Or maybe it's just this simple: Lightning didn't strike.

More often than not, that's what happens. For every R.E.M. or Hootie & the Blowfish, there are a thousand others that never get any further than their own hometowns. Still, in terms of timing, Arrogance didn't miss by all that much. Less than four years after Arrogance broke up, the Georgia Satellites went platinum with the same sort of roots rock Arrogance played. More recently, Fastball's 1998 radio smash "The Way" is a dead ringer for old Arrogance.

"Except for the B-52's and R.E.M. and a few other bands, it's easy for anyone from the South to be bitter about the music industry," Cheshire says. "It's so not about talent and music, and so about artificial things that all come down to money. Arrogance really did pioneer original rock music in North Carolina, to a very high standard. But they were between eras, out of time. Hypothetically, if Arrogance had come along in 1964, they could've been like the Box Tops. And if they'd come along in 1980, they could have gone the R.E.M. route and toured the country in a van. They were right in between, when

there really wasn't either way to get to the national level."

Arrogance, at least, got further than most. And with the group's catalog coming back into circulation on compact disc, its musical as well as logistical legacy will be within reach -- but only briefly. The group is pressing just 1,000 copies of each title, and they'll only be for sale at the reunion shows. When they're gone, they're gone.

Just as briefly, Arrogance itself will be around again as a performing group. The genesis of this reunion came when Dixon started going through tapes and decided the Arrogance albums deserved to be heard again and also deserved a live sendoff.

Kirkland says Dixon called him in October to broach the subject, and began by asking, "Are you ready?" They came up with a two-show format: one at the ArtsCenter devoted to the early-period folk-rock Arrogance, and another at the N.C. Museum of Art given over to Arrogance's louder rock-band side.

Since agreeing to do the reunion, Arrogance's members have been working overtime to reconnect, both musically and personally. Relations between everybody appear to be perfectly cordial, though not without the occasional undercurrent.

"We basically act exactly the same way toward each other that we always did," Kirkland says. "I don't care what anybody says, people don't change. They just get...more polite. Things really are fine, mostly. But it's tough to make everything peaches and cream all the time."

Actually, that's perfectly predictable. As David Robert points out, this band wasn't called "Arrogance" for nothing.

"The competition they had was healthy in the long run," Robert says. "But they weren't the love-peace-and-understanding band, either. I think there was a certain amount of jealousy and tension, which you're always gonna have when people have to share the spotlight."

Still, now that everyone is within shouting distance of 50, things are more relaxed this time around. As Abernethy puts it, "There's none of that, 'If it weren't for me, this band wouldn't be anything' anymore."

"We're all older, and nobody's trying to use this band as a springboard to becoming a big star," Davison says. "We're just in it to have a good time. Somebody asked if this meant we were, you know, 'back together.' Dixon said this is more like a high school reunion -- it doesn't mean we're gonna start going to class again everyday starting Monday."

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Rough cuts, right sounds:

The songs are covered with cobwebs. This is an early rehearsal for the reunion shows, and an attempt at "I Doubt It" is pretty rough. It's a complicated little song Arrogance recorded 25 years ago, and the tricky tempo shifts get the best of the musicians. More than once, they have to cue up a CD to hear how a part goes.

Kirkland struggles with the instrumental break and eventually negotiates it. His relieved smile quickly becomes a frown.

"Um, then what do we do?" he asks.

"Fade out," Stout quips with a smirk.

But a couple of songs later, they take on "Slaughtered Elves" and the song falls right into place, barreling along at the same rollicking cadence as the Rolling Stones' "19th Nervous Breakdown." Quirky and surreal, "Slaughtered Elves" is Kirkland at his most idiosyncratic:

It's sad I know to be so weird you can't control yourself/But if I had a long white beard I'd slaughter all my elves/Yes, it's a great day comin' when the words will cease to flow/There'll be no more Harry Reasoner and no more Dick Cavett show/And there's nothing you can do to keep the hot from turning cold/'Cause it's written on my T-shirt and I knew you'd wanna know...

"That was not bad at all," Kirkland says as the song's last note fades. "Er, except for where I screwed up."

"Yeah," drummer Scott Davison says over a rimshot. "Perfect, except for the mistakes." Close enough for rock 'n' roll.