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2004 ELECTION & BEYOND

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7:30 pm Speakers Panel
1st United Methodist Church (1376 Olive St.)
Sliding scale admission for panel, \$5 to \$20.
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news BY MELISSA BEARNS



The Electras

Bass player John Kerry's rockin' the vote.

Call us shallow but studies show that most Americans vote for the candidates they'd rather have a beer with. Sure we think about issues. But Democratic strategist Dan Carol of Eugene says that before we start thinking politics, we look at personality traits — things like character, likability, values and even sex appeal.

If that's the case, would most Americans rather hang out with John Kerry, the guy who played bass in a popular high school surf/rock band — or George Bush, the cheerleader?

Before Kerry had even won the Democratic nomination, the *Washington Post* did a short story on his stint with The Electras while he was in prep school at St. Paul's in New Hampshire.

Since then the media has all but ignored the story. But now Bend-based PR firm Waterston Communications has taken on the job of promoting this little-known aspect of Kerry's life.

The year was 1961. The Soviets were building the Berlin Wall. Kennedy was sworn into office. The Freedom Riders were traveling through the South testing the limits of desegregation. And the Beatles were looking for a bassist. Isolated at their all-boys boarding school, a few guys decided to form a band to meet girls. They recruited Kerry, who was just learning to play bass.

This was the pre-Beatles era and the boys appear on the cover of their re-released album with their hair carefully slicked down and parted on the side, looking dapper in suits and white, button-down shirts. The music is fun, light, danceable early surf-rock, mostly instrumental covers including the Ventures' "Yellow Jacket."

They played school dances, had a lot of fun and recorded the album in the school's band room, pressing just 500 copies. Now an original can go for as much as \$2,500 on Ebay. But you can buy a copy of the re-released CD from their website (www.the-electrasrockandrollband.com) for just \$14.

Carol said bringing up the Electras as a campaign strategy is a good move as long as it doesn't seem forced, as if Kerry's trying too hard to show he's just a regular, fun guy.

"Everybody loves music," he said. "And this shows his fun-loving side. Say what you will about George Bush. In the 2000 election he came off as looking more comfortable in his skin than Al Gore."

Clinton got it. And even though he was the fat kid in band, he got up on "The Arsenio Hall Show" wearing sunglasses and played

sax. In this election, as in 1992, the candidates' coolness factor could easily swing the vote because once again, the 18- to 24-year-old age group is a key demographic.

"The youth vote is critical," said Dan Isaacson, the 24-year-old vice chair of the Democratic Party in Lane County. "If more than 50 percent of us vote, I think this election will be over."

This year rock may play a more important role than even the savviest strategists realize. The Vans Warped Tour, which features mostly alternative punk rocks bands and caters to people 35 and under, drew crowds as large as 25,000 this summer. This year the fervent message, shouted from almost every stage, was "Vote" and "Don't vote for Bush."

Rock The Vote, founded in 1990 in response to government censorship, played an important role in the 1992 election, registering 350,000 young voters and encouraging about two million to get to the polls. For the first time in 20 years, youth turnout increased, jumping 20 percent compared to the previous presidential election.

In the 2000 election in which Bush claimed the White House, the turnout of 18- to 24-year-old voters hit an all-time low of 38 percent.

So once again, Rock The Vote organizers have aggressively mobilized to get young voters a voice. Joining Rock The Vote this election is a new political group with musical roots, Punk Voter.

"This is about getting everyone to mobilize as a block of concerned voters," reads their website (www.punkvoter.com). "Punk bands, punk labels and punk fans must form a union against the chaotic policies George W. Bush has put in place."

The Punk Voter concert series, "Rock Against Bush 2004" featuring Anti-Flag, Strike Anywhere, Midtown and Mike Park makes a stop in Portland at the Roseland Theater on Sept. 18. Numerous other political groups including Future Soundtrack for America and locally, "Make Rock Not War," have also jumped on the bandwagon.

Isaacson said highlighting Kerry's rock and roll past could help him win the hearts of those very important young voters, as long as cynical Gen X and Y'ers don't feel patronized.

"We're a hard market to market to," said Isaacson. "But I like the rock & roll thing. It promotes the youthful, lighter side of Kerry. It shows he's not a dry person and that he's reaching out to everyone."

EW