

The Kingsmen's infamously innocent 'Louie, Louie' back in front of the feds at downtown Federal Building

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Fifty years ago, FBI agents dressed in dark suits and skinny ties stood among screaming teenage fans and passed out promotional cans of [Green Giant vegetables](#) as [The Kingsmen](#) rocked the stage with "[Jolly Green Giant](#)" -- "Well, he lives down there in his valley (Brussels sprouts)," they sang. "The cat stands tall and green (spinach)."

The [FBI agents were being helpful while investigating](#) whether the Portland-bred garage band -- in 1963 considered a rhythm and blues band -- violated federal obscenity laws with the lyrics of its internationally famous version of "[Louie, Louie.](#)"

"They were great guys just doing their job," says Michael Mitchell, 69, guitarist and one of the original band members. He adds, "If they didn't ban it, no one would've ever listened."

The federal government inadvertently took The Kingsmen from supermarket openings in the Portland suburbs to worldwide fame in the course of an 18-month investigation. Now [a sculpture of the chords of that infamously innocent song hang in the lobby of the Edith Green-Wendell Wyatt Federal Building](#), which opens to federal employees and the public next week.

A curtain of neon colors juts from the federal building wall in Las Vegas-based artist [Tim Bavington's](#) glass and acrylic sculpture of "Louie, Louie" sound waves.



When Bavington, commissioned through the federal [Art in Architecture](#) program to create a sculpture for the building, learned the story behind "Louie, Louie," he couldn't resist bringing the song full circle -- back in front of the feds.

"Few songs have a more storied history," Bavington says. "And it's not only the FBI investigation; it's the conclusion that the song was unintelligible. For a lot of people, that's what fine art is.

"But if it makes you dance, you dance. That's what good art is like. If visually you like it, you don't need to know the lyrics; you enjoy."

Half a century ago this year, The Kingsmen recorded "Louie, Louie" in a recording studio at [Northwest 13th Avenue and Burnside](#). As the tale goes, the only band member who knew all the words to [Richard Berry](#)'s calypso-meets-R&B song that day had just had his braces tightened and didn't have a great voice to begin with, says Dick Peterson, 67, drummer with the band since 1964. The producer moved the microphone away from him, capturing the music but muffling the words.

A month after their famous recording, the five members of The Kingsmen had a gig at a nautical-themed dance at [Grant High School](#), according to a 1963 edition of *The Oregonian*. They'd sold about 600 copies of the record in Portland.

But after the recording was fortuitously voted "worst record" by college-aged Boston radio listeners, the rumor spread: When played at 33-1/3 speed the song's lyrics were decipherable and dirty. An [Oregon History Museum music exhibit in 2011](#) featured a letter to the U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy from a concerned parent at the time: "Who do you turn to when your daughter buys and brings home pornographic and obscene materials?"

"You'd think we were performing in gold lame jock straps -- and there was a band that was doing that," Peterson says. "Imagine us, young guys from Oregon, and some little girl walks up to us and says, 'You guys say (expletive)?' "

But the guys from Oregon had enough business savvy to continue mumbling the words, and issuing a "no comment" when asked what they were, Mitchell says. They sold millions of records -- estimates range between 12 million and 20 million.

"You play it so damn much you just start to like it," Peterson says.

A year to the day after it was banned in Indiana, a headline in *The Oregonian* read: "Record found free of obscenities, examiners fail to decipher lyrics." A Federal Communications Commission official is quoted: "As a matter of fact, we found the record to be unintelligible at any speed we played it."

By then, the boys in the band were rock stars.

"We never threw a TV out a hotel window," Mitchell says. "We weren't those kind of rock stars." But they did drink enough beer in 10 days to replace a hotel bed frame with beer cans. They didn't say what happened to the bed frame.

By the end of 1963, *The Oregonian* reported that The Kingsmen had been picked up by Scepter-Wand Records after selling 21,000 copies of "Louie, Louie," which peaked at No. 2 on the [Billboard charts](#). In February 1964, they'd be No. 4 on the London charts.

The Kingsmen were part of "a type of 'long hair' music," *The Oregonian* columnist Wayne Thompson wrote in 1965, that included the era's legendary bands: "The big attractions in Rock and Roll, other than the aforementioned Beatles, are the Kingsmen, the Rolling Stones, the Kinks, the Righteous Brothers, Freddy and the Dreamers, Herman's Hermits, Beach Boys, Gary Lewis, Petula Clark and Jody Miller, to mention only a few.

"Meanwhile," he concluded, "classical records gather dust on the back shelves" of record stores. The Kingsmen's contribution to garage rock and popular music led Bavington to use "Louie, Louie" -- covered more than 2,000 times, according to most counts -- for a concept he'd had in his sketch book for a while: sculpting sound waves.

With the help of Southwest Portland-based studio [New North Sound](#), Bavington printed the second measure of every bar of "Louie, Louie."

Those printouts became man-and-a-half-sized forms of glass and acrylic connected with steel bolts.



Bavington assigned a color palate to each of the 80 notes; the glass and acrylic panel color combinations vary with chord changes. The long yellow portion in the middle is Mitchell's guitar solo. Back when they were students at [David Douglas High School](#), the band members got leave school early to play gigs like the opening of the [Burlingame Fred Meyer](#), and they were the house band for a teen dance club near Milwaukie called The Chase. But they never imagined they'd hold a moment in history, Mitchell says.

The Kingsmen rode "Louie, Louie" fame for more than five years, until they were displaced by psychedelic music, Peterson says. They experienced resurgence when ["Louie, Louie" was used in the cult classic "Animal House"](#) (rumor is John Belushi picked it out himself) and now play regular [gigs in Prescott, Ariz.](#), and [Las Vegas](#), among other cities.

They no longer have their clothes ripped off by zealous fans or have to hide in a closet because a crowd storms the stage, Mitchell says. Now they have a different breed of fan.

When [U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, 64, visited the federal building](#) this summer, he said [U.S. Sen. Harry Reid](#), 73, asked him to report back about Bavington's "Louie, Louie" sculpture. He'd heard it was cool.