

FRIEZE

Riot Grrrl Band Emily's Sassy Lime Is Back!

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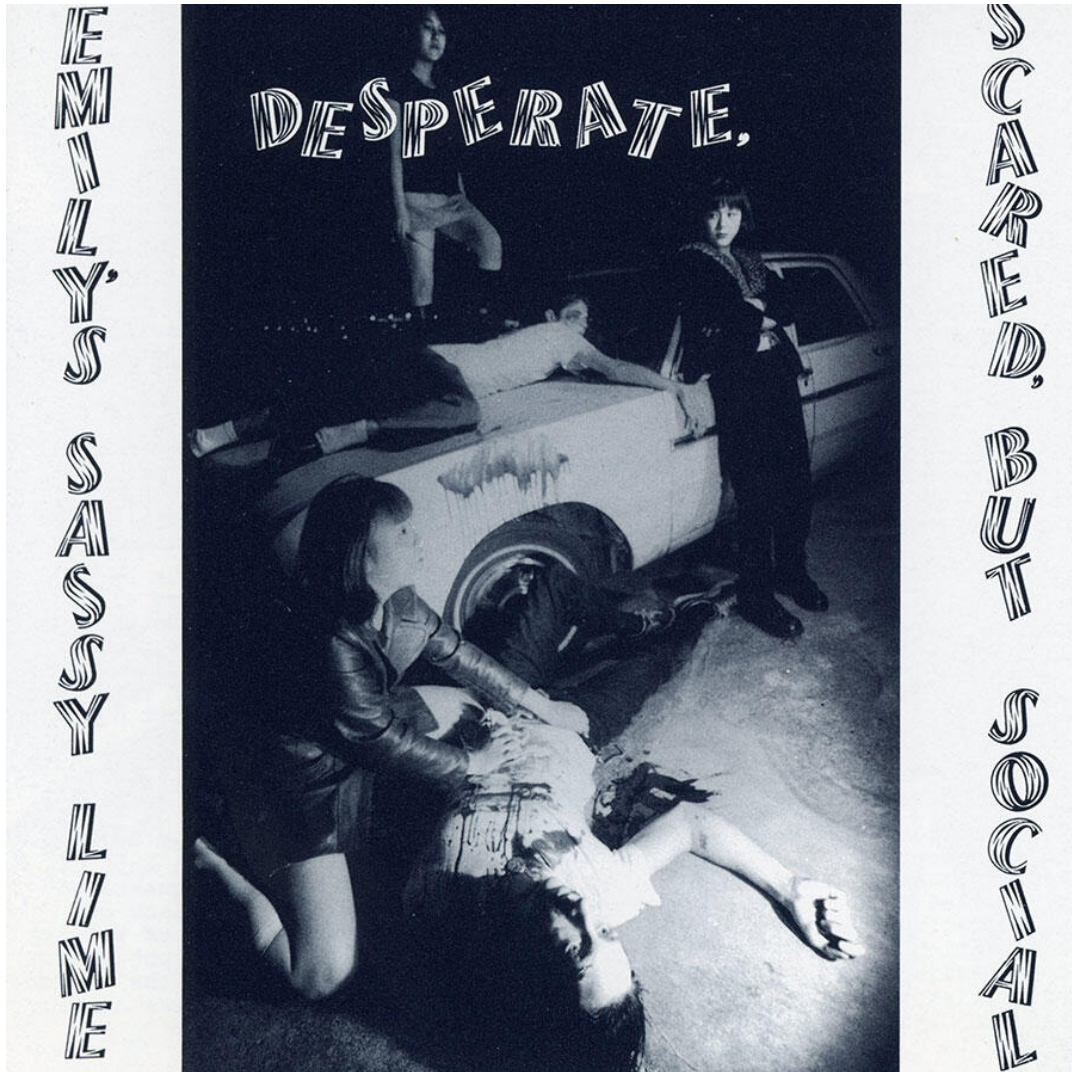


It's 1993: teenagers Amy and Wendy Yao and Emily Ryan are getting ready for Emily's mum to drop them off at UC Irvine. They had told her they were going to study at the library, but actually Bikini Kill was playing at Pietro's Pub on campus. They had to be there.

The music – all cymbals and guitars – cut through their ennui; it was emancipating. It was the first concert the trio attended together. In 2013, Amy recounted to Art Paper that they stuck around to talk to the band and, high on the music, she thought on her feet when she introduced them: 'We're a band,' she said. (They were not a band.) 'Oh cool,' Bikini Kill replied. 'Well, The Frumpies are playing in LA soon and you guys should play with them!'

They never did play for The Frumpies. But for the next three years, Amy, Emily and Wendy would become the actual riot grrrl band Emily's Sassy Lime (ESL). They snuck out of their parents' homes, wrote songs over the phone and played gigs after school. They told their parents they were doing homework at each other's houses. During that time, they released two

singles, 'Summer Vacation' (1994) and 'Dippity Do-Nut' (1996); a compilation Right Is Here (1995); and one LP Desperate, Scared, But Social (1995), on the label Kill Rock Stars. ESL played several dozen live shows – including one US cross-country tour. They made an unpublished zine called 'Sassy Crimes Club', and even had fans, like artist Seth Bogart and poet Brontez Purnell, who would write them letters. Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon told them not to take guitar lessons.



This June I visited the California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA) to see ESL perform for the first time in over 25 years. This year's edition – curated by Courtenay Finn, Christopher Y. Lew and Lauren Leving, and named after ESL's only LP – features a large installation of ESL ephemera, posters and mixtapes that Amy, Emily and Wendy have kept all these years. Before the performance I went into the galleries to spend time with their installation. The gallery walls are covered with zines, letters and Polaroids; delicate sculptures that Amy made from stacks of translucent takeout containers, rendered crystalline from a glittery slipper, punctuate the space; Garfield and Keroppi dolls sit beside a light-up caterpillar from Disneyland and an iridescent clamshell bed. I was standing in the world of ESL's desperate, scared but social and so casually punk adolescence, recovered from garages where its remnants had been waiting for over 20 years.

The music of riot grrrl fuels the community-centred DIY sensibility of the members' subsequent lives in art. Emily is 'an artist innately, every day, whether or not she pursues it professionally or calls herself one', as Wendy once told me. When we got in touch, Emily sent me covers of Robyn's 'Dancing on My Own' (2010) and Charli XCX's 'Von Dutch' (2024). Much of their artwork is as social as it is visual: in 1999 Amy started the gallery China Art Objects, a key chapter in LA's alternative art scene, and in 2004, Wendy founded Ooga Booga, an art boutique and bookstore in LA's Chinatown neighbourhood.

A moment before their performance, I briefly pulled Wendy aside to say hi. A woman in large sunglasses and a beige cardigan with a crossbody bag across her small frame approached us. Wendy introduced her as her mum, Judy.

When Judy walked away, Wendy was thoughtful. For most of ESL's existence, the members were in high school and the band was a secret to their parents. But after they left home and felt more comfortable sharing, the trio told their parents that they were in a band but kept the details vague. The OCMA show would be the most material her mum had ever seen about that time, Wendy said. She wondered if her mum could piece together how much had actually happened while they were in high school.



After Wendy left, I kept thinking about our interaction. I thought about what my own mother knows and what she doesn't know about my youth. I thought about what she knows that I don't know she knows. ESL took the stage and a crowd of mostly teenagers screamed. They thanked their kids for coming to the concert, and I pushed in closer to the speakers, past other parents and their children.