

L7: Pretend We're Dead

A documentary celebrating the rockers' "rags-to-riches-to-rags" story debuts this fall in select cities and on DVD and VOD — plus the OG lineup is on tour!

BY SUZANNE RUSH

THERE'S JUST A LIMITED amount of ferocious, free thinking kind of — I don't want to say, oddballs. But we were all just built a little different," says guitarist Suzi Gardner at the beginning of *L7: Pretend We're Dead*.

The new documentary about the heavy-metal grunge band, from Blue Hats Creative and directed by Sarah Price (*The Yes Men, Summercamp!*), employs a familiar behind-the-music narrative, to chronicle the "rags-to-riches-to-rags" trajectory of this pioneering foursome. Combining reflective voiceovers by band members and previously unseen video footage — much of which is remarkable "home video" taken long before anyone carried a smart phone — the film tracks L7 from their conception in 1985, through the making of six studio albums and numerous tours, to an eventual breakup in 2001.

Guitarists Donita Sparks and Suzi Gardner, bassist Jennifer Finch and drummer Dee Plakas, formed L7 in Los Angeles during the late-1980s. The band was initially embraced by the Sunset Strip's big-haired, metal bands. But, despite their Motorhead-inspired chops, L7's decidedly genderless — and *oddball* — image made them "the antithesis of that scene," Sparks explains. It wasn't until they moved to Seattle in the early 1990s that they found real success.



"I think people assume that you're raking in the cash when you're on the cover of *Spin* magazine. But unless you sell an insane amount of records you're really just a working stiff at best." — Suzi Gardner from the rock doc, *L7: Pretend you're Dead*

"Seattle was ... much more progressive than L.A. — like night and day," says Finch. "We were accepted as a real rock band."

Finding a home in the Pacific

Northwest's exploding grunge scene led to recording deals with Sub Pop Records, and later Slash where they would work with producer Butch Vig. "We got a shit deal from Slash," laughs Sparks. "But on the other hand, we became worldwide." But, not rich. "In our peak year, we were making \$500 bucks a month each."

Records led to numerous tours, including 1993's *Lollapalooza*; and tours led to ubiquitous rock band excesses. Notably, the film's stories of on-the-road hijinks and drug use are recounted without the usual fetishizing. Maybe it's the passage of time and the affecting drug-related deaths of friends like Kurt Cobain that wrung the glee from those tales.

Much of the film explores the band's quest to transcend the

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Witness the return of the Fierce-but-Funny Fab Four at one of 14 movie screenings of *L7: Pretend They're Dead* — or at three live concerts near you. If you prefer to smell the magic at home, the film is available on Blu-ray and DVD, starting Oct. 13, at MVDShop.com

FILM SCREENING DATES:

- 9/1: Portland, OR @ Hollywood Theater
- 9/8: Philadelphia, PA @ PhilaMOCA
- 9/8: Chicago, IL @ The Vic/Brew & View
- 9/8: Santa Ana, CA @ Frida Cinema
- 9/9: Santa Ana, CA @ Frida Cinema
- 9/10: Santa Ana, CA @ Frida Cinema
- 9/12: Long Beach, CA @ Art Theatre
- 9/14: Boston, MA @ Regent Theater
- 9/15: Boston, MA @ Regent Theater
- 9/17: Austin, TX @ Alamo Drafthouse
- 9/19: Washington DC @ The Black Cat
- 9/16: Los Angeles, CA @ The Regent
- 9/27: San Francisco, CA @ The Roxie
- 10/5: Brooklyn, NY @ Nitehawk Cinema

LIVE TOUR DATES:

- 9/26: Santa Cruz, CA @ Catalyst
- 9/27: San Francisco, CA @ Slim's
- 9/30: Los Angeles, CA @ The Greek Theatre

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studio. What people don't realize is that Wexler ran that company and was in the studio."

In the late '80s CBS Records honcho Tommy Mottola called Dave and asked if they could meet.

Dave: "We have dinner and he says some changes are gonna happen at a major company and would I be interested in being a part. I said, 'Look, I've been a loyal soldier at Atlantic. But I would never be president. I said I'd be interested if I could be a president."

"Then I have dinner with Tommy and (CBS uber-boss) Walter Yetnikoff and they tell me Tommy will be named president of CBS Records shortly and they wanted me for VP of Epic. The CBS structure didn't allow for presidents of divisions, but they hinted that there was something going on with Sony and they could put a guarantee in my contract that I would be president of Epic Records within six or nine months. So Ann and I go to dinner and she gets a napkin out and we put down numbers—signing bonus, parking spaces, outrageous stuff. I meet them again and show them the numbers and they say, 'You got it.'" Dave adds wryly, "And I think I should have asked for more."

"I get someone to draw up the contract and I take it back to Walter and Tommy on a Friday night. They look at it and they say, on the spot, 'We will sign this contract but you must sign it now before you tell Atlantic you're leaving.' So I did."

Dave goes back to Atlantic on Monday to resign and, just like on his first day, he can't find anyone in charge.

"Finally I found Doug [Morris] and told him. That afternoon Steve Ross calls and asks me to come upstairs. I go upstairs and he says, 'You're leaving, why?' I say my goal was to become a president and he says, 'You have a contract with us.' I say, 'No I don't,' which shocks him. He says 'We'll match the offer and I'll give you Warner Communications



Glew with Michael Jackson

shares and we'll figure out a way to make you president.' I went back down and told Doug I gave Walter and Tommy my word and I'm going. Guess what? They escorted me out of the building."

So ended Dave's 19-year relationship with Atlantic.

"I go in as senior VP/GM of Epic/Portrait/CBS Associated Labels and around nine months later, they made me president."

Aided by a crack team that included Richard Griffiths, Hank Caldwell and Polly Anthony, Dave engineered a turnaround of epic proportions, signing Pearl Jam, Spin Doctors, Suicidal Tendencies, Bad English and Alice Cooper, and turning around Gloria Estefan's career. Then there was Celine Dion.

In 1994, Dave was named Chairman of the Epic Group and the hits kept coming, with Rage Against The Machine, Oasis, Ben Folds Five, Jennifer Lopez and more.

Dave is especially proud to have signed AC/DC, a band he was tight with at Atlantic.

"Here's how I won them over. I knew Atlantic had taken the packaging on their CDs down to one page. That's what the labels were doing to save a few pennies. We brought Angus [Young], who was the one calling the shots, to our offices in New York and, with Steve Barnett, made a great presentation—with the help of Sony's amazing art department—of special packaging we'd prepared for all the old albums. He loved it."

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women-in-rock paradigm by deliberately eschewing superficial sexiness in favor of just playing as loud and hard as the boys. "We were aware of the scrutiny we were getting for being all gals, says Gardner. "If you were too fluffy or cutesy or something, then you weren't going to be noticed as a musician." In TV interview footage, the band members are shown employing their hallmark, salty humor to deflect the inevitable focus on gender. "Our fans couldn't give a shit if we're women," Sparks proclaims in one voiceover.

On the other hand, L7 used their clout to start Rock for Choice — a series of concerts headlined by bands like Nirvana, Hole and Joan Jett that raised money for pro-choice causes — in the main, issues of primary interest to females.

The film's additional interviews with Jett, Shirley Manson (Garbage), Lydia Lunch, Allison Robertson (The Donnas), Exene Cervenka (X) and Krist Novoselic (Nirvana) — celebrate L7's legacy as iconoclastic rockers (and, incidentally, women) who inspired countless riot grrrls.

L7: Pretend We're Dead screens throughout Sept. and Oct. at theaters across the U.S. (see listing on page 34). On Oct. 13, the film will be released on DVD (mvshop.com) and video-on-demand. In conjunction with the film's release, L7 will play a handful of concerts in California.

L7 DISCOGRAPHY: 1988–1999

