

Dan Rodricks: After a 26-year hiatus, Love Riot is back, planning new album



by Dan Rodricks

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When a music video titled “So Much” showed up on YouTube last week, it confirmed something that had been rumored for months: Love Riot, one of Baltimore’s best bands from the 1990s (and probably ever), is back.

Let the church say amen.

The folk alt-rock band, led by Lisa Mathews, had a prolific run of original songs, won music awards, kept a busy East Coast concert schedule and made a number of regional and national television appearances back when cassettes and CDs were still a thing. The band produced five albums before hitting the pause button in 1999.



Love Riot: "Young" Ron Campbell, Mikel Gehl, Mark Evanko, Lisa Mathews, Willem Elsevier.

Credit: Chris Myers

Established by Mathews (singer, songwriter, guitarist) and Mikel Gehl (backing vocals, guitarist), Love Riot was a hometown favorite, with a polished, distinctive sound of solid rock enriched by Mathews' smart lyrics and Willem Elsevier's superb violin. Mark Evanko played bass and "Young" Ron Campbell added drums and backup vocals.

I'm happy to report that all five of those talented people are on the 2025 reunion committee.

After Love Riot stopped performing, Mathews and Gehl entered the world of parenthood. In 2002, they formed Milkshake for kids, performing as a duo and as a full band. They won awards for their kindie rock and performed famously each "Midnight noon" on New Year's Eve at the Maryland Science Center.

The Milkshake run lasted longer than Mathews and Gehl ever expected, and it stands as a testament to their versatile talents and flair for innovation.

Now, their children grown, Mathews and Gehl have returned to the music they first created when Kurt Schmoke was mayor and the Orioles had just moved into Camden Yards.

It was Mathews' 24-year-old daughter, Jesse, who encouraged the Love Riot reunion during a drive with her mother last year.

"I had been saving all my past music, digitizing music from my 80s band, Beyond Words, and posting Love Riot stuff, making it all available on streaming platforms," says Mathews. "So Jesse calls it up on her phone and we listen. She says, 'Mom! This is great!' It was very gratifying to hear that. I said jokingly, 'Well, maybe I can get the band back together,' and she said, 'Mom! I would come see you.'"

Mathews took that pledge as full endorsement of a Love Riot reunion.

"So I put it out there to the guys, digging up everyone's contact info," says Mathews. "It was an almost immediate yes from everyone, although Mark [Evanko] was concerned he might not be able to play bass like he did. But sure enough, he dusted off his bass and started to play. He sounds great.

"I also had to relearn guitar and how to sing more richly. My singing in Milkshake was simple and unreaching. When I think about it, this is the way Mikel and I meant it to be, coming full circle and playing music for adults again. We regret it took so long, but hey, isn't Pulp just now back together?"

True. In fact, a new Pulp album just hit the top of the British play charts for the first time in 27 years, according to the BBC.

"So Much" is an interesting choice for a Love Riot revival release. It was on the shelf for years, not a title I recognized. It's a song about the confusion and pain that comes with love on the rocks; the video is smartly produced and speaks to anyone who experienced heartache from a relationship, which is just about everybody.

“We wrote that song in 1999,” says Mathews. “I wrote the lyrics and Mikel and I wrote the music. ‘So Much’ was actually one of six songs we wrote back then and recorded. We did a soft release, making a CD available to anyone who sent in \$5. We called it No. 5 and I handmade the CD covers and burned the CDs at home. I don’t remember how many actual orders came in before I decided to stop performing and put the band on hiatus. Maybe there’s 25 out there.”

The secret Love Riot reunion project has been underway for several months. The plan is to release a new album in the fall and return to some live performances.

“We’ve been gathering in Young Ron’s basement,” says Mathews. “He’s got a great set-up because he’s never stopped playing, and his son Philip is also a musician with his own band, so we’re sharing amps. Philip is a much better guitarist than I am.

“There was a learning curve for most of us, as we started sifting through the Love Riot catalogue. I will be recording five or six new songs next month. . . . I certainly don’t want to live in the past.”

But the past includes many great songs — “Long Way Home” and “Find Me There” are personal favorites — though Mathews says there are some titles from the 1990s that won’t make her playlist.

“Even ‘Satisfied’ seems too saccharin to me now, even though it’s a lovely love song,” she says. “It’s interesting seeing what makes sense in our older lives. Thankfully, many of our songs still hold up.

“Our goal is to add the unreleased songs to the new songs and put an album out called ‘Better Now.’ That’s the title of one of the new songs I’ve brought to the band, and it does seem right for now. The chorus reads: ‘They say time is a fleeting thing and nothing lasts forever. I’m a little tired, a little bit mean, but I know better. . . . I know ‘Better Now.’”