

Dusting 'Em Off: Lush – Lovelife

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Lush's third and final album, *Lovelife*, turns 16 this year. A sixteenth birthday is admittedly an unusual time to revisit an album, as tradition dictates that such occasions be reserved for anniversaries divisible by five, but *Lovelife* is one of those albums that has and will likely continue to remain uncelebrated and forgotten on its milestone anniversaries. Sure, Lush still retains a dedicated, loyal following and continues to gain new fans, but how often do they appear in critics' "top albums and songs of the '90s" lists? Not often enough.

One of the guarantees in the world of music journalism is that any discussion of the history and relevance of

shoegaze will inevitably focus on how Cocteau Twins and The Jesus and Mary Chain pioneered the shimmering style, while My Bloody Valentine perfected it. Sometimes, Slowdive and Ride will be included, but Lush will likely earn a passing reference at best. Despite generally positive reviews and a commercial viability that found the London quartet playing television shows everywhere and successfully touring American cities other British bands of the '90s never dared to tread, Lush has seemingly been forgotten or omitted for consideration as one of the shoegaze greats. This diminished legacy is at least partly because *Lovelife* is when Lush allegedly “went pop.”

“Ladykillers” opens *Lovelife* with an attention-seizing circular melody and spunky vocals from Miki Berenyi that are no longer floating along in a sea of reverb. Confidently at the forefront, Berenyi eviscerates Anthony Kiedis, Matt Sharp, and men with transparent agendas and dubious attitudes towards women everywhere with an infectiously sarcastic wit. It’s what would have been hyped as a girl power anthem had it been released a couple years later.

Driving the point home that Lush is too confident and extroverted to be content with ethereal drifting and effects pedal-fixating are spirited power pop anthems “Heavenly Nobodies” and chart hit “Single Girl”. The sublimely sweet “500” is probably the finest ode to a car of the era and a bona fide 90’s staple. Pulp hero Jarvis Cocker guests on “Ciao!”, which is enough to make the song a fascinating novelty at the very least. Here, Cocker and Berenyi channel Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazelwood as they go back and forth, each one-upping the other’s “I’m so much better off without you, so fuck you” sentiment. This death-of-a-relationship celebration is a potent anti-love song that’s especially cathartic for anyone who’s ever needed convincing that they were more over a former flame than they actually were.

Aside from the earworms, Lush is still in touch with their roots on *Lovelife*. “Tralala” and “Last Night” capture that haunting, dreamy ambience that made the arrangements on *Spooky* so stellar, while enveloping it with layers of mystery and trippy sensuality. Yet, the general consensus is that Lush ran away from shoegaze in favor of Britpop on *Lovelife*.

Since shoegaze and dream pop had been on the decline for a few years, some critics and fans have dismissed *Lovelife* as a case of bandwagon-jumping. In the mid-90’s, the infamous war between Oasis and Blur dominated the media and the charts, Pulp achieved superstar status after a legendary headlining performance at Glastonbury, Ocean Color Scene, The Boo Radleys, and other second-generation acts of the scene were on the rise. In short, it was the peak of Britpop. Although Lush never set out to make a such a record, its touch persists throughout the album. As the dominant style of the time, it was inevitably going to serve as one of the largest wells of non-retro influence for a forward-seeking band to draw upon. Even if they had deliberately shifted gears to fit the times, is that so wrong? M83 has been increasingly dialing back the shoegaze stylings and scored a crossover hit with “Midnight City”, yet there’s nary an accusation of jumping onto the idealized-vision-of-the-’80s synthpop bandwagon, and such acts are hotter than ever. Rather, *Hurry Up, We’re Dreaming* is nearly universally acclaimed for its grand ambition.

Pulp got to ride the Britpop wave because they had some anthemic and unabashedly English tunes filled with hooks at exactly the right time. However, once they released the bleak, anti-catchy *This Is Hardcore* in 1998, it became apparent that their blend of glam, disco, and post-punk was always fundamentally different from the sound traditionally associated with the genre, such as that of Oasis, Supergrass, and Blur. The history of Lush parallels this rise and subsequent shattering of illusion. Yes, Lush’s jangly sound on their debut album *Spooky* was brought to life in part by none other than producer Robin Guthrie, but even then the band clearly had a poppier side. Songs such as “Superblast!” and *Split*’s “Hypocrite” are as purely pop as any of the singles from *Lovelife*. The fact that the band’s sound shifted on *Lovelife* is indisputable, but it’s just not that drastic of a change since Lush was always more than just a purely shoegaze outfit.

Back in 2010, Graham Bendel of The Quietus [argued](#) that Lush is not only just as deserving as My Bloody Valentine of shoegaze legend status, but that they are an even better band. One aspect of Lush that Bendel skipped in his compelling case is the significance of *Lovelife*. The understated legacy of Lush seems to signal the danger of turning away from shoegaze, yet artists that have been similarly labeled in recent years, such as M83, Asobi Seksu, and School of Seven Bells, continue to move on and evolve. Like My Bloody Valentine’s failed, costly attempts to follow-

up *Loveless*, the stylistic shift of Lush indicates that the genre is one in which an artist can sound fresh for a limited time only.

Would My Bloody Valentine still be held with the same mythical status had they followed-up *Loveless* with that reported jungle music experiment or “gone pop?” It’s doubtful. Perhaps what has changed over the past 16 years is that “pop” is no longer considered such a dirty word. Rather than relegated to guilty pleasure status or dismissed as a symbol of artifice and pandering, the value of a good hook is more widely appreciated by even the most jaded of music consumers. Whether it’s ethereal or anthemic, the sound of Lush is an irresistible one, and *Lovelife* deserves a reexamination.