

The 50 Best Shoegaze Albums of All Time

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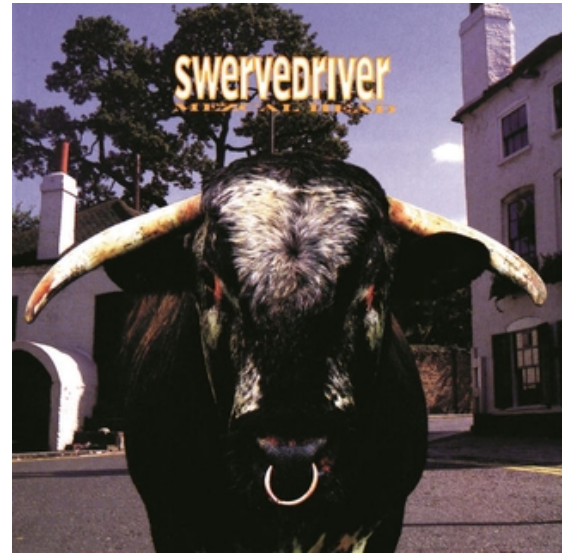
- Creation
- [Swervedriver](#)

Mezcal Head

1993

10

For all its trademark wistfulness and ethereality, shoegaze can rock, too. [Swervedriver](#)'s sophomore album, *Mezcal Head*, stands as a testament to the genre's occasional bursts of hell-raising extroversion. Released in 1993, the record builds on the dynamism and forcefulness of 1991's *Raise*; frontman [Adam Franklin](#) keeps all the velocity and volume, only he spikes things with even greater pop hooks and a more dexterous sense of songwriting. "Duel" flirts with the alt-rock bounce of [Sugar](#) even as it recalls the gargantuan riffage of *Isn't Anything*-era [My Bloody Valentine](#). "Last Train to Satansville" even sports a touch of surf. That's not to say the album isn't capable of dreaminess, as in the delicate touch of "Duress." Even then, though, Franklin's vocals stalk the foreground, smooth and clear, with an edge of menace. With *Mezcal Head*, Swervedriver brilliantly make the point that shoegaze, despite its name and reputation, doesn't have to be bashful. —Jason Heller



Listen: [Swervedriver: "Duel"](#)

- Fontana
- [Catherine Wheel](#)

Chrome

1993

9

For their second album, [Catherine Wheel](#) hired the [Pixies](#)' and [Throwing Muses](#)' mastermind, Gil Norton, as a producer. It's a considerably more focused record, both in songwriting and the visibility of its instrumentation; Norton sharpens what *Ferment* intentionally blurred, dragging a whirling shoegaze design around cleaner guitar tones and Rob Dickinson's honeyed vocals. Every chord on *Chrome* is a crisp, metallic clang trapped in a halo of hazy and seductive noise, a membrane through which the individual notes branch like nerves.



Few rock records sound like this; there are only a few songs on [Teenage Fanclub](#)'s *Bandwagonesque* and [Sugar](#)'s *Copper Blue* that resemble *Chrome*'s gentle, blushing form of aggression, which generates songs as harsh and

menacing as the title track and songs as celestial and full of dread as “Fripp.” Where many shoegaze bands would resign themselves to 2-3 monochromatic notes, Dickinson’s vocal melodies are dynamic, vivid, and exhibit an astral quality; they burn, shimmer, and glow against these songs. It’s as if *Chrome* were imported from another history of alt-rock, one more textured and romantic, where it sits deservedly atop the pile. –Brad Nelson

Listen: [Catherine Wheel: “Fripp”](#)

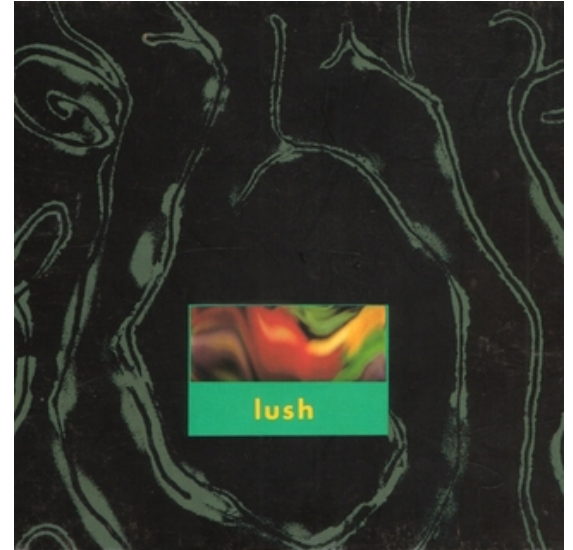
- 4AD
- [Lush](#)

Gala

1990

8

As foundational documents of shoegaze, the songs on [Gala](#) are pretty key, but they cede to a larger point: [Lush](#) were a great band from the start. Singer/guitarists Miki Berenyi and Emma Anderson were longtime friends who formed the group after meeting drummer Chris Acland at North London Polytechnic, then added Steve Rippon on bass. 4AD’s Ivo Watts-Russell took a shine to them and, over the course of 1989 and 1990, the band released three individual EPs, collected after as this record.



Lush were spiky, snarky, and not apt to suffer fools gladly, as *Gala* songs like “Bitter” and “Leaves Me Cold” underscore on matters personal and passionate. That Berenyi and Anderson sung these with sweet individual and harmony performances, adding in odd time signatures and eccentric flourishes, was even better: The two versions of “Thoughtforms” alone, from two consecutive EPs, demonstrate how quickly they learned to make their work even more distinct. From the early standout “Sweetness and Light” to the swooping beauty of “De-Luxe” to the enjoyable romp through Abba’s “Hey Hey Helen,” *Gala* is one continued win. –Ned Raggett

Listen: [Lush: “Sweetness and Light”](#)

- Creation

- [Slowdive](#)

Just for a Day

1991

7

At the time of its release, [Slowdive](#)'s full-length debut was seen almost as a comedown by some after their string of raucous earlier EPs. But time has not only vindicated *Just for a Day*, it's revealed it to be a crucial shoegaze template—something easily heard in electrogaze performers, post-rock bands, black metal acts, and anyone with a taste for majestic, stately, and moody-as-hell compositions.



The young UK quintet's love for the gothier side of things was clearly evident in their [Siouxsie and the Banshees](#)-inspired name, and their sonic echoes of early '80s [Cure](#) and [New Order](#). But the genteel, sighing flow of [Neil Halstead](#) and [Rachel Goswell](#)'s vocals, the slow burn combination of their guitars meeting Christian Savill's, and the rolling punch of the Nick Chaplin/Simon Scott rhythm section were its own beguiling beast. Starting with the cello-touched "Spanish Air" and finishing on the dramatic "Primal," and with stellar numbers like "Waves" and "Ballad of Sister Sue" along the way, they create music that constantly flows over a cliff into a deep, distant ocean. As for "Catch the Breeze," especially with its rising chorus and massive coda, almost no other song so perfectly sums up what shoegaze is at its core. —Ned Raggett

Listen: [Slowdive: "Catch the Breeze"](#)

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- Hut
 - Vernon Yard
 - [The Verve](#)

A Storm in Heaven

1993

6

[Verve](#) frontman [Richard Ashcroft](#) never really fit the wallflower-of-sound shoegaze mold. He was too brash, too pretty, too magnetizing. Even when his band started out in the early '90s, years before the [Rolling Stones](#)-pilfering "[Bitter Sweet Symphony](#)" made them an international concern, he was peacocking like a cosmic [Mick Jagger](#) onstage, barefoot and blaring. But back then, his psychedelic philosophies were perfectly counteracted by Nick McCabe's six-string impressionism; McCabe gave Ashcroft's ambitions a soul to search for.



The guitarist's work on the Verve's perfectly titled debut album *A Storm in Heaven* offers color and clarity to Ashcroft's grand pronouncements, his tone—gentle as a butterfly one minute, squalling like the sea the next—providing the sort of nuance his singer could never quite pull off. Produced by UK vet John Leckie, whose credits

include engineering for [Pink Floyd](#) in the '70s and steering [Radiohead](#) toward *The Bends*, the album lives in that liminal state between jam and song, spontaneity and structure. It's not calculating, but it never veers into sheer indulgence, either. It breathes beauty. The Verve would go onto make anthems for millions, but they never again sounded this whole. –Ryan Dombal

Listen: [The Verve: "Slide Away"](#)

- [Creation](#)
- [Ride](#)

Going Blank Again

1992

5

[Ride](#)'s second studio album represents the commercial peak of shoegaze, a glorious explosion of populist noise that proves how utterly satisfying distorted guitars can be when allied with [Byrds](#)-ian harmonies, a drummer at the top of his [Keith Moon](#)-goes-indie game, and bass lines you can hum in the shower. *Going Blank Again* sounds like someone has taken the wistful charm of [Ride](#)'s debut album *Nowhere*, fed it three solid meals, and packed it off to finishing school to be sharpened within an inch of its life. It's tight, audacious, and supremely confident.



The album went Top Five in the UK, driven by the singles "Leave Them All Behind"—a monstrously intrepid, eight-minute slice of thrilling guitars—and the hook-filled "Twisterella." Crucially, *Going Blank Again* manages all this without losing any of [Ride](#)'s innate charm; nothing here sounds stretched in the pursuit of commercialism, though [Ride](#) would plumb those depths on their next two albums. Instead, *Going Blank Again* feels like the logical destination of the band, the peak of noise and melody they had been moving towards since their first hazy demos. – Ben Cardew

Listen: [Ride: "Leave Them All Behind"](#)

- [Creation](#)

- [My Bloody Valentine](#)

Isn't Anything

1988

4

Isn't Anything was the moment everything changed, the moment a jangly, C86-ish guitar act from Ireland went into the studio and birthed shoegaze out of their languorous, sleep-deprived minds. [My Bloody Valentine](#)'s *You Made Me Realise* EP, released three months before *Isn't Anything*, may have hinted at the departure that the band was about to take, but on their debut full-length, you can actually hear the sands shift beneath their feet, as largely straightforward noise-rock numbers like "Sueisfine" or "(When You Wake) You're Still in a Dream" give way to the transcendent, hallucinatory pieces "All I Need" and "Several Girls Galore." The former is a warm, comforting smudge of a song that seems to recreate the sound of a rock concert from within a mother's womb; the latter is a nightmarish, stop-start drone that suggests music itself is dying a painful death.

Songs like these helped *Isn't Anything* change the idea of how a guitar could sound, but the album offers more than that. Buried beneath the guitar soup are troves of mournful melodies, as well as drums that—on "Soft as Snow (But Warm Inside)"—reflect [Kevin Shields](#)' love of hip-hop. Even today, it resembles little else in the guitar-rock canon. — Ben Cardew

Listen: [My Bloody Valentine: "Several Girls Galore"](#)

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- [Creation](#)
 - [Ride](#)

Nowhere

1990

3

[Ride](#) were barely out of their teens when, in the summer of 1990, they finished recording their debut album. Accordingly, *Nowhere* reflects much of the indie environment that reverberated around them, including [Sonic Youth](#)'s distorted meltdowns, [the Stone Roses](#)' jangly psychedelia, and the chiming nightscapes of [the Cure](#)'s *Disintegration*—not to mention a huge dose of inspiration from Ride's Creation Records labelmates [My Bloody Valentine](#). But unlike MBV, who were in the midst of resequencing the DNA of guitar-centric indie rock, *Nowhere* harbors a deep strain of classic-rock reverence, from the [Paul McCartney](#)-esque bassline of "Seagull" to the "When the Levee Breaks"-like stomp of "Dreams Burn Down." Mix in "Vapour Trail," the disc's melancholy, violin- and cello-laced anthem to post-adolescent romanticism, and *Nowhere* stands elegantly poised between pop traditionalism, gently devastating songwriting, choirboy harmonies, and the most harrowing sonic overdoses in shoegaze. —Jason Heller



Listen: [Ride: "Seagull"](#)

- Creation
- [Slowdive](#)

Souvlaki

1993

2

[Slowdive](#)'s second album was marked by more than its share of misfortune, both in creation and reception. The band ditched their original batch of sessions to start over again, and the album debuted in mid-1993, the exact moment of the UK press' firm backlash against anything shoegaze. On top of that, there was comically bad handling on the part of the group's American label, including a heavily delayed release. But from a distance, [Souvlaki](#) can be seen and heard clearly for what it is: the rare sophomore effort that not only maintains the quality of a great debut but also avoids simply repeating its sound. The evanescent vocals of [Just for a Day](#) give way to new clarity in [Neil Halstead](#) and [Rachel Goswell](#)'s singing and lyrics (the trading of sections in "Machine Gun" being one highlight of many). Similarly, their striking blend of feedback and texture serves more straightforward arrangements on songs like "40 Days" and the majestic "When the Sun Hits." "Souvlaki Space Station" finds a way to bring in the clatter and wooze of dub, while "Dagger" concludes the album on a [Lee Hazlewood](#)-like hushed intensity. All this plus not one, but two, collaborations with [Brian Eno](#). –Ned Raggett



Listen: [Slowdive: "When the Sun Hits"](#)

- Creation
- [My Bloody Valentine](#)

Loveless

1991

1

Sometime last year, the legally hazy industry of fan-made merchandise paid tribute to [Loveless](#) with a product that captured its essence: [a duvet cover printed with its artwork](#). It was a perfect (and perhaps accidental) union, this prospect of physically curling up inside the album's magenta-tinted blanket of noise.

Not that we haven't already spent years talking up [Loveless](#) and its comforts. Hyperbolic discussions of the album predated its release, even, as the recording process stretched out over two years' worth of sessions at 19 studios, ultimately involving something like [45 engineers](#). During that time, bands inspired by [Isn't Anything](#) started putting out their first albums, so the pressure was on for [My Bloody Valentine](#) to prove they couldn't be replicated. But the real miracle of [Loveless](#) has always been how its excruciating birth resulted in music with such



visceral impact. Fixating on [Kevin Shields](#)' tremolo-reliant, feedback-sampling technical prowess is a [proud tradition](#), but it can undersell the sensory swaddling of listening to these songs.

Loveless is a guided meditation on love and its absence that conjures an emotional reality instead of merely depicting one. At the album's core is a succession of super-sweet melodies filtered through the softly psychedelic subjectivity of a mind engulfed by thirst. Shields' bent notes are that introspection made sonic, their familiar guitar sounds so dramatically distorted, you might start to suspect that it's your ears twisting them. The [glide guitar](#) on opening track "Only Shallow" contains the same creeping violence as the onset of passion; "Loomer," which comes next, speeds into the childhood origins of longing.

The album isn't just romantic, though. It's also Romantic in the 19th century sense, a work so grand that it connects us to the limitless universe and reminds us how small we are as individuals within it. Coleridge and Turner used nature to access the infinite, but the internal landscape Shields locates is just as expansive. The radical inclusiveness of these songs even evades the specificity of gender by mixing Shields' and Bilinda Butcher's vocals into androgynous foam on soaring monuments to the lover's gaze like "When You Sleep." Just audible beneath the halo of fuzz that surrounds "Sometimes" are lyrics that express a frustration we've all felt: "I don't know how you could not love me now." *Loveless* is the defining statement of shoegaze because it discovered, in layered guitar sounds and submerged singing, a language that serenely overwhelms as it distills the universal human experience.
—Judy Berman

Listen: [My Bloody Valentine: "Sometimes"](#)

Contributors: *Stacey Anderson, Judy Berman, Stuart Berman, Ben Cardew, Ian Cohen, Cameron Cook, Ryan Dombal, Stephen Thomas Erlewine, Jason Heller, Jesse Jarnow, Paula Mejia, Quinn Moreland, Brad Nelson, Ned Raggett, Mark Richardson, Ryan Schreiber*