

A Mad Love: An Interview With Lush John Freeman , November 30th, 2015 13:23

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Seminal shoegazers Lush are back and armed with an EP of new material and a UK tour in 2016. John Freeman speaks to Miki Berenyi, Emma Anderson and Phil King about why the timing was finally right for a reunion



In March 1990, I travelled across the Pennines to watch Lush play a show at Sheffield University. I'd already seen the band several times in the previous months, such was my fanatical devotion to the layered shoegaze noise of their debut mini-album, *Scar*, and the mighty, Robin Guthrie-produced *Mad Love* EP.

Back then, the Lush line-up was vocalist/guitarist Miki Berenyi, guitarist Emma Anderson, bassist Steve Rippon (who was replaced by Phil King in 1992) and Chris Acland on drums. I was besotted – from the twisting stab of 'De-Luxe', the controlled thrash of 'Downer' or the heady swirl of 'Thoughtforms', Lush seemed like the perfect creation, right down to the beautiful Vaughan Oliver v23 artwork.

At the Sheffield gig, with stage times running late and Lush only part way through their set, I realised I had a choice to make. Either leave before the end to catch the last train home, or watch the entire set and take my chances on a park bench until first light. I decided to stay and watch my new favourite band and cemented the choice by spending my last cash on a tour t-shirt. Luckily for me, al fresco sleep was averted - I bumped into an old school friend outside the gig and crashed on his living room floor with the newly acquired t-shirt as a tiny blanket.

However, 25 years on, Lush remain the only band for whom I've ever contemplated the notion of sleeping rough. The announcement a few weeks ago that that Lush - Miki, Emma and Phil would be joined by Justin Welch on drums (Acland died in tragic circumstances in 1996) - had reformed and we're playing UK shows in 2016 was met with fist pumps of delight.

Moreover, the news got even better. Unlike some of their recently reformed peers, (the genre grouping was always a lazy one) such as Ride and Slowdive, Lush were returning with new music. As well as a gorgeous 4AD reissue of the vinyl version of their 2001 compilation *Ciao! Best Of Lush*, Lush are also due to release an EP of brand new material in early 2016.

What's more, having been given the chance of a sneak preview, I can confirm that the new EP is good. In fact, it is very good. It's grown-up Lush; with Emma's twisting chord structures and Miki's otherworldly vocal still as affecting two decades on. The new EP was produced by Ladytron's Daniel Hunt (himself a huge Lush fan) and Jim Abbiss - he of Arctic Monkeys, Kasabian and Adele's *19* and *21* fame. Its four tracks cover the opaque pop typical of Lush's best work, as well as a shimmering ballad replete with strings and brass and beautiful eulogy to Chris Acland. On first listen, I shed joyful tears as the final bars faded.

However, the original Lush story didn't have a happy ending. The band released three full-length studio albums during a four-year period (1992's *Spooky*, 1994's *Split* and *Lovelife* in 1996) and while each one steadily increased sales, a relentless touring schedule, especially in America, took a heavy toll. By October 1996, Emma had had enough and called a meeting with Phil and Miki (Chris was at his parent's house in the Lake District and wasn't aware of developments) to tell them she wanted to leave the band. A few days later, Chris took his own life. Lush never played another gig and officially disbanded in 1998.

In reflecting on the ensuing two decades, Lush's legacy seems hamstrung by a mixture of mischievous revisionism and retrospective musical snobbery. Like my colleague Graham Bendel - [in his 2010 article for tQ](#) - I also think that, at their best, Lush produced work as good as anything by the über-vaunted My Bloody Valentine, and way better than the shoegazing poster children Ride and Slowdive or the bewildering average Chapterhouse. Lush always sought to evolve, and were always looking to make that most elusive of art forms - intelligent pop music. The new material only serves to remind just how close they got to that particular sonic nirvana.

I meet up with Miki and Emma in a central London pub, having Skyped the previous day with Phil, who is back home in Portugal after returning from a recent tour as the bassist in The Jesus And Mary Chain. Miki is on her lunch break (she works as a production editor); while Emma has taken the day off from her bookkeeping job.

After some cursory pleasantries about the apocalyptic London rain and a gentle reminisce about local Camden hostelries, I recall my Sheffield gig anecdote. While we all agree that the story would have more dramatic if I had slept rough and been eaten by squirrels, Miki and Emma are kind enough to tell me "it's the thought that counts." Some stories need a happy ending.

What are your earliest memories of Lush?

Phil King: I saw a really early show in the basement of a Hampstead pub. I remember going down a spiral staircase and hearing lots of giggling in between songs. I liked them - they were good.

Miki Berenyi: My earliest memories probably involve nerves and faffing. I always think of a Pale Saints gig we did, when we knew [4AD's] Ivo [Watts-Russell] would be there. Pale Saints went on first and they were seamless. I'm not

even sure they had gaps between the songs. They were so polished and then we came on and were a fucking shambles. I remember thinking, "Well, that's that - we have no chance." Therefore, the first memories are of incompetence.

Emma Anderson: Pale Saints had probably done their incompetent, shambling gigs by that point. I remember an EMI publishing guy. He had a ponytail and a coke habit - this was the late 80s. He actually said to me, "Emma, if I were you, I would just give up as Lush are really, really bad and you are just making a fool of yourself."

But you must have predominantly fond memories of Lush as a band?

MB: Yes – and those early days were really good fun. We weren't a band that had some sort of game plan, or some massive vision. It was just one little step at a time and each little step was a joy, be it recruiting [original singer] Meriel [Barham], Chris and Steve to the band, or writing a song or our first tour in the back of a van. We'd read about some bands who wanted to be playing Wembley Stadium, but we were never like that. We just enjoyed getting to the next stage, which was more about being better musically. That said, signing to 4AD was amazing and a real validation - as we had previously been thought of as nice enough people but fairly unwatchable - and we were proud of every record we made.

So fast-forwarding to 1996 and the demise of Lush, would the over-simple diagnosis be that the split was down to record company pressure to 'break America'?

PK: Yes. America was always the place that we could rely on to go back and tour. However, in that last year, we were being shoved back to do tours with unsuitable bands such as Gin Blossoms. The label were trying to take us to the next level and ended up breaking up the band. It is a cliché about British bands going to America and being broken by the experience but it happened that year.

There was an infamous meeting between the three of you, during which Emma revealed she wanted to leave the band. What are your memories of that time?

MB: I remember after we came back from that last US tour. We were at a Suede gig and I just felt Emma was avoiding me. I knew something was up. Therefore, it wasn't an absolute bolt from the blue and I did think I would try to convince Emma to go on with it somehow, because I always felt that if I didn't have Lush then the idea of trying to form another band or having a solo career held no interest for me. I needed Lush more, in that respect.

EA: You get to the point where you think, "I should be enjoying this, I'm doing a job that a lot of people would quite envy and I fucking hate it." I remember sitting in a hotel room in Los Angeles and crying. I'd been there four times that year. No one was listening to us and nobody cared. It was a nightmare. I did feel Lush could carry on without me. I do remember feeling guilty, but then I thought that Bernard Butler had left Suede and they'd carried on. It wasn't a "fuck them" kind of decision. However, when you are that unhappy, you just want out. Ivo had gone, amongst others, and it felt like we were on a raft in the middle of the ocean. I felt very alone and we weren't even communicating properly within the band. They were pretty dark times. Then we heard the news about Chris about three days after that meeting. Chris was back in the Lake District and he didn't know about my decision, which I think needs to be made clear.

If I can ask about Chris, I assume that after he died there was no chance of the band continuing?

MB: When Chris died, we couldn't think of anything else. It completely wiped everyone out. It was the worst thing that had ever happened in my life. For me, I'd been friends with him at North London Polytechnic and I'd gone out with him for a while, so we'd been very close and it was awful that I didn't have any inkling. None. It's that terrible thing where you comb over the past for something you should have spotted. There were no clues. Previously, I'd have said he wasn't that kind of person. I think we've tried a million hooks to explain why, but none of them rings true. When it happened, for me that was it. I didn't want anything to do with the music industry. I wanted to get as far away from it as possible.

Can I ask you about Lush's legacy? My sense, as a fan, is that your music never quite got the credit it deserved. Would you agree?

EA: We did feel that we weren't taken seriously in this country as songwriters and musicians. The press was different back then - two weekly tabloids that had to fill column inches each week and a lot of it was bollocks. Now, it's nice because people are talking about the music.

PK: Without naming names, many other groups were into self-mythologizing. Lush never were about that. In fact, Lush were about popping the balloon of pomposity, which maybe worked against us in some ways. We were seen going out in London, enjoying ourselves, which somehow translated as us not taking our music seriously enough. However, we also had serious records in our collections; we just didn't need to wave them about. If you look at the artist's songs Lush covered, they include Dennis Wilson ['Lady'] and Vashti Bunyan [I'd Like To Walk Around In Your Mind']. Vashti once told me that was the first time she ever received any money for one of her songs.

On the back of that, when did you start thinking about reforming and how easy was the decision?

MB: We first started talking about it in 2007, but the idea fizzled out. I remember when we first started talking about it, I felt I would really, really need convincing, given that the end of the band was about a very tight, close friendship that had become fractured. When you don't have that friendship at the core of a band, it is really hard. I was worried that it might happen again for different reasons. We have very different lives. I have kids, other people have jobs and we lead very separate lives. I didn't know how it could work when we have all these different pressures. Plus, it will be a lot of work. There is no point in reforming for three or four gigs. We always felt that if it was going to happen, it had to be a little more complete than just a couple of gigs. It will take a lot of sacrifices to make it happen and I don't think it was feasible until this point.

Both Ride and Slowdive – bands you were previously lumped together with – have had seemingly successful reunion tours. Did this play into your decision to reform now?

MB: I think the Slowdive reunion did influence me. They did brilliantly and they got great feedback. Then, there is the concept of having a legacy – and us realising that what we did back then has some value now. There has to be a good reason to reform. I think the pull is as important as the push – the idea that people will want to hear it and there is interest. The other thing for me is that I am going to be 50 soon. Therefore, there is a 'last chance' aspect to this. Lush was a massive part of our lives and I haven't done anything in music since. If I am ever going to be involved in music again, I am not going to do anything on my own, so a Lush reunion represents a last chance.

PK: I would also say that Ride have come back and they are even better than before. They are older, more professional, with a better PA and lighting, so you would hope that reflects in their shows. Hopefully, that will be the same for us.

Are there any risks attached to reforming? Does anything scare you about getting back together?

MB: Well, it scares me that we haven't played in 20 years. Moreover, it is not with Chris, it is with Justin, who is great, but there is an emotional aspect to that as well. Also, I want it to be really good and it will take a huge amount of work. There is a huge attention to detail on everything, from the EP to the 4AD box set, which Emma has been heavily involved in.

So, turning to the EP, how much of the decision to reform was based on having new music?

EA: It was really important. The new music aspect really excited me, as I love making and writing music. Also, having new music puts a completely different slant on a comeback.

PK: Also, I think the EP carries on from where we left off. Obviously, I am biased, but when Emma sent me the demos and I heard the tunes, I immediately knew it was Lush. There is a very definable sound.

I am a complete non-musician, so this is probably a stupid question, but how easy was it for you to switch back into Lush songwriting mode after almost 20 years?

MB: Well, the songs come out as Lush songs because that's who we are. We aren't musical virtuosos and I haven't gone off for the last 20 years and learned to play funk and want to introduce a slap bass to Lush's music. We have always wrote within our limits and to what is achievable. Those elements stay the same. And, while I don't think you can compare what was on [1990 compilation album] *Gala* to what is on the new EP, there are those odd, dissonant movements in Emma's writing that are still there.

Miki, how did you approach the lyric writing? How different was your 'source material' compared to 20 years ago?

MB: It was hard for me to write lyrics. The first song I wrote was about Chris, as I had to begin with the song about him. Then, in trying to write others songs I would go back, listen to Lush, and try to remember how I had done it in the past. It is different as it is 20 years on. I think our songs were often personal and had to have an emotional power to them. I cannot write a political song, as I don't have that really straightforward vision. I might write a "fuck you" song but there will always be some balancing statement like, "I know it was my fault as well" in there somewhere. The lyrics always had to be relevant and real. It was hard to get back to something that would be relevant and real to me now. Back then, I mined my childhood because at the time that was really relevant, but that is long gone. I am a mother et cetera, and that is a completely new perspective for me to right from and it is hard not to sound mawkish or even smug.

The new EP was produced by Ladytron's Daniel Hunt and Jim Abbiss, who is a pretty big name. How did that come about?

EA: I used to work for Ladytron's management, so I met Danny back then and we became friends. I never forget the first time I worked in the office and we all went to the pub, and he sat next to me and asked, "Are you Emma Anderson from Lush?" It turns out he was a massive Lush fan when he was about 15. He told me that he had posters of me on his wall and that Ladytron "only existed because of Lush." I lost contact with him for a few years, but when we were thinking about making a new record, our manager was coming up with ideas for producers. We wanted someone who understood something about the band. I got in touch with Danny via Facebook and asked him if he knew who might be good to produce Lush. He immediately put himself forward. Jim Abbiss, who had produced the Ladytron album *The Witching Hour* is friends with Danny and they had always had an idea that they would work on something together one day. It was probably a drunken chat. So, Jim got involved, which was exciting.

Apologies in advance for the job interview-style question, but, from the perspective of the reunion, what would success look like?

MB: To see happy, smiling faces all round. Including us. Primarily us. I want the gigs to go more than well. We are already really happy with the EP. I was so fucking nervous. I had visions of going into the studio and standing in some vocal booth and looking at people with their head in their hands when I started singing. I did the vocal on one of the new songs and Jim was like "I think that's great." I thought "really?" – I was very relieved.

What do your kids think about Lush being back together?

EA: My daughter couldn't be less interested. She doesn't like it, because Lush makes me "on my emails."

MB: They are intrigued. However, my daughter just wants to know whether we will be playing any festivals with bands that she actually likes.

Finally, how do you feel about the reaction to the news you have reformed? Didn't the Roundhouse show sell out within a day?

EA: We were in the studio tweaking the mixes on the day the Roundhouse gig went on sale. I couldn't believe when it sold out in six hours and we had to put the other show up on sale.

PK: I remember playing with the Mary Chain at the Royal Festival Hall in 2007 and Kevin Shields joined us for an encore. We went for a drink and Kevin said to Emma and myself, "it was funny with Lush; it was like you just disappeared." That's what it felt like. We had just disappeared. That was frustrating about splitting up – we hadn't even done a proper farewell tour. The last time we played London, we played the Electric Ballroom. Now we have sold out the Roundhouse in six hours. It's amazing.

The re-released vinyl version of the compilation album Ciao! Best Of Lush is out now via 4AD. Lush play UK shows in Manchester and London in 2016. The new EP will be released in early 2016