

how to be a woman (in a band) with lush's miki berenyi

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We first spoke to Miki Berenyi in a pub outside the BBC Elstree studios back in March 96. She and the other three members of Lush were trading *Eastenders* and *Top Of The Pops* star sightings (it used to be on all year round, kids) and contemplating the fickle nature of the music business. 20 years on, the acclaimed shoegazers are back - with a new EP, *Blind Spot*, due out next month and two shows at London's Roundhouse to follow in May. So much for fickle.

While Lush, formed in 1988 by friends Miki and Emma Anderson, quite clearly were not the first band with female musicians to make it big (you only have to look at Berenyi's influences to see that there was "an entire landscape of women" that made her want to have a go), they still had some distance to travel in the fight against those that didn't take women seriously, particularly as musicians. From magazines that would agree to shoot the band on the proviso they'd wear bikinis to outright hostility from male bands that felt they spoiled the locker-room party - chauvinist and sexist attitudes came with the territory in a world of *Loaded*, ladettes and bassists whose names rhymed with Lalex Lames. Not that Berenyi ever put up with anything that. Like The Slits' Viv Albertine, who said, "I want boys to come and see us play and think I want to be part of that. Not 'They're pretty' or 'I want to fuck them' but 'I want to be in that gang, in that band'," she achieved it. And she's still achieving it all these years later. This is how.

Which female artists were you inspired by growing up?

Around the age of 11 I became completely obsessed with Blondie. Their music was brilliant and of course Debbie Harry was beautiful and iconic, but I loved her lyrics which were moving and funny and spirited. Anyone who manages to rhyme 'restaurant' with 'debutante' deserves credit in my book. Siouxsie and the Banshees were huge for me, too. I loved Siouxsie Sioux's fearless presence and drama. But in terms of actually being inspired to become a musician myself, there is an entire landscape of women that made me want to have a go. Chrissie Hynde, Poly Styrene, Poison Ivy (The Cramps), Gillian Gilbert (New Order), Pauline Murray (Penetration), Barbara Gogan (The Passions), Patricia Morrison (The Gun Club, Sisters of Mercy), Liz Fraser (Cocteau Twins), X-Mal Deutschland, The Throwing Muses... I can just go on and on and on...

What were attitudes towards women in music like at the time? How important was having a fellow player in Emma Anderson?

When we started the band, we were part of a close knit and thriving music scene. Half the people we knew were in bands, and a lot of them were women. Yes, you'd come up against the occasional sexist prick, but most of the men we knew were just as exasperated by that sort of attitude as the women. And signing to 4AD was the same - there were a lot of women on the label, both artists and staff, so sexism wasn't an issue. Everyone just wanted you to make good music!

It got more complicated as we became more successful and had to venture out of these safe zones, because some areas of the music business were very male dominated and you came up against a lot of individuals who had been attracted to working in it for that very reason. Any threat to their boys club, where girls were not there purely to provide backing vocals or suck someone's cock, spoiled the locker-room party, so they'd bully and dismiss you in the hope that you'd just give up and go away. The constant drip-drip of comments targeted at your gender and character becomes incredibly wearing, and it's hard to have the confidence to be creative and put your heart and soul into your music when you know that people don't want to give it a fair hearing but will jump on any element they can mine for a sneery slag-off.

So yes, it was important for me that Emma, as a fellow female, was in the band, but it was just as important to have Chris and Phil (and before that, Steve) to stand with us against that crap.

I wanted to ask about your meeting Anthony Kiedis at Lollapalooza and how it went on to inspire the single

Ladykillers... What was the story behind that and what were people's reactions to the song?

I always feel a bit shabby having a go at Anthony because he's not the worst person in the world for god's sake and is just one of three people who fed into the lyrics for *Ladykillers* -- not to mention the millions of like-minded blokes on the planet who behave in exactly the same way! He was friendly and chatty and attentive, and we got along fine, but I got the impression after a while that it was all some kind of charm offensive. I remember a woman from the record company turned up during the tour and she was eulogising about how Anthony remembered her birthday and her favourite food and where she'd gone to college etc etc even though they had only met once months and months ago, and she was so dazzled by this and it made me think - Oh, I get it. This is his shtick - he wows the ladies by using these tricks to collect acolytes for the Anthony Kiedis fan club. It's like those books that tell you how to manipulate women to get laid. And it's just really tiresome because you feel that all your entire conversation was a complete waste of time - it was all just a game with one unswerving aim and you were being conned.

I've had comments about *Ladykillers* from rather bruised men who tell me that it's hard enough to screw up your courage and chat up a woman you fancy without a song like this scything you down for your efforts. But that's not what this song is about. Chatting and flirting is a world away from hunting prey and using every weapon in your artillery to get it, from persistent one-track 'sexy' talk to playing you off other women to imply that you are all somehow fighting for attention. The song is pretty clear that it's a certain type of man, not all men, that pull these con tricks, and what makes it more irritating is that often us women fall for it and feel stupid when we do.

Also - guys, get over yourselves! Women have to live their lives to a constant soundtrack of lyrics that imply every man in the room has a divine right to honk their boobs or slide their hands into their pants at any moment they like, and they'll be grateful for the attention. The odd song where the girls get to roll their eyes and be a bit sneery about certain members of your gender isn't going to kill you.

Do you think men found it intimidating that you were in a band?

Possibly, but that would be their problem. If a man finds it intimidating that a woman plays music and writes songs, then he seriously has to question his preconceptions and expand his comfort zone!

Was it frustrating to be constantly grouped with other (dissimilar) female fronted acts?

Grouping together a load of bands, purely because they have women in them, is as absurd as grouping together bands just because they have men in them. I'm sure that many of the 'women in bands' features in the media were well intentioned, and meant to champion women's creativity. But they also had the unfortunate consequence of trapping you in a novelty niche - because 'normal' means blokes in bands - and making your gender the only thing worthy of discussion.

Yes, women have a different experience to men, and that may sometimes have some bearing on the way they write and perform, but gender is just one aspect of an artist, along with ethnicity, class, childhood, taste in music, etc etc.

Of course, you were later lumped in with the Britpop scene too...How did the attitudes towards women change with that? What did you think of the whole ladette thing, for instance?

Britpop was upbeat and irreverent and mainly I think a reaction against the grungy US rock scene that dominated at the time and was perceived to take itself rather too seriously. The attitudes to women didn't change with Britpop, which had lots of great bands and several that featured women, but they were set back massively by the advent of *Loaded*. James Brown launched the magazine to puncture the po-faced political correctness he felt was stifling men's freedom to enjoy their sexuality. The trouble is that for some men, 'fun' only comes at someone else's expense. Apparently, being a fully sexualised male requires women to exist primarily as wank fodder and superfluous décor.

James once suggested that Lush appear in the mag, but the proviso was that we would have to wear bikinis. So, basically, you can come to the party but only if you get your tits out. It was depressing how quickly people embraced treating women with this kind of disrespect and contempt.

'Ladette' was another bunch of patronizing bullshit packaged to look like a compliment. Basically, any woman who liked football, poker, beer, computer games or any other activity (wrongly) assumed to be exclusively of interest to men was perceived to only be doing so because she was desperate to ditch her loser circle (women) to hang out with the elite group (men) and parade herself as a male sexual fantasy (as per the Cool Girl rant in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*). It was nonsense.

Did you ever get any hassle from male Britpop groups?

Ah well, you may have seen my appearance in the BBC4 *Girl in a Band* doc where I mentioned Alex James biting my arse and thinking it was hilarious and something I was bound to enjoy (I didn't). There have always been blokes who believe they can grope women at will - it's just that before the success of *Loaded*, a lot more people would condemn it. Suddenly, it was a laugh to treat women like sex toys and if you objected, or stuck up for someone who objected, you were a killjoy and excluded. Believe me, Alex wasn't the only offender.

How do you think attitudes towards women in music have changed since you've been gone? Have you noticed a difference?

I was in a guitar shop in Denmark Street some months ago and everyone was incredibly friendly and keen to help. Back in the day, most (but not all) of these shops were staffed by blokes who assumed that if a woman walked in, they were either buying something for a boyfriend or needed a reed for an oboe.

The music business as a whole I think has become a lot more professional, so everyone involved is subject to the same laws regarding sexual harassment and discrimination as any other professional workplace. And there are now many more women working at all levels, which is really what changes attitudes. You can't make idiotic assumptions about women's lack of ability in male-dominated jobs (touring crew, musicians, managers, promoters, etc) if there are women actually doing those jobs and doing them well.

But I don't really know. I'm in an established band, and I can surround myself with the people I know and like to work with. I have no idea what kind of crap you have to deal with if you are starting from scratch. And I suspect the same attitudes prevail. One glance at the bigoted comments and vicious threats made on web forums make it pretty apparent that women are still up against the same bullshit.

What's the biggest issue still facing women in music today?

Women in bands still don't have the clout that men do. Solo artists seem to command more respect, and glamorous girl bands who do the singing and dancing thing can rule the airwaves, but I suspect one reason for this is because it's recognised that they can't simply be replaced by a man doing the same job. If you're a female drummer in a band, a lot of people will still believe that a man would do it better.

What advice would you give young women forming bands today?

As with any band, you have to look after each other because sometimes it's you against the world. And it's tough out there for girls. My daughter is 14 and had to move schools last year. She was being relentlessly bullied by a competitive little shit who was protected by his privilege and didn't like that a mere girl was his match in every way, so he made her life a misery. And she was beset by constant taunts from boys that that 'women belong in the kitchen' and girls are 'rubbish at everything'. And you have to be prepared for that kind of intolerance and hostility, and find a way to not let it crush you or ruin your enjoyment. On the plus side, creativity is liberating, cathartic and immensely rewarding. But fame is bollocks - it's all about the music.

Lush release the Blind Spot EP on 15 April through their own label, Edamame Records. The band play London's Roundhouse on 6 and 7 May and Manchester Academy on 25 November.