

# Interview with Lush's frontwoman Miki Berenyi

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It's a regular Tuesday night in everything but the fact that I am currently sat opposite Miki Berenyi, the returned frontwoman of Lush. After nearly a 20-year break, the 90s favourite indie kids make their return. Much has changed for the band in the interim: Elastica's Justin Welch replaces Chris Acland on drums after Acland committed suicide in 1996; Berenyi all but disappeared from the music scene to start a family and hold down a regular job. In spite of this, she remains the same at the core: she sips on white wine that she brought over, and intermittently takes a few drags on an e-cigarette.

When she speaks of how it feels to be back, Berenyi says it's 'really quite odd actually [...] I was losing sleep about having agreed to do this. I suddenly thought, "fuck, I haven't played in twenty years, this is going to be a disaster." And actually, it was really good to just go into the studio and sing and play guitar and think, "ok, I can still do this!"'

In spite of having been out of the game for so long, there is a clear sense of anticipation to play live again [I spoke to Berenyi before Lush's headline shows at the Roundhouse]. 'It's a bit weird cos we haven't played yet [...] I went on the radio and they were like "ooh so how's it going?" and all I can really talk about is rehearsals. I mean, I can talk about the EP a bit but even that isn't out yet.'

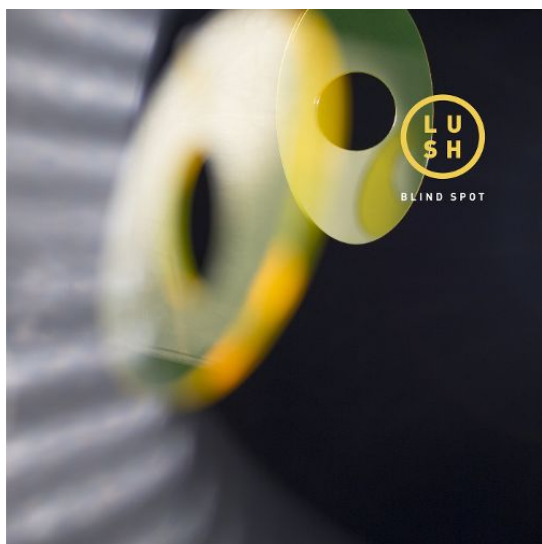


Image: Allmusic

In 2015, Lush started working on *Blind Spot*, a new EP with new material – a fresh continuation of where the band had gotten to in their last years. 'It's pretty much picking up where I left off [...] Although lyrically it was really difficult trying to get back into it, suddenly trying to write, thinking "ugh what did I used to write about? And what can I write about now? I can't write about the same things!" But actually, there is a bit of a pattern to it. [My lyrics] are a bit oblique, they are personal, they are of their kind.' She stops before ploughing on, 'I'm not suddenly coming back like "right, I'm gonna write songs about the Labour party." It doesn't work like that.'

It seems strange that after such a long hiatus, Lush would decide after all that they weren't quite finished with the music industry; everyone had assumed that they had hung up their guitars and called it a day. Not so. Berenyi says the reunion had been in the pipeline for as long as eight years, but practically just wouldn't have worked before now.

'I get a sabbatical after five years, so I've got an extra six weeks' holiday this year,' she explains. 'I'm not giving up my job. That's not gonna happen.' She has become used to the life of a civilian: 'If I could be at home, just open a door, play a gig and then come back and be at home, that would be great. Playing music, playing live and recording – great. But the rest of it is a fucking nightmare! It is a lot of hassle.'

For Miki, the separation from the music industry after Chris' death was total. 'I almost left completely. I haven't really followed music, I wasn't going to gigs and I haven't played.' She muses, 'I don't know how massively comfortable I ever was in that industry.' As a response to Chris Acland's death, everything music-related became a reminder. 'I'm sure it's the same for anyone who's lost someone, but for a while you sort of randomly burst into tears, and you think you're ready to go out and then you're not. The music industry is not really the place to do that. You know, you're at a gig and suddenly you're really upset and people are like "ooh dear!" So I just completely retreated from it, just cut off all ties. Chris' aunt trained me to become a sub-editor, and she said "ooh you should try and get work at the NME. That's where you should go cos you know that subject". And I wanted to go a million miles away from all of that. Totally turned my back on it, basically.'

So after what was a very conscious and decisive split from music, band business became secondary. It's more of a case of 'why don't we just do this while we can' rather than prioritising it above and beyond anything else. 'I can still remember a flight to Japan to go and visit my mum, and I was sat for ten hours writing these lyrics because I just had to fit them in when I could.' After musing for a moment, she adds, 'It was really good fun!'



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Image: David Lavine for the Guardian

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In their heyday, Lush were pigeonholed into every imaginable genre, by the merit simply of being around. First shoegaze, then Britpop; if there's one label they couldn't escape, however, it was 'girls in a band'. 'The tricky thing,' Miki explains, 'is that the scene that we came from, which was really small pub gigs and a whole mix of influences, didn't have a problem with women in bands. At grassroots level, it didn't seem to be a problem. To be honest, it was a lot of the journalists that were fetishizing girls in bands. Then when you're trying to be a professional and you're going on tour, encountering crew and maybe someone local who's doing the lights and they go "oh yeah, girl band, right I get it". So when we were in our little enclave it was absolutely fine. I imagine it's probably not that different now. If you're at college I imagine it's all very right-on and people would fucking dream of saying that shit.'

To explain what she means by 'that shit', Miki cites the recent interview with The Last Shadow Puppets in Spin, where Miles Kane repeatedly makes the female journalist uncomfortable by inviting her up to the bedroom. 'Unless I stand there and act dumb, and laugh at [the men's] jokes, it's gonna irritate them, and then I'm a bitch.'

In terms of the constantly changing genre that they were assigned by the music press, Berenyi sees a direct correlation between this and the attitudes towards women in the industry. 'There's this thing in the music press of "they're old news". And I felt that being a woman was a part of that. It's like, "there's a new breed of women

replacing you. We're sick of shoegazing girls: now we want Courtney Love." It's one thing saying it about the music; it's a whole other thing saying it about your gender.'

She sighs. '[The industry] wasn't really created for women of 30+. When [Lush] ended I was almost 30. It gets quite difficult. When you're 25 and it's all kind of exciting, but there comes a point, especially for women where you think "actually I'm sick of being bloody patronised by guitar roadies". I'm sure it's the same for any women in the entertainment industry, but it is a bit infantile with bands.'

None of this is necessarily breaking news, of course, but every fresh report brings to light just how unfair the music industry is for women. 'It is about men being allowed to behave a certain way, men being encouraged to behave a certain way.' But, Berenyi argues, there is a flipside. 'Now there are quite a lot of older women in music, whether it's Chrissy Hynde or Debbie Harry, so for the two-steps-forward-three-steps-back that a lot of mainstream music has taken – a lot of the flesh-revealing, bitchy, un-sisterhood stuff that's going on – there is a separate stream.'

In spite of their seemingly indefinite hiatus, Lush are back and they're bad. 'We'd love to make an album! But it's all about the logistics: it's funding it, it's trying to find the time.' Please find the time, Miki. I speak for the masses. Please.