

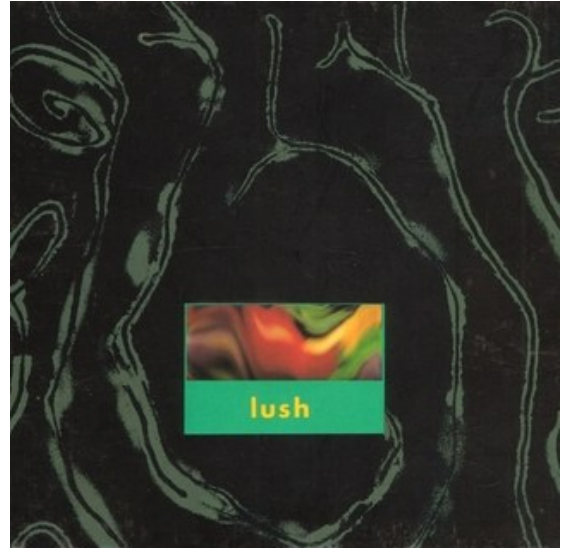
# Lush: Origami Album Review | Pitchfork

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This five-record retrospective box reminds us that while Lush might not have lunged for the jugular like My Bloody Valentine or Jesus and Mary Chain, they were a first-rate shoegaze band.



If you're hearing [Lush](#) for the first time via this five-record retrospective box, bear in mind: the feathery jangle of leadoff track "Sweetness and Light" is going to sound somewhat anemic measured against the sensory-bathing production favored by Lush's modern-day successors like [Beach House](#), [Painted Zeros](#), and [Dum Dum Girls](#). The same goes if you're arriving at this set straight from the brand new EP [Blind Spot](#), Lush's first recorded output after a 20-year absence. Conversely, back in 1989-90, when Lush's debut EP *Scar* first made a splash, it was tempting to dismiss the English quartet's music as a [Cocteau Twins](#) knockoff—but only if you focused on skin-deep similarities rather than the character underneath the sound.

The first record in this set is *Gala*, a re-packaging of *Scar* and two other EPs released together in 1990 to function as the band's introduction to new audiences. Sequenced in backwards chronological order, *Gala* allowed the uninitiated to stumble onto the demo-like crudeness of *Scar* after being won-over by the radiant shimmer of songs like "Sweetness and Light" and "De-Luxe." Those songs came across as something of a revelation if you were unfamiliar with Lush's influences and were listening through the lens of alternative rock's transition to a hard-driving, heavy guitar-based format. With six songs produced by Cocteau Twins co-founder Robin Guthrie, *Gala* still has the naive air of a band fumbling for its voice in the shadow of its heroes. Nevertheless, on the first seven songs, the band throws down the gauntlet and asserts all of the traits that have established its sound as timeless.

The second record of the set is Lush's first proper full-length, 1992's *Spooky*. Here, it becomes quite clear that this band possessed the substance to match its style. As part of the wave of British acts that were first slapped with the shoegaze tag—[Ride](#), [Slowdive](#), and [Pale Saints](#) among them—Lush's music was naturally defined by its seemingly endless ripples of delay, reverb, flange, and chorus. But the almost-supernatural power of frontwoman/guitarist Miki Berenyi and lead guitarist/vocalist Emma Anderson's vocal harmonies and intertwining guitar work set Lush apart from the shoegaze pack on a number of levels.

After a brief intro, *Spooky* launches straight into the stratosphere with "Nothing Natural," a pinnacle moment not only for Lush but for shoegaze/alternative across the board. Although Guthrie brings his soft-focus production once again, no amount of sonic soft-pedaling can contain the band's assuredness as it aspires to—and mostly reaches—a beauty so sublime that it pumps you up as much as it takes your breath away. Sure, Lush made melancholy, ethereal music, but such was the band's range during this period that none of the songs on *Spooky* conform strictly

to one mood.

By turns dour, impatient, hopeful, and resigned, the album never runs out of shades. Uptempo numbers like "Laura" and "Superblast!" counterbalance the more reflective moments, which hit hardest on album closer "Monochrome," a song with a swaying underwater groove. In the chorus, Berenyi sings, "And sometimes I think if I stand by the phone it may ring/ And sometimes I worry and fear what tomorrow may bring," her voice drenched in reverb so she sounds less like a human than an apparition. It is one of several moments on *Spooky* where Lush's music verges on mind-altering.

As the band's sole songwriters, Anderson and Berenyi each took unorthodox approaches to melody, chord structure, pacing, lyrics, and even guitar strumming. With Lush, they wove their idiosyncrasies together into a sound whose rough edge belies its delicate outer lacing. The pair was especially fond of inserting odd notes into chords that draped even their most delicate songs in a haze of dissonance. And if you refer to bootleg recordings from the band's heyday, it's evident that Lush packed a punch in concert that none of these records quite capture. Most unfortunately, you can listen to this whole reissue set and never get a sense of the [assertive](#), even [forceful](#) playing of late drummer Chris Acland, whose suicide in October of '96 stopped Lush's career in its tracks just as Anderson was contemplating quitting and collective morale had begun wane.

Had Acland not ended his own life, it seems like an implosion was imminent anyway—which is strange considering that Lush's third and final full-length, 1996's *Lovelife*, triggered a spike in commercial success in the UK. By *Lovelife*, however, Berenyi and Anderson had abandoned what originally made their music appealing in favor of a more streamlined sound [hewing towards](#) Britpop. While a tune like Anderson's "500 (Shake Baby Shake)" distills the familiar harmonies into a tight, sugary-sweet package, which only makes the song's underlying sarcasm and faux-vapidity all the more biting, a multi-faceted muse like Anderson's wasn't best served by going down the same path as [Pulp](#) and [Blur](#). Frankly, she and Berenyi were more capable than that.

At a crucial midpoint between the beginning and the end, 1994's *Split* documents the band reaching beyond the shoegaze mold but not yet pandering to pop appeal. By all accounts a [difficult process](#) that involved repeated attempts at a final mix, *Split* benefits from the turmoil. By that point, Anderson and Berenyi's romantic outlooks had darkened considerably, and at times—the languid, seven-and-a-half minute "Desire Lines," a plea to a person who needs help on "Undertow"—*Split* simulates the sensation of being emotionally lost, adrift on a sea of uncertainty and woe. On those songs, the pair's guitars are like waves lapping against the side of a boat going nowhere.


The final disc, a collection of *Lovelife*-era B-sides originally released (in two versions) in Canada and Japan as *Topolino*, largely follows in the direction of *Lovelife* and then veers off course with delightfully varied results. It's a breath of fresh air, for example, when Lush delve into their signature guitar glitter on "I Have the Moon." Meanwhile, on "Plums and Oranges" (one of a slew of digital bonus tracks, all of which also appear on the recent 5-cd box set *Chorus*), the band seamlessly transplants its classic sound onto an electronic framework—a tantalizing hint of what might have been had Lush had more time to experiment. Likewise, "Matador" and "I'd Like to Walk Around in Your Mind" see the band venturing into a pastoral English folk arena one wishes Berenyi and Anderson would have explored more.

It's frustrating, because the stripped-down simplicity of "Carmen"—a chipper rock ditty that sounds like it was rescued by the spirit of Juliana Hatfield on its way to becoming a Britpop single—proves that Lush could have sailed right past the trends of the day. In truth, *Topolino* serves as a postscript, rather than the meat, of a remarkable career, but its charming odds and ends reveal myriad new angles on the band. Even the instrumental cocktail jazz of "Cul De Sac" stumbles its way into grace somehow, and the album's haphazard running order caps the listening experience off on a surprisingly carefree note.

Of course, *Origami* establishes Lush's place in the lineage of guitar rock well before you get to the *Topolino* record. Anchored by Anderson and Berenyi's songwriting acumen, Lush's music didn't lunge at the jugular quite like the work of more audacious sonic innovators like [My Bloody Valentine](#) or the [Jesus and Mary Chain](#). But, in a strange

way, time has proven to be on Lush's side. Two-plus decades later, bands have gotten rather adept at reproducing the sound and attitude that this box documents so vividly. Nevertheless, Lush's body of work reminds us that all the guitar pedals in the world amount to little more than window dressing if you don't have the heart and soul to harness them. With *Origami*, it's perhaps more clear than ever that Lush possessed both in spades.

**Correction:** *Due to a publishing error, this review was published with incorrect scores; they have been changed.*

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