

Lush reunited: 'We were seen as a band who'd turn up to the opening of a packet of crisps'

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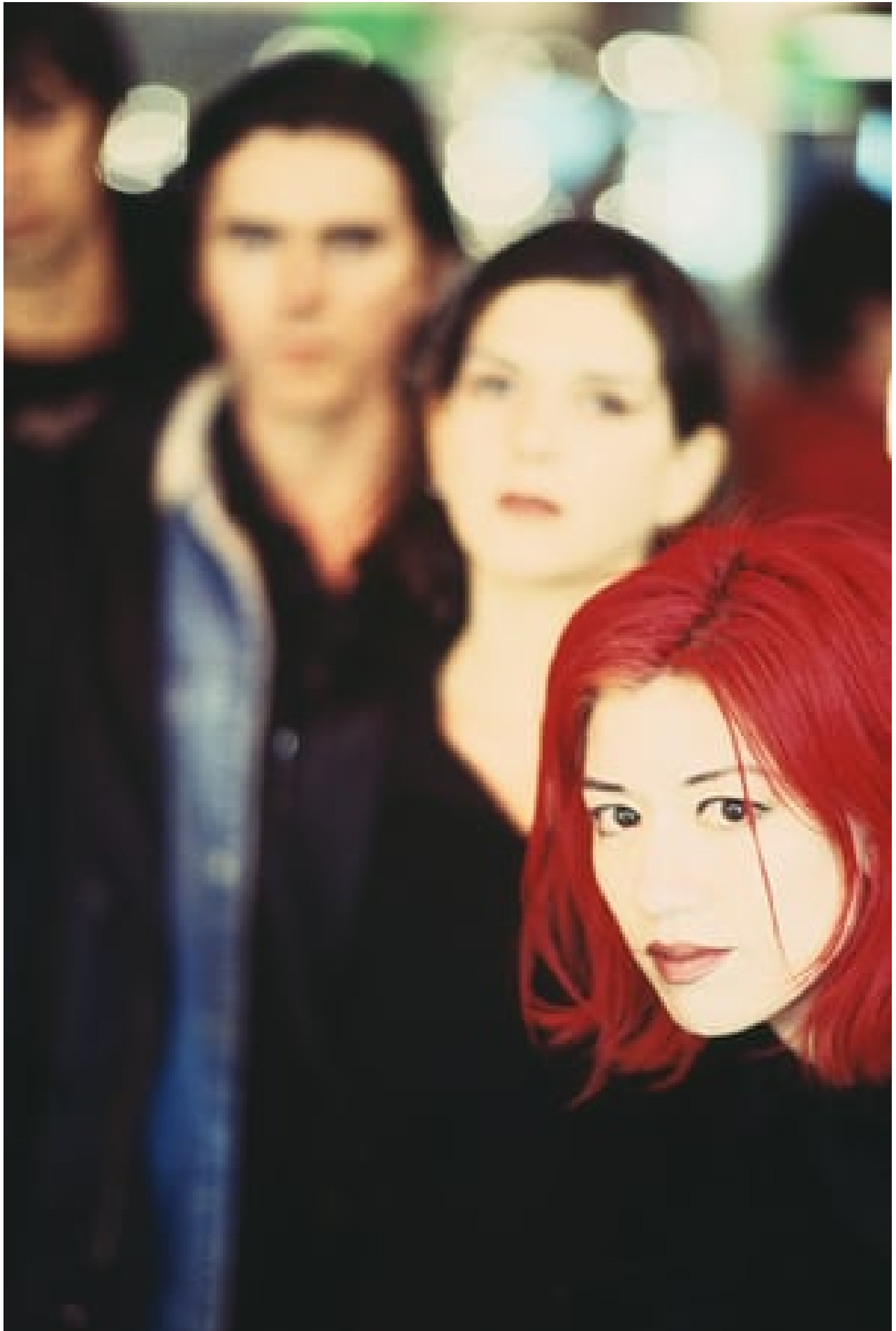
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Officially, Lush broke up in February 1998, when they issued a statement as a courtesy to their fans. In reality, they were done the minute they heard that their drummer, Chris Acland, had killed himself on 17 October 1996. "I didn't even want the publicity of splitting up," singer and guitarist Miki Berenyi says. "I thought: isn't it fucking obvious? We knew it was over. Fuck the rest of the world. I just retreated completely."

It was a shocking conclusion for an intensely likable band who always looked as if they were having fun even when they weren't. Though they were bracketed with the shoegazing scene, they had their own distinct charisma. Neither experimental like Slowdive nor besotted with classic rock like Ride, they wrote fantastic pop songs. Their name suggested the luxuriant swirl of their records, while actually repurposing a disparaging term for a heavy drinker.

Drinking red wine on a couch in a London hotel library for their first joint interview in 19 years, Lush are still excellent company. Berenyi, instantly recognisable even though her distinctive shocking-pink 90s hair is now ink-black, gets told off for vaping indoors. Co-frontman Emma Anderson wages a war of nerves with a passive-aggressive desk clerk who keeps silently opening the library door. Silver-haired bassist Phil King regularly interjects with wry, elegant anecdotes, like an indie Peter Ustinov.

Lush toyed with reuniting as far back as 2007 but it didn't seem like the right time. "To be honest, I thought we were a bit forgotten," Berenyi says. "There were books coming out about [90s music] and we barely got a bloody whisper."





i Lush in 1993, Acland at far left. Photograph: Kevin Cummins/Getty Images

“I always felt we were seen as followers,” Anderson says, disgruntled. “My Bloody Valentine, Cocteau Twins and the Jesus and Mary Chain were the sonic geniuses and the other bands were copying. Now, nicely, it feels like we’re seen as influential ourselves.”

When Lush saw Slowdive and Ride reform to great acclaim, they figured it was now or never. Hence a gorgeous new soup-to-nuts boxset, a brand-new EP next year, and live shows in the spring with Acland’s old friend Justin Welch, formerly of Elastica, on drums. Berenyi was inspired to take the plunge by reading the section in Viv Albertine’s memoir about “the Year of Saying Yes”. “That did resonate with me,” she says. “I thought this is the last chance I’ve got to do anything like that again. It’s an open door and I should walk through it.”

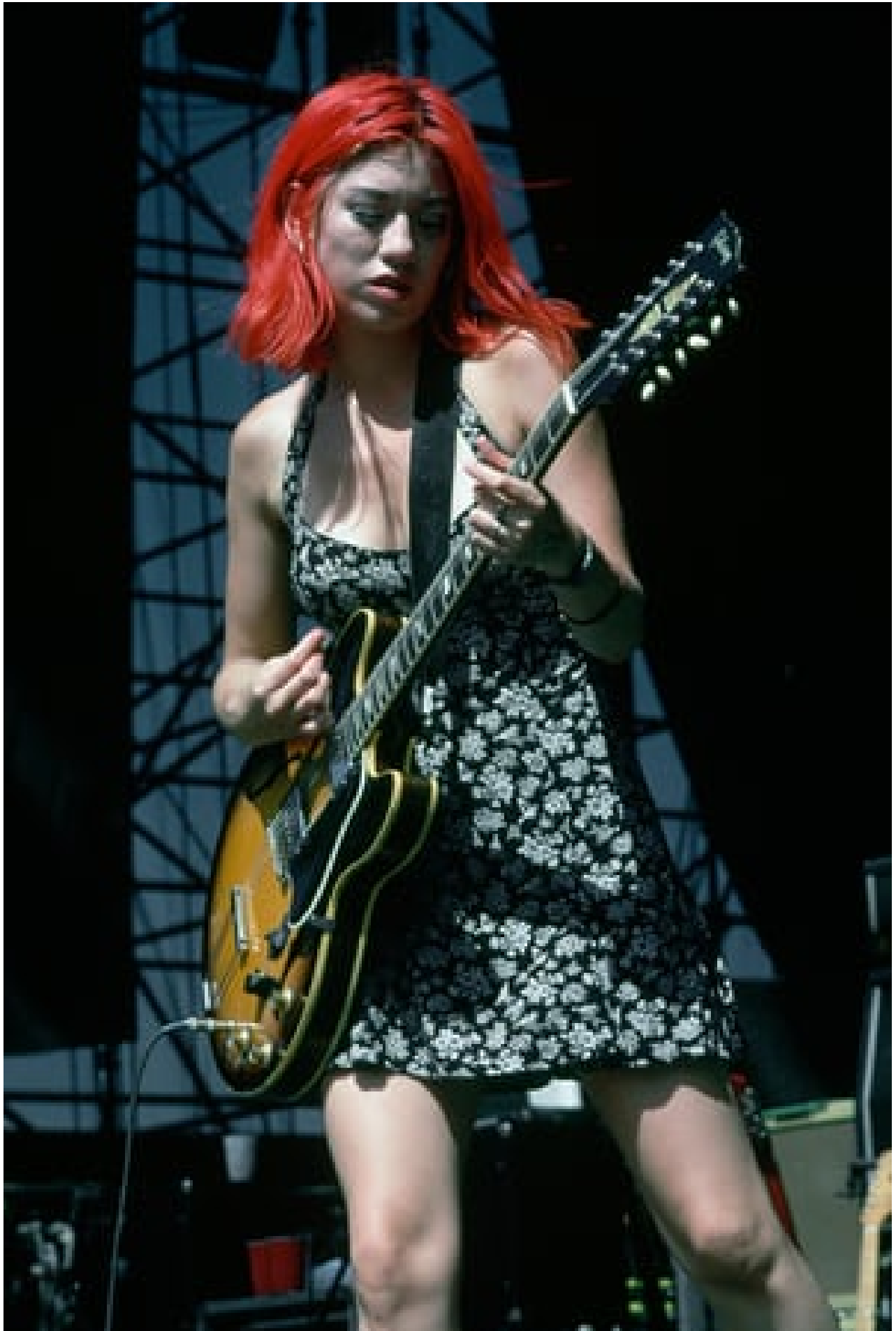
It’s dismaying to learn that Berenyi and Anderson fell out for several years after Acland’s death because much of Lush’s appeal stemmed from their tight, if sometimes tense, friendship and simpatico songwriting. They met at Queen’s College in Westminster when they were 14, both misfits in an environment of privilege. Berenyi’s mother, a Japanese actor who appeared in *You Only Live Twice* and *Space: 1999*, had recently moved to the US, leaving Miki with her father, a womanising Hungarian journalist, and her misanthropic, alcoholic grandmother. Anderson had been adopted (a fact she only discovered when she was 34) by a retired army officer and his wife who lived in a veterans’ club. “I think we were both quite isolated in our homes,” Berenyi says. “It was like: ‘You’re weird, and I’m weird, too.’ We could trust each other.”

The two girls wrote a fanzine specialising in gothic rock and rude jokes and played bass in other people’s bands. After leaving school and meeting Acland at North London Polytechnic, they decided to start their own group, originally called the Baby Machines. “If you went to the [Camden] Falcon, half the people there were in bands,” Berenyi says. “Whether you wanted to write a fanzine or sell your own clothes in Camden or start up a club, all those artistic things were possible on a shoestring and lots of people would join in. We just wanted to be part of it.”

Their early shows, Anderson says, were “pretty rough”, and their first singer, Meriel Barham, left to join the Leeds band Pale Saints, also on 4AD, with whom they often shared bills early on. However, a glowing write-up in *Melody Maker* caught the eye of the 4AD label’s enigmatic founder Ivo Watts-Russell, who saw in Lush the potential that other A&R men missed. He dispatched them to famous singing teacher Tona de Brett and invited them to record a mini-album, 1989’s *Scar*. Show by show, they improved, until they were one of the hottest young bands. “We didn’t start off as proficient musicians,” Berenyi says. “I became a singer by default. We could literally only play the songs we wrote. We went on tour with Ride and at the soundcheck they started jamming.” She shudders. “Not us.”

In the restless, gossipy music weeklies, Lush were saddled with two conflicting images. Thanks to glittering, sensuous records, such as their 1992 album *Spooky*, produced by Cocteau Twins’ Robin Guthrie, they were ethereal shoegazers with voices like angels’ sighs. At the same time, they were boozy scenesters who, King jokes, would “turn up to the opening of a packet of crisps”. Neither stereotype was accurate.

Berenyi recently appeared in the BBC Four documentary *Girl in a Band*, talking about being asked to strike provocative poses for photographers and getting bitten on the rear by Blur’s Alex James. “It just felt like, oh fucking hell, we’re doing it again,” she says. “Hasn’t it moved on? There was always back-biting: ‘Oh, it’s because you’re girls that you get the attention.’ A lot of people wrote us off.”





i Berenyi on stage at Lollapalooza, 1992. Photograph: Henry Diltz/Corbis

Still, the attention accelerated their rise. They acquired a manager called Howard Gough, a notorious loose cannon prone to extravagant acts of largesse with Lush's credit card. "When I read [Kill Your Friends](#), I thought: 'That's Howard!'" says King, who joined Lush in 1991. "If we did a good gig, he'd say: 'We were brilliant!' If we did a shit gig, he'd say: 'You were shit.'"

Gough did, however, wangle Lush the opening slot on Perry Farrell's 1992 Lollapalooza tour of the US. Anderson and Berenyi were the only women to appear on the main stage, unless you count the industrial rock group Ministry's dancers, which you probably shouldn't. Among their touring companions, Ministry were fun, Pearl Jam gracious, the Red Hot Chili Peppers obnoxious and Ice Cube standoffish. "We wrote on his mirror: 'Hey Cube, say hi to Lush,' in lipstick," Anderson remembers. "He came in and said: 'Some people got no respect.' We were quite drunk."

Making their 1994 album, *Split*, with producer Mike Hedges was much less enjoyable. By the time they were mixing the record in Hedges' gloomy French residential studio in the middle of winter, Berenyi says: "The madness had set in. We were isolated. Mike lost interest, our manager went Awol, our A&R man went Awol, Ivo had had enough of 4AD. It was mixed and remixed. It was fucking endless, actually."

With songs about death, infidelity and neglect, *Split* was a dark, introspective album that jarred with the beginning of the Britpop party. It fared badly and the music press soured on Lush. "We weren't getting in the charts so we were called underachievers," Anderson says. "Maybe they felt they'd given us a lot of attention but we weren't reaching the dizzy heights of the Top 10. So when *Split* came out it was like: 'Well, we can give up on this band.'" With 1996's *Lovelife*, however, Lush wrote their sharpest, most emphatic songs, including three Top 40 hits and a duet with man-of-the-moment Jarvis Cocker. "It was a really good record for enjoying ourselves," Berenyi says. "We got our confident moment." One music magazine photographed Lush in gladrags, grasping a bottle of Moët. Good times, only not really. Watts-Russell had experienced a nervous breakdown and Gough's replacement as manager was a bad fit. "We had no one to rely on," Anderson says. "It all started unravelling."

During the 1990s, the music industry was in the throes of delirium. Cash-drunk major labels wasted millions on bidding wars and marketing ploys for anyone who looked remotely like the Next Big Thing, thus burdening bands with unnecessary debt and unrealistic expectations. For every alternative band that crossed over, a dozen were driven to distraction.

In Britain, Lush were pitched into the world of "comedy Friday night bullshit", which was grating if not without its surreal pleasures. "It was quite fun going from the rarefied world of 4AD to the Radio 1 roadshow in Hunstanton with Simon Mayo in a fatsuit dancing at the side of the stage," King says drily. In the US, they toured relentlessly in pursuit of a pop breakthrough that never happened, and that they didn't really want anyway. Anderson agrees with a comment from their A&R man at Warner Brothers, the late Tim Carr, who said Lush were a great indie band, but they weren't the Cranberries or the Sundays. "Warner Brothers thought they would turn us into a mainstream act who would sell a million, and actually it wasn't fair. We still wouldn't have made any money, our debts were so large," Anderson says.

After yet another US tour, Anderson called a meeting to tell Berenyi she'd had enough. "I said I'm quite happy to record an album of Gregorian chants if that's what you want to do but I think it's really important that we stay together," Berenyi remembers. "We left the meeting like: 'OK, let's see.' Two days later we got the phone call."

Acland had hanged himself at his parents' house in Cumbria. Nobody had seen it coming. His bandmates knew he was taking Prozac, anxious about turning 30 and unhappy about a recent breakup, but he gave no indication that he was suicidal. During Lush's last US tour, they had spent a night in a New York bar with the singer-songwriter Mark

Eitzel. Acland was ebullient while King got miserably drunk. After Acland's death, Eitzel wrote a touching account of the night, *Lower Eastside Tourist*, but when King heard it he realised that Eitzel had got the wrong man: he'd assumed the bassist was the suicidal one.

"I know it's a cliché but [Chris] was the last person in the world you'd think would do something like this," King says. "That's the thing with suicide. You can't make sense of it. You keep going back to look for the clues, and there aren't any."

Berenyi, who had dated Acland, was shattered by his death. "Chris's suicide was the worst thing that had ever happened to me," she says. "I was completely floored by it. I remember going to Sainsburys and running after some bloke who looked like Chris. I had a meltdown at some gig. Steve Lamacq came up, being very sweet, and I completely lost it, crying. I thought, there are all these people that I know and I don't want to talk to any of them, I just want to talk to Chris. I needed to change everything."

Anderson is now a bookkeeper but had another band, *Sing-Sing*, for 10 years. King juggles journalism with playing in the *Jesus and Mary Chain*. Only Berenyi, who also became a journalist, gave up music all together, bar three sporadic, low-key guest vocals. King teasingly calls her "the Greta Garbo of indie", but Berenyi wasn't trying to be enigmatic; she just wanted to be normal.

"To be honest, in the last year or two of the band I started to turn into a bit of an arsehole," Berenyi says. "Being in a band does that to you. You just lose yourself, and you're constantly tempted to lose yourself. There are all sorts of people preying on you and wanting you to be a certain kind of person and it's hard to stand against that. 'Miki from Lush' was a different person to what I really am and it wasn't a nice person to be."

For the next few months, at least, she will be "Miki from Lush" once more, but not in the same way. This time they have more control and less pressure, which is what they wanted all along. At one point Anderson is complaining about some long-ago argument with the record label when she stops herself with a self-mocking: "I'm not bitter." Everyone laughs.

"No, really!" she says. "Why is it working now? Because that shit doesn't matter any more."

The Chorus box set is released on 11 December on 4AD. Lush play Manchester Academy on 30 April 2016 and the Roundhouse in London on 6 and 7 May. They release the Blind Spot EP to coincide with the shows.

- This article was amended on 4 December 2015 to correct the name of Lush's current drummer, who is Justin Welch, and to correct the caption on the photo of the band in 1993.