

Miki Berenyi | Under the Radar

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Miki Berenyi

Lush's Former Singer Reminisces on Britpop

Oct 01, 2007 [Web Exclusive](#) By Lorraine Carpenter

Amid the heaps of visual flash and sonic flair displayed by British musicians over the years, Miki Berenyi's cherry-red mane and featherweight falsetto remain unforgettable. Berenyi was the lead-vocalist/guitarist/songwriter for shoegazing stars Lush, whose career began in 1988 and continued into the mid '90s Britpop movement.

Lush's other members included

guitarist/vocalist/songwriter Emma Anderson, drummer Chris Acland, and bassist Philip King (who replaced original bassist Steve Rippon). The band released three full-length albums—*Spooky* (1992), *Split* (1996), and *Lovelife* (1996)—as well as 1990's *Gala* (which collected their early singles) and 2001's collection *Ciao!: The Best of Lush*.



Though Berenyi's been off the radar for a decade, time has done little to quash the love of some Lush fans, who've mounted an online campaign to bring her back from retirement. "It's flattering that anybody gives a shit," Berenyi writes in an e-mail interview. "Not sure how enthusiastic the support would be if they realized that bringing back Miki Berenyi would deliver a 40-year-old office employee with graying hair who's still struggling to shift the weight from her last pregnancy."

Family and frustration with the music industry have kept Berenyi from pursuing a solo career or a new band, though she has contributed guest vocals, by request, to records by Flat 7, Fruit, and Moose, and also on the forthcoming debut album by The Sinking Ships. Berenyi has rarely granted an interview since Lush's split following Acland's suicide in 1996, but graciously agreed to answer *Under the Radar's* questions. The occasion: Rhino Records' Britpop and shoegazing box set *The Brit Box*, which includes Lush's "For Love."

***Under the Radar:* Looking back at Lush, what was the high point of that period for you? A particular album, show or incident that stands out as being the best moment?**

Miki Berenyi: The whole experience of being in a band is so tied up with my memories of just 'being young' that it's difficult to recall specific moments without viewing them through a rose-tinted lens of nostalgia! There were a ton of great memories though, so I'll just bore you with the first that spring to mind: One particularly sweaty gig in Hoboken (Maxwell's, was it?)—it must have been early on because Steve [Rippon] was still in the band. The venue was so stifling all the dye ran out of my hair all over my face and neck. I looked like I'd been hit over the head with an axe. We piled into the van after the show and Nilsson's "Without You" came on the radio. I just remember all of us—band

and crew—packed into the vehicle singing at the top of our lungs “*I cant li-i-ive*” —we were so happy and excited! Lollapalooza was a genuine rollercoaster. I did find it difficult to accept the astonishingly macho attitudes—I remember [Red Hot Chili Peppers] Anthony Kiedis (I think it was the first night of the tour!) inviting me to come along with the band to “The Ballet.” I didn’t realise he meant a strip club—I genuinely thought they were off to see *Swan Lake*! Thankfully, I was enlightened and I declined. ‘Why the hell would I want to go to a strip club?!’ I thought. And there was a lot of use and abuse of groupies. I guess everyone involved would say that the girls were willing participants, but a naïve ‘nobody’ is likely to overstep their normal boundaries of their behaviour if they think they will get attention from someone they idolise, and that can lead to rather sordid and upsetting situations ripe for exploitation. That said, there was a genuine sense of euphoria and enjoyment on the tour. Despite a tiny bit of factional bickering, everyone really seemed to muck in and get involved in making the whole experience a memorable and immensely enjoyable one—rather than, say, calling their business manager to see how much the tour had improved their album sales. As a result, no one was afforded star status—we were all in it together. It had the genuine feeling of a travelling circus. I absolutely bloody loved it! Of course, all my memories of Lush are shot through with some sadness as they remind me that Chris [Acland] is no longer here. We had a weird bar count in a couple of songs—the break in “Sweetness and Light” and the one in “Superblast!”—and it was my job to give Chris the nod when the drums had to kick in again. I’d turn away from the mic, look round at him, and he’d always pull some silly face or be laughing hysterically at something. It makes me feel bereft to think that those days—and that person—are gone.

UTR: Were there any circumstances under which you think Lush could've stayed together and made more albums after *Lovelife*?

Berenyi: Perhaps, but not without Chris. I know bands that have managed to soldier on through that kind of loss, but to be honest, by then, we were already struggling to stay together. Just before he killed himself, Emma called a meeting with me and Phil (Chris was up at his parents’ house in the Lake District). She wanted to leave the band—she felt the pressure to become successful in the U.S. was swamping everything. Emma and I were not getting along well, either. I’d venture to say that our relationship was always a little fragile. But I desperately wanted the band to stay together and coerced her into giving Lush one more shot. A few days later Chris was dead. We were falling apart as it was, and that was the killer blow. If Chris had been around, I might have had the strength to keep Emma happy and convince her to stay in Lush. If Emma hadn’t already lost faith in Lush maybe she would have been able to convince me that we could carry on even without Chris. But with Chris’ suicide, we both had plenty of reasons for giving up on Lush.

UTR: Rhino Records is releasing a 4-CD Britpop and shoegazing box set called *The Brit Box*. Now that nearly a decade has passed since the Britpop scene petered out, how do you judge that period of British musical history? How do you view your role in it, and your contribution to it?

Berenyi: I’m afraid I’m going to come out with the stock answer of anyone who’s ever been in a band and throw a tantrum about being labelled as part of a ‘scene.’ Britpop? I remember Blur hated Oasis and Oasis hated Blur. And that Blur won the battle but Oasis won the war. But then later Oasis won the battle and Blur won the war. Several people embarrassed themselves by shaking hands with Tony Blair.

I think our contribution was to stand at the sidelines (being ignored) with stunned bemusement at this desperate attempt to create an advertisable brand of Britishness that seemed to represent a minuscule stereotyped sector of the U.K.

UTR: Does it feel weird that there's now a box set collecting the era?

Berenyi: To be honest, I don’t think this box set does commemorate any era. It’s an entertaining collection of someone’s favourite British hits from over the years, but—I mean—“Lorelei” by Cocteau Twins came out in 1984 and Gay Dad were releasing records 15 years later. That’s not a scene, it’s a lifetime (in pop music, anyway). Were Ned’s Atomic Dustbin in the same scene as The Cure? Can anyone find any similarities between The Happy Mondays and The Shop Assistants? Is there a band in existence who would feel it a compliment to be compared to

Dodgy? And who even wants to remember anything by Hurricane #1?

UTR: Which bands from the shoegazing/Britpop era do you think still hold up a decade later, and which bands from that era do you feel really sound dated now?

Berenyi: Hmm. To be honest, any comment I make would just be a personal list of the bands I liked and the bands I loathed. That has remained constant—I still like the ones I liked then and I haven't changed my minds about the ones I thought were rubbish! And it's probably not fair to list them as it's often as much to do with individual personalities of the band members as it is with the music they made.

UTR: What do you make of the U.K.'s pop/rock output since the end of Britpop in the late '90s? Do you keep up with the new bands? What have you been listening to lately?

Berenyi: I'm so far out of touch I'm not even on the radar. I like it, though. When I was in Lush, any mention of a band posed a potential threat to your own status and you couldn't listen to anything without being biased by malicious gossip, character assassinations, and rumours of hyped record-sales and publicity bribes. I know nothing now, except hearing the music. I like CSS, The Gossip, Jarvis Cocker, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Amy Winehouse—it's hardly obscure! Two of my Japanese relatives are musicians, so I enjoyed getting into their stuff. My cousin Takashi Nagazumi is well-known in Japan, and I discovered that I'm second cousins with Keigo Oyamada (known as Cornelius). I went to see him play recently—it was amazing!

UTR: I read a rumour that you've taken up professional landscape gardening. Is this true? If so, where, and what does that entail exactly? (If not, what have you been up to professionally?)

Berenyi: No... I think that's Kim Wilde! I'm a sub-editor.

UTR: I'm aware that you've made cameos on a handful of records over the years, post-Lush—what made you choose these projects?

Berenyi: I didn't. They just asked me!

UTR: I understand that you've recorded some vocals for the soon-to-be-released album by The Seinking Ships—what attracted you to this project?

Berenyi: Again—Eric [Matthews] just asked me. He was very patient with me—I'm afraid the demands of work and family mean I have very little time to put any commitment into other projects, so sorting out just one day to go into a studio and perform the vocals was a logistical feat in itself. I really liked his stuff though—in a funny way it reminded me of Emma's songs. I know they're completely different really, but there's something in the weird harmonies and the slight jazziness—and [they're] really bloody hard to sing!

UTR: Are there any other musical projects in the works?

Berenyi: Nope.

UTR: Did you consider (or are you considering) pursuing a solo project or forming a new band?

Berenyi: Not unless I win the lottery and I don't have to hold down a job to pay the mortgage. Even then, with the children it would be virtually impossible. Being in a band took up all my time and head space. If I wasn't physically away from home—touring or in a recording studio—I was mentally preoccupied with writing songs, helping to run the practicalities and generally fretting about every aspect of the band. If I were to immerse myself in that again, it would be completely unfair to Moose and the kids. And if I didn't immerse myself in it completely, I don't think I'd be doing the music any justice.

UTR: Why did you choose to essentially withdraw from music for the last decade?

Berenyi: Everything I've said above applies, but the trigger was Chris' suicide—it completely disabled me. That said, I'd had just about all I could take of the 'industry' Lots of young people have artistic ambitions that spring from wanting to gain popularity and acceptance, and I wasn't any different. But when I got it, I realised my ego was too fragile to take the criticisms and taunts that are part of becoming famous (even on so small a scale as Lush!), while the praise and adulation seemed equally undeserved. Then there is the classic truth that most people in the music business have no interest in music at all—it's all about money and fame and you're just a cog in the machine. Complying with the business means buying into a pretty unimaginative value system (the more you sell, the better you are) while pushing against it merely means you're ignored. God, I sound like such a self-pitying wimp! Ultimately, trying to please ourselves and trying to please an increasingly commercial music environment was not working. Saying that I was being pulled apart sounds ridiculously melodramatic, but it was turning me into a bit of a fuck-up. With Chris gone I felt even more isolated and, frankly, anything I'd have done musically would have just made me feel his absence even more.

UTR: Are you aware of the online Bring Miki Back/We Miss Miki campaign (www.mikiberenyi.com, www.myspace.com/mikiberenyi)? How do you respond to this?

Berenyi: I guess it's flattering that anybody gives a shit. Not sure how enthusiastic the support would be if they realised that bringing back Miki Berenyi would deliver a 40-year-old office employee with graying hair whose still struggling to shift the weight from her last pregnancy.

UTR: Do you still keep in touch with Emma Anderson? Have you heard her two albums with Sing-Sing and, if so, what do you think of them?

Berenyi: Yes—I still see Emma. We kind of didn't speak for a while, but that was inevitable, I guess. Don't get me wrong—we got on terrifically well in many, many ways, but now that we've had time apart we can be friendly without the rivalry and bickering that the intense relationship of the band brought with it! I saw Sing-Sing a few times early on. To be honest, it was a little painful for me. I felt replaced! Another reason I never started another band is that I believe that the *magic* of a band that really clicks is rare. When it works, it works, and you don't want to mess with it. No matter how bad things were between me and Emma, I knew that without her I couldn't come up with anything half as good as what we'd managed to achieve together with Lush. And that's pretty much how I feel about Sing-Sing. I liked a couple of their songs, but they were nowhere near as good as Lush. But of course I'm *totally* biased!

UTR: Do you ever think that you and Emma might make music together again one day?

Berenyi: I doubt it! We're both way too busy (and old).

UTR: What about Philip King, do you still keep in touch with him? If so, what is he up to these days?

Berenyi: It's been a busy year for Phil—he became a dad and he's been playing bass with The Jesus and Mary Chain! We went to see him a few weeks ago at the Brixton Academy. They were really excellent and I thought, "Oh look at Phil! He finally got his own mic!"

UTR: Which Lush album and song are you most proud of?

Berenyi: I always loved Emma's off-beat way of writing songs—it was totally unique! "Sweetness & Light," "Monochrome," "Thoughtforms," "Loveline." They were all amazing songs that meandered all over the place—no proper structure, no logic, but they worked perfectly and were beautiful. I wept the first time I heard "When I Die" — and now that I associate it with Chris's death (it was played at his funeral) it still makes me totally emotional. I guess with my own songs, they were more basic—"Ladykillers" still makes me laugh and so does "Ciao!" "Light from a Dead Star" still moves me because lyrically—it pretty much hit the nail on the head and I don't think I'll ever manage to stop carrying that stuff around. I think the nearest I got to something really pretty was "For Love." I am proud of that one actually—it was the first thing I wrote that was any good!

UTR: What's the biggest misconception about you?

Berenyi: That I didn't give a shit.

www.mikiberenyi.com

www.myspace.com/mikiberenyi

www.rhino.com