

QUEENS 4AD

LUSH

READING UNIVERSITY

WE'RE NOT supposed to like Lush anymore, are we? We're meant to damn 'Spooky' as a promise unfulfilled, a lily gilded by producer Robin Guthrie's spangle-making. We're meant to hate them for all the ethereallists without attitude who gilded into their footsteps last year. We're even meant to sneer as they're caught out on the town yet again, part of the The Scene That Actually Goes To Gigs. After a lengthy state of grace, there's no longer any sanctuary in that proverbial sonic cathedral.

In truth, though, Lush are totally revitalised; tougher, rigorous and — whisper it — vaguely *professional*. The critical affair may be over, but there's a striking sense that the real career, Top Ten albums and all, has just begun.

"We have had a hell of a lot of good press and I can understand that people resent that," says Miki philosophically, languishing somewhere in the depths of Reading University's Students' Union. "There have been gigs we've played that were a pile of shit that have been raved about. People think the band's been getting away with murder for the past couple of years and it's time to put the boot in."

It's an ill-timed kicking. The arrival of new bassist Phil King and the prospect of half a year trekking around the planet have given Lush a fresh sense of purpose. Tonight, in spite of a strangely uncommitted audience, there's a tangible confidence which throws the songs sharply into focus, polishing off the fuzziness and occasional ineptitude of old. The intensity, pace-shifting dynamism and sheer pop sensibility that have always been the band's strongest aspects are in the ascendant; regulation soundscaping has, by and large, been purged.

So 'Sweetness And Light', previously one of the blandest numbers, is more muscular, propelled by weirdly funky drumming, and 'Superblast!' becomes a brilliantly orchestrated rush'n'lurch, with each rowdy guitar surge undermined by spacey, calculated collapses. After the inconsistent London shows of last autumn, it's little short of a revelation. A dose of new blood and a little practice can work wonders, it seems . . .

"Phil was really putting us through our paces," explains Emma. "He kept asking 'Can we do that again?'" This, obviously, is a new experience for the rest of Lush.

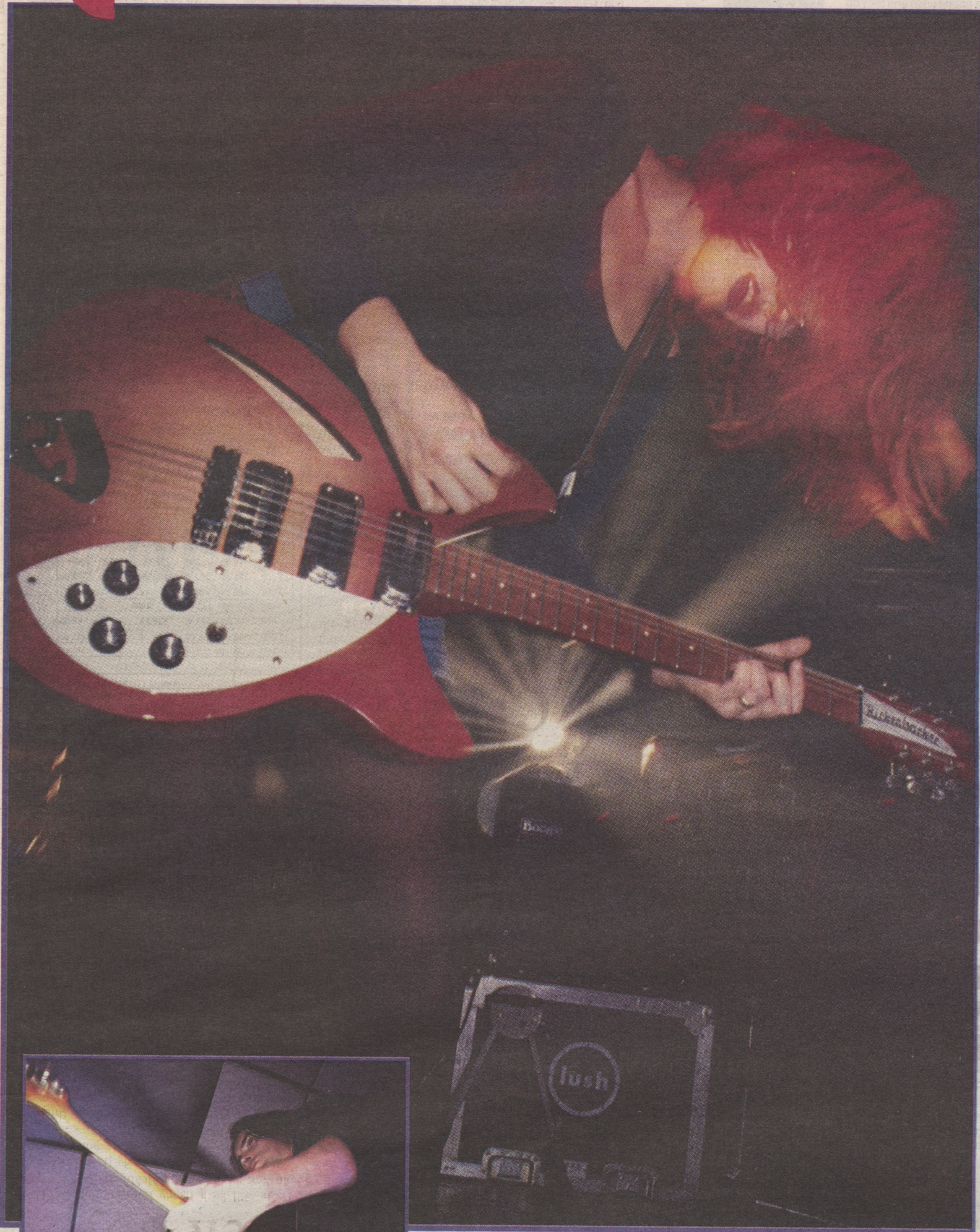
"Phil's probably a better bass player than Steve," admits Chris, resplendent in a new Discharge T-shirt. "Steve would turn up at rehearsals during the summer and listen to the cricket commentary on his headphones while he was playing. And sometimes he fell asleep standing up and woke up still playing the bassline."

Of course, the new approach hasn't ushered in a new era of stage heroics from the band. Following the gross-out *rawking* of support act Spitfire, Lush make bricks look lively. Apart from a little doubled-up axe-hacking at the end of 'Baby Talk', the most animated band member is (necessarily) Chris, gob gaping and arms flailing behind his drumkit. At least Miki, unlike most of the Static Quo, actually *talks*, ridiculing the obligatory sexist tool in the audience who seems to believe women can only appear onstage in strip joints.

And now that sarky self-assurance is finally, consistently, being reflected in the music. Miki and Emma's harmonies are precision-tight throughout, and there's even a short, bittersweet guitar solo at the end of the pulsing 'Ocean', one of several 'Spooky' tracks to benefit from having Guthrie's much-derided gift wrapping ripped off live. 'Deluxe' — still their best song — resonates with artfully controlled choppliness, while 'Starlust' is the set's most expansive, most purely exhilarating moment.

It's time, then, to start the backlash on the backlash. Lush have survived all the stereotyping, the hatchet jobs and the personal pettiness. They've thrived on a potentially messy line-up change. They're not even bothered about missing Syndrome every Thursday night for the next six months. Time, undoubtedly, to leave them *all* behind.

John Mulvey



Main pic: Miki understudies a brick . . . (inset) As Phil King keeps a watchful eye on proceedings Miki denounces a visiting tool . . .