

## LUSH SPOOKY (4AD)

NO stars. No constellations of ravens. Just a knife to the back, and an embarrassed glance away. Lush are growing more distant by the second.

It's all a question of perception. On one side, 4AD, their manager and their producer – men all – who see Lush as some Nineties version of the Cocteau's (obvious, but true), all wispy vocals and ethereal otherness. And, opposite them, the music press – men all – who view Lush as some superior pop group, one that could bring glamour and subversion and danger back to the charts. Why else write songs in such a traditional manner, and using such traditional methods? Why else those ravishing live shows and frequently gorgeous melodies?

Who's right? Who cares? As long as someone's being manipulative. Both factions appear to see Lush as pliable matter to be moulded, as and when they like – the press with their ridiculous and fulsome praise, the producer with his "art". Somewhere between the two lie Lush, two precociously talented female songwriters caught like butterflies in a jar, nearly choked of life altogether. Don't they get to have a say? You'd hardly believe it from this record.

"Spooky" (marvellously evocative, scary and silly, title: one which goes some way to capturing the contradictions which go to make up Emma and Miki's characters) is an album that incorporates state-of-the-art recording techniques as neatly as, say, Mike Oldfield's "Hergest Ridge". With all the failings that implies. Why the need to hide? Never mind the f\*\*\*ing quality, never mind the f\*\*\*ing players, feel the width.

One unfortunate side-effect of this is that this album *has no dynamics*. It has no contrasts, no highs and lows. Everything is one great wash, swirl and eddy of sound, guitars and vocals secondary to the magic fingers of The Great God Guthrie. It probably sounds great in the rarified atmosphere of the recording studio, with all those hypnotic flashing lights. NW2, and Lush sound de-personalised, shorn of any identity or interest.

The previous single, "Nothing Natural", highlights the album's failings: the dreary vocals trying to be dreamy, the "classy" production masquerading as high art, the way it's impossible to judge if there's a melody somewhere underneath the sequencer, the bit where the song almost breaks down and there's nowt left but some state-of-the-art wind tunnel noises, the way it goes on three minutes longer than necessary. Likewise, the bitty "Tiny Smiles" and super-bland "Fantasy", where the sentiments of the song ("For I know you really love no one but me") are at direct odds with the way Miki's voice has been treated – not laden with ennui as much as sheer boredom.

Most of the blame must lie with that man, The Great God Guthrie, he who is above criticism, according to my colleagues. He's drained Lush of the emotion of their live shows, sapped them of their strength, robbed them of Miki's frail, earthy voice, Emma's soaring guitar, as if such concepts are contrary to their identity. But surely, what we celebrated in that initial rush of blood with "Scar" and "Mad Love" was their very ability to communicate sorrow, enthusiasm, lust, not this blank carpet of would-be helplessness. I can see the idea behind Guthrie's approach – the blindest of critics could hardly fail to, he rams it down our throats so incessantly – but when this record's not sounding laboured, it mostly sounds weary.

"Spooky" only manages to break free of his vampiric grip when either Miki or Emma have written one of those lovely descending, spiralling trademark vocal motifs of theirs, as on Emma's luscious and lamenting "Monochrome", or on Miki's mesmeric, swirling "Covert". Emma's "Sometimes I think if I look at the phone it may ring/And sometimes I worry and fear what tomorrow may bring" on the former is particularly poignant.

But most of "Spooky" is pitched at exactly the same level. So a subtle segment like the opening "Stray" is made to sound identical to the vaguely Valentine-influenced "Superblast", and the sardonic and potentially biting "Take" is interchangeable with the rockier "Laura". The way the vocals have been reduced to an anaemic whine makes you wonder why Emma and Miki bothered to start Lush in the first place. Why not drag four kids off the street instead? "For Love", the new single, at least has a semblance of a melody (and the little bit where it goes all Euro-finishy is rather sweet), but... hell, you guessed it. *The production.*

Only once does Guthrie manage to improve on Lush without detracting. "Untogether" has a truly incandescent peeling guitar line, a drum machine that sounds like a thousand hands clapping and warming backing vocals. Miki sings hopelessly, "I'm not offended by all the things that you say/Cos it's such a predictable way to behave" and your heart goes out to her. Goosebump time.

But that last line could well be the coda as far as Lush and the press are concerned, unless something is done, and fast, about The Great God Guthrie. Lush still have so much potential, but they'll only begin to fulfil it when and if they can shrug away the influence of the men in power – the press, and the record company.

Just call me Judas. Judas Svengali Wannabe.

EVERETT TRUE

"Spooky" is released on January 27

# FEAR OF MUSIC



## VARIOUS ARTISTS

### CHAMPION SOUND: THE BEST OF KICKIN

(Kickin)

I GET the feeling that some of you out there (and one or two in here) are still under the impression that all dance music is SAW-esque disco bollocks. But associating the sort of acts featured on "Champion Sound" with your Kylies and your Sonias is a bit like bracketing Nirvana with The Scorpions. In fact, many of the tracks on this album are as gutsy and gritty as anything on Nirvana's "Nevermind".

"Champion Sound" shows why Kickin rank as one of the most respected hardcore techno labels in Britain. Kick Squad's "Soundclash" and The Wishdoka's "Evil Surrounds Us" are 24-carat crazy, the title of the latter having as much to do with its bassline as its horror film samples, and Zero Zero's "Zeroxed" is similarly not for the nervous: thrash played with keyboards instead of guitars. Here's perhaps a good place to also note the Hendrix samples of Messiah's "There Is No Law".

Messiah contribute two more tracks: "20,000 Hardcore Members", which neatly extends the life of the "There's something going on inside my head" line beyond Marathon and Nightmares On Wax, and "You're Going Insane". The dramatic switch from Italian piano and sweet vocals to a barrage of noise is brilliant and The Wishdoka's "Wasted" is pretty good too. A snippet of Chic, a reggae break, wild screams and Acid squiggles all have parts to play.

Even Santa Hardcore's "Merry Tekkno", a 12-inch free with the first pressing of the album, works better than expected. The way that a famous old Christmas ditty is used as the catalyst for a panic-spreading moon-stomp proves that techno isn't the clinical and humorless music medium you might think. "Merry Tekkno" is hell's "Jingle Bells": save that "disco bollocks" accusation for Electronic. **PUSH**

## BORGHESIA DREAMERS IN COLOUR

(Play It Again Sam)

"DREAMERS In Colour" marks a wildly improved Borghesia. Previous output from these Slav Eurobeat practitioners was invariably limited. Like Nitzer Ebb, the ban seemed to luck across a pulverising motor-beat then mooch around it, arms hanging by their sides, unsure what to do next. But here Borghesia open their wings and fly. They've developed a heartening variety.

The basis of "Dreamers In Colour" is the score for a ballet which toured Yugoslavia throughout the recent civil war. And while soundtracks are usually dire ventures, "Dreamers In Colour" brims with exotic textures and angles, with found noises and chance symmetry. It's a surprisingly lovely ambient adventure, a constantly shifting soundscape. Borghesia were always over-literal and blatant; now they've discovered the joys of evocation and ambiguity.

So "Dreamers In Colour" is a symphony in many keys. "Twins (Part III)" is a delicate, haunting doodle which recalls David Sylvian's productive collaborations with Ryuichi Sakamoto, while "400" – the distance in kilometres between Zagreb and Belgrade, the capitals of Serbia and Croatia – suggests a suddenly streetwise Depeche Mode. "Power City" could easily be Soft Cell, a high compliment indeed.

They haven't totally jettisoned their trademark powerbeat – "Scum" is a lumbering, pulverising monster march. Ar "Never Trust A Soldier" gestures, understandably and inevitably, towards the war which broke their nation as they recorded this. But mostly "Dreamers In Colour" finds Borghesia awake, alert and experimenting joyfully with brand new sonic toys. Slavs to the rhythm? You bet. Here are their finest moments yet.

IAN GITTINS