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### **Interview with Chris Letcher**

Emphasis in *italics*.

Michael Drewett [MD]: OK, Chris, so – could you just say a little bit about how you first got involved at Shifty, and what you'd heard about Shifty before that, even – and then coming in to your – that initial Urban Creep deal?

Chris Letcher [CL]: Well, I knew some of the Shifty recordings, from the late 80s, early 90s. Um – particularly the James Phillips stuff which, yeah, I was very into and listened to pretty much constantly, particularly when I left Grahamstown after university and went down to Durban. Um. And met up with Brendan and started a band with him there. Um. And there was a club in Durban that was related to Jameson's up in Jo;burg. There was a woman called Hannalie there who had worked with Lloyd before, and I think she may have been the person who put Lloyd in touch with us, or told Lloyd about us; somehow Lloyd found out about us. We didn't even, you know, send a demo or anything – as far as I can remember. Um. But we went, ended up going to Jo'burg and recording a demo up there. Um, Lloyd, also as far as I can remember never said, y'know, 'let's make an album', it was more just 'come and record and let's see if we can do anything,' basically, so it was – it was always just 'let's see what happens'. Yeah, it was – I mean we were extr –we were very young, and very naïve, and it was a massive education basically; in music and in recording, in constructing a song, basically – all that stuff which I think both Brendan and I learnt a huge amount from, basically, so... we were pretty raw and unformed, as a band – I mean it was – we were a live band, basically, and the studio stuff was a totally different story.

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So that – that was – an amazing thing to – amount of knowledge, really, that he passed on to both of us; I think basically changed our lives, basically towards being quite serious about music rather than just ‘yeah, ok, y’know, let’s see what happens in the next few weeks; y’know, see if we can go and play at this place and that place; and here are some chords let’s try and write, y’know, a verse or something. It became a lot more – yeah, serious and structured in a way – that was – quite useful.

MD: D’you think, given the fact there was an indie company in South Africa at the time, d’you think Shifty did what they could for you, as a band, or d’you think they were just constrained by the context, or d’you think there was more they could have done?

CL: Erm... Well, I mean honestly, no other record company would have given us the time of day we wouldn’t have been able to put out anything other than just some cassettes on our own, which I think we had done before we met Lloyd, basically, so... yeah, no I definitely don’t feel the company didn’t do enough at all. I mean Lloyd ...by that stage – we were very late in the Shifty day, really. I mean it – things had peaked I think. Lloyd had pretty much decided to give up producing records; so we – we were like the last gasp, I think – of that thing; and it was amazing to be part of the tail end of that – y’know – fairly short-lived scene.

But it was – it felt like real affirmation, basically, to *be* on the same label that had put James’s stuff out, and be recorded by the same person who had produced those James Phillips albums; and the – yeah, also the Voëlvry stuff, I mean that was, when we were at university that was a – that was massive; it really felt like quite a shift in the – shift in everything – in the culture generally, and in the way we thought about music, and how, y’know, music and its relationship to society, and – all of that stuff. So, yeah, I mean another part of Shifty’s work, really, that had a major effect on my thinking, certainly, yeah.

MD: And, Brendan was saying when I interviewed him earlier that he was, um, agreeing cause I was asking if it felt like there was a kind of camaraderie amongst Shifty, like a stable in a sense. Like you weren’t alone, and he said that was very much what it felt like – you played each other’s albums, and you – you felt that was an important part of what Shifty was as well?

CL: Yes, that's absolutely right.

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And, yeah. I mean, yes, it was quite amazing to – have connections to bands that I was also listening to there, like 'The Genuines', with Ian Herman playing on stuff we were recording in those days, which was just – *crazy*; it felt like a ridiculous privilege to have – such a genius musician playing on the – songs that we'd written, kind of thing – that was totally crazy. Jennifer Ferguson coming in and singing on stuff Matthew and I were working on, or Matthew's solo album that I was involved in as well. So that, also – yeah, it felt – it felt like everyone – everyone was kind of in it together; we were hanging out a lot with James, and Gary, and that crowd; and they were – they were – they had quite a sort of paternal relationship towards us, they were quite protective and, y'know – yeah, I suppose helping us negotiate things with the record label that they'd been with, and with the whole – idea of producing an album, where some of the creative – sort of *authority* in the project gets taken over by someone else – that can be complicated in a way, and I think – especially James would be – a very sympathetic person to talk to about those difficulties; and just very *inspiring* – just, like, talking about songs, and, yeah – it – that did feel like an amazing thing. And there was absolutely, as far as I am concerned, there was no other community of musicians that – certainly that I had any access to – that could have done anything in any way similar. There was a bit of a small musical scene in Durban, which we sort of came out of – but, yeah, it felt like really being – kind of accepted by this very – extremely talented and extremely warm and welcoming family up – mostly in Jo'burg really, but then also with Warwick and all that stuff happening down in Cape Town a bit later.

MD: OK. And then, what is your understanding of the significance of Shifty, as a record company right from its start? I mean...

CL: Well, certainly – its significance in my own life, just in terms of the music that was produced before I met any of those people, was pretty powerful, and – yeah – very much influenced the way that I thought about music, and how it worked; but also – also the politically engaged stuff, or the socially engaged stuff, or the stuff that – um – Jennifer was singing about, 'The Genuines' were singing about, obviously James in the Corporal Punishment stuff – the personal and the political in those songs was – yeah – incredibly powerful, and yeah, I mean that is just really my own personal response – you know, how Shifty kind of affected my life. But wider than that, I mean... Yeah it was

certainly doing – important work as far as I’m concerned, and work no-one else was doing, and there was like a desperate need for it really – and not just in the white music scene, in the white songwriting scene, but – yeah – in its way, sort of bringing all sorts of musicians together –

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a sort of range of backgrounds in musical styles, in musical... yeah, all that. In terms of – a lasting legacy... it’s quite hard to say. It really does seem like South Africans generally have pretty short memories in terms of – music, popular music from the past; and there are probably good reasons for that – pop music is ...kind of a disposable thing in some ways, and it’s very much always tied to its time, and all of that... yeah – where that spirit of a record company like Shifty is now, I – I’m not sure. I don’t see much evidence of it really around now – that independent spirit, the – kind of a – engaging with society in a very real kind of a way, and putting out – yeah, what I thought was incredibly strong music.

MD: That’s great, thanks.

CL: Is that enough?

MD: Yeah

CL: OK great.



[/ends.]

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