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Interview with Gary Herselman

Emphasis in *italics>.*

Michael Drewett [MD]: So um I know when you – when I interviewed you previously you said that you were just doing your thing at Jameson's and then Lloyd approached you to – to record. What – what were your um – expectations at that stage, of what Shifty would do, you know?

Gary Herselman [GH]: Well, when Lloyd approached us I was sort of – gobsmacked basically. Um – I couldn't believe that somebody would be interested in recording it, y'know, it – erm. There was a thing – er – with the band, when we went – when we first got our bass guitarist in, and we started like rehearsing the songs I'd written and he went 'what is *this* shit?' you know? 'No-one's gonna like this kind of thing.' And I had that sort of attitude as well. Y'know a lot of guys, especially a lot of, kind of, white – or peach South Africans – playing like – um – African, so-called African music, jive and all of that, and – I'd come from like Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, and through the punk thing and all of that. I thought, er, this is not the way to be pissed off about this situation, so we came in with that sort of – fast punk.

And then Lloyd after one of the gigs at Shifty – at er Jameson's actually, that you mentioned – came up and said he'd like to record us, and – *ach*, just basically couldn't believe that anyone was – interested in it, so I – like anything would go, you know?

MD: Had you heard of Shifty?

GH: Yes, yes, well I'd been – I was working at Hillbrow records as well, so – and they'd had, like, Sankomota out and those kind of things – and er – I can't remember the sequence but the Bernoldus album – the Bernoldus album really impressed me, I was blown away that that could be done on like on an eight-track, you know, recorder [Timecode – 00:02:39] – it really was amazing.

And I knew them from that aspect, from buying records from them. They also used to represent the Sterns catalogue, which was kind of, er, Africa – stuff, you know, kind of Celluloid, those kind of labels.

MD: Yeah.

GH: Um. And I – would deal with them that way, kind of buying stock from them and selling it then, and then when they were interested in recording the band it was just – as I say – unbelievable – couldn't – couldn't get in there quick enough.

MD: And that was in '88, '87

GH: '86, I think – something there, yah, somewhere there, yah.



MD: '86, OK right, yeah. So, so – did you have quite high expectations of the recording itself, you thought that would go well, with Shifty?

GH: I just was grateful to be – that somebody was interested in recording, basically. I didn't expect anything. And that – the recording was amazing, I thought. There were things in the mix that I wouldn't have done. I know Lloyd had just got a new – what they call a gating, I don't know if you're familiar with that sort of thing – he had 'gates', which means you can cut off the reverb, so if the sound is '*quaaaaahhh*' you can make it '*quah*', or '*quaaaaahhhhhhh*'. And he – er – was trying it out and I think he put a lot of that on the stuff. I actually spoke to him about it recently; he said that he had a problem with the drum sound – our drummer used to play with – er – sheets, torn off sheets underneath for live, which was very good, you don't get all the overtones; and he wouldn't take them off in the studio, and it was a bit – maybe a bit dead, which is – what he said.

But erm, no, I was amazed. I mean we went in and recorded that whole album in one day; he told me to go out and get drunk. I went out and got drunk; dived in the swimming pool and lan[ded] – hit my head as well. And then

came back the next day and *sang* it all, you know? Worked – well we did it all like we'd do it live, and then they just took out the vocal track and I just concentrated on just singing it once through, and that was it. It sounded great, I mean the first time we played it was – amazing; the first time...

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The first time he played it back I said 'are you playing – is that tape playing at the right speed? Y'know? Cause it's the first time I heard how fast the band actually was, without being involved in the playing of it, so. No it was amazing – beautiful, no – no complaints at all. And then the band split, so we had to chop – we had to make erm – sort of a – we had to compensate a little on the cover, just – we were only allowed two colours kind of thing, cause the band weren't gonna be promoting it, which was something they had to consider.

But we got all the lyrics and then everything was – Sarah Hills, you know Sarah Hills? – played with The Sunways? Bass guitarist. She actually did the cover – of 'Ek Se'; the first album, yah.

MD: So you're – you were just very pleased to be recorded.

GH: Essentially yah.

MD: You didn't have high hopes in terms of what would – what would – what the album would do.



GH: *No.*

MD: Or what Shifty would do with it.

GH: No – I didn't – *no, no*, it wasn't like that at all. You know it was the time when – when if you played your own songs you couldn't get a gig, firstly. So we were glad to be able get a gig, y'know? So that – which essentially was kind of Jameson's was the main thing – I mean there were one or two other places where you could play, but – if you played your own songs nobody was interested; it was the time of the cover band. So first we got a gig and then through the gig we get a – like, somebody who's gonna record our own songs, and put it out – it was just *wow*, you know, take anything you can get, you know? Sign your life away. So – I didn't know, I had no expectations, as I say – and the band – *that* band, that incarnation of the band split, just as the record came out, so. You can't expect people to – the band's gotta play live, to promote it. So I didn't expect much. And also I *knew*, from – I'd been playing since I was in Standard 8, kind of thing; and I – I *know* the difficulties of playing whitey rock and roll in South Africa. It was kind of – something I

knew, but just something I as compelled to do for – for whatever reason.
Maybe it was the only thing I *could* do.

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MD: So – so I mean beyond – beyond The Kerels, what – what were the major constraints facing Shifty then for you – I mean from – from your understanding of – having worked at Hillbrow Records and things like that.

HG: Well, independent, firstly budget's a big thing. You can't promote it – also your guys [are] talking about political stuff, er – getting in people's faces, getting banned by the SABC – they had that whole thing, you know about it, where they scratched the record, don't play this track. Some records are just *kshhhh* [mimics scratching the record]. They were – they had one song, 'Slum', that's on 'Ek Se', er – it was that er – minister, Jannie Malan, and his sidekick, who used to play the records backwards; he said, like, Satan wrote this song, y'know, all that sirt of thing – which could have worked out quite well, actually. It could, y'know, could have gone in the sort of Sex Pistols direction.

But yeah – and then of cour – y'know, there's just the thing of the population, y'know, the, the – firstly the how many whites were there then – 6 ... 5 million? I dunno. So – that's already/really[?] down. There's not many black people – so-called black – brown people I prefer to say, more accurately, er – that would be interested in it.



So there's – there's quite a few things: you can't get on the radio, there's no budget, the bands all can't hold it together, cause they have to – we had to work – it was a hobby essentially, y'know, you had to have a job so you could play music; um – yah, that's – that's... no ra – definitely no TV, no radio, nobody hears, you can't get – get it exposed. It's always kind of – in the underground, it was all in like a subculture, very much.

MD: So then you – you also played with the Gereformeerde Blues Band, and that er – that was a very different experience for you, obviously, because you had a big following and that kind of thing – er – and in a way that was Shifty's best sort of marketing exercise, in a way, going out on the road with the Voëlvry thing and so on. So d'you think, if you look at, say, the Gereformeerde Blues Band experience, that Shifty had – did enough for the band as well there? In terms of marketing it and putting it out, that kind of thing?

GH: Yes, I think so. Yah. There was a – what happened there was a – I think that's kind of how the major companies work. You have to get out there; once they see you've got – in the trenches – like the – the – the tour was on – was on

before the record was made, y'know, and the band was hitting the public and it just went *nuts*. I think with a lot of the major companies they'll do that:

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if you go and you start creating a sensation on your own, then they'll come in and say 'OK, well we'll put in another thousand dollars,' or whatever. So that was – although it wasn't planned that way I don't think, it worked in more of a conventional sense; it [claps for emphasis] we'd be, like, fought the war really kind of thing, just bring the record out; and I think it did – at that stage it was only on vinyl – and it did about 20,000 or something, yeah.

Although I think Mzwakhe also sold a hell of a lot, and the first Sankomota also sold a lot; but again it's a different – you know, with the way South Africa's divided.

MD: Yeah. Yeah.

GH: It's just one of those things.

MD: So what d'you think the legacy of Shifty is, if you look back on what Shifty did – I mean, what what – why is it important?

GH: Well I think, a lot of people say that Tic Tic Bang was the first independent record company, and I have no idea why, because Shifty were definitely before that. And I think they were like the pioneers, essentially, you know.

I'm surprised that no-one else wanted to record Sankomota, I mean Lloyd went – off in his *mobile*, y'know, to record them. Um. And Warrick was also involved, in the Kalahari Surfers stuff as well. I – I think they had – they – they were partners, I'm not – I don't know what the share was, but they were both partners – and Warrick was always in the – government's face [laughs], and that kind of thing, as well. So I think they – um... They kind of just lit a candle, that there's another way to do this, that you don't have to sit back and do this – we don't have to – all have to play Dire Straits and Chris Rea, you know? You can get in there, do your own music, and then – somebody then was listening and – I think that's given, in a way that – that – Nude Girls or somebody has brought, like, other people into it, or the GBB has brought Afrikaans music – I think Shifty did that for music as a whole, *independent music*, y'know? They were prepared to take chances, on – on stuff that they believed had good lyrical content, or the musical quality was of – of – of a different kind of – just a different aspect, or wasn't just pop songs, y'know? So I think they're, like, pioneers, yah.

MD: And d'you think that they were markedly different to other independents that were around?

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GH: I don't *remember* any other independents.

MD: There were – there was kind of Mountain...

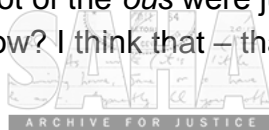
GH: Oh *yah*...

MD: Jo'burg Records, which was like – almost like a small major in a way. And there was Third Ear – Third Ear with Dave Marks...

GH: Yah...

MD: ...but Shifty seemed to be – to go more for, the margins almost.

GH: Yah; yah. And I think politics was a big deal, on that. People who weren't afraid to talk about what was going on, y'know. We weren't singing, like, surf songs, or – telling stories. A lot of the *ous* were just [...] [claps for emphasis] '*this is what's going on,*' y'know? I think that – that was – they were very brave, on that level.



MD: And d'you think as an artists who worked with Shifty, there was a kind of a – could you call it a – a Shifty stable, or like erm camaraderie that – existed and that – as a whole, amongst all the musicians there, or most of the musicians there?

GH: I think to a certain extent. I think it – some of that was also divided by like the black/white apartheid vibe. But I definitely think so; *yah*, no definitely I think so. That caused, like, infighting as well, but I mean that's like any family. But I definitely get a sense that – that there were. There were amazing groups – like *Tananas*, I mean their first album was on Shifty. And then you've got that same thing, where the *ous*, they get a bit of recognition, and they – move off to another label, and maybe it doesn't work out so well there kind of thing, but. Yah, I definitely think. There was like that – His – His Muzzled Voice – there was that week where all the Shifty bands played.

MD: Say a bit about that? How did that work, so was it a concert?

GH: It was a week at the Market, yah, yah. And em – I actually saw a poster from it the other day. And the whole of like Kalahari Surfers played – I actually played

in – three bands – in that week. That was the other thing – a shortage of, like, musos that were prepared to get up and – get their –

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MD: You used to all play on each others' albums a lot, and that.

GH: There was that kind of thing, definitely. But that happens anywhere, you know? I mean – if you're Robbie Robertson, or whatever – U2, whatever, they're all, like, if you start to work out 'OK, these guys can *do it*,' these guys can do it, kind of.... Um – and – Steve Louw also did that quite a bit, he used – like, the hot shots kind of thing. So that's a – that's a familiar thing, but yes we did play on each others' albums, and play live. I mean I played with the Rats, and I played on their record with Koos Kombuis, the GBB, er – er – The Kerels; I had a group called Archie Pelago, we also recorded in there – and people get to know 'Ah! That guy who played on that thingy.' You know, like our drummer, Andrew Clelland, he also played for the Rats eventually, they heard from him through that, so he heard via that – and – you just kind find the other guys who will do it, as well, you know, so... who've made it that far, to be able to actually play now. A lot of guys just give up when they see that its – y'know, that – [...] Jonathan had a – Jonathan Handley from the Rats had a great analogy here: playing South Afr – playing whitey rock and roll in South Africa is like – climbing a set of stairs – stairs – with a piano strapped to your back handing out 50 rand notes.

[both laugh]

MD: So, if you could just sum up, then, er, Shifty, and – and, if somebody was to ask you 'why is Shifty important?', what would you say?

GH: I think they broke – they're, as I say, pioneers, they lit the candle, they showed – other ways of doing – they were prepared to get in and take risks, they were prepared to stand *up* to the authorities; even though, y'know, like – it was, like – almost impossible odds, kind of thing. And to – create kind of an underground scene, y'know? But there was a thing – a whole thing going on in Cape Town as well, I think yah; as well – but I mean – it's just too much distance for us; we got to Cape Town once, [it] was great, but to – we didn't have that sort of – camaraderie thing as you were saying. At that stage. I met a lot of the guys later. And then Durban was always a funny place as well. Stuff – always – kind of came out of – bands like Squeal, which were great. Er. But they seemed more few and far between, I don't know, y'know?

MD: Yeah.

GH: Erm. Yah, no – they – they – they showed a way, definitely, I think – definitely.

MD: Yeah. OK. Thanks.

GH: Good. [ends]

