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Interview with Willem Moller

Emphasis in *italics*.

Michael Drewett [MD]: So um Willem could you just talk initially about your – your first experience of Shifty, when did you first hear of them...

Willem Moller [WM]: Um. I first heard of Shifty, I'm guessing now but somewhere in the mid-80s, '84, '85. I became aware of – suddenly there was this music that er – the kind of stuff that – I was *hoping* I would hear in South Africa, but – definitely wasn't coming from the major record companies, Bernoldus Niemand, The Lurchers; and so on. And I was obviously very interested – here's a label that's signing the kind of people that I would like to hear and the kind of bands that I was playing in, and my friends were playing in. So this was very exciting. And um, we were aware that, um, production-wise, I mean Lloyd was recording on the 8-track, so it wasn't a 24-track studio... but – suddenly there was actually somebody recording these people.

Erm. So that was very exciting. And erm, I immediately became a fan of Bernoldus and of – James; although – and – and, erm – there were – er – there was a compilation that had Corporal Punishment, and –

MD: 'A naartjie in our Sosatie', yeah.

WM: That one, yes. I think I had a cassette of those. So this was very exciting to me at that time; I was playing in similar bands in Cape Town; and, er – I immediately became a big fan of James, and then I moved to Johannesburg

around that time. And I was in a band, and we actually took a demo to Lloyd, he was still in a house in – in Crown Mines somewhere with a caravan parked outside. Lloyd wasn't interested. I don't blame him, it was a terrible band; but anyway, that's how I first met him.

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And then, erm... The Kerels came out, The Genuines, Jennifer Ferguson, I don't remember a particular order, but – The Softies... er – Jive Mixup, Winston's Jive Mixup; several others. And for me that was the – the really exciting stuff of that time. I think The Genuines were one of the best bands I ever heard, The Kerels – I became huge fans of these people. And I realised that this is the label that's signing the important stuff. And not only in the sense that this is the *new* music and not the mainstream – I mean to – to – to us the mainstream was just boring, copying overseas styles, there was no innovation. We weren't interested, me and my friends. We were interested in what's happening now, and we were living in Yeoville, it was a – state of emergency; this is – *hectic* times; and there *are* people who are singing and – and addressing these issues. And Shifty was the label that's recording them. So – it became our label, in a way. For like, a community of people.

And the first time I – recorded with Lloyd was with the Gereformeerde Blues Band. This must have been in '88, thereabouts, yah. And then we – we – we did first a single, which was 'Hillbrow' and 'Ry' – actual 7 single, vinyl, I've still got the picture sleeve; and then we did the album, 'Eet Kreef', and then subsequent to that I – erm – I played on a whole bunch of albums, er – Koos Kombuis, Johannes Kerkorrel's solo stuff, erm – Radio Rats, Matthew van der Want; and various other people. And then Lloyd and I co-produced a couple of albums: the – The Sunshines; and The Lurchers, the – the 'Sunny Skies' album.

And we became friends and erm – we – I was running a small studio by that time in my house in – in – in Yeoville; and we ended up – you know, he would lend me equipment, and I would help him out with stuff, and so we'd – it kind of went like that over the years. I – I ended up with a 16-track tape recorder that he used in the – in the 80s, it became mine in the 90s, and so on, and I got some microphones off him and so on.

So er – that goes on to this day, we [laughs] – we've – we've become close friends over the years. And – I've developed enormous respect for Lloyd. I think he's – he's an unsung hero. I mean he saw potential and the importance of artists when nobody else did. When the mainstream people were stuck in the mindset – y'know, don't – 'avoid politics, and copy whatsoever [sic] been a

hit from overseas' – and they're to some extent still like that, it's a real blind mindset. And I think Lloyd was a visionary: he saw all this talent around him, and decided to record them, and – bravely – put it out there. And – er – if it wasn't for him, a lot of these people probably would not have been recorded. So, er, to me he's an absolute hero.

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MD: And, I mean, you've sort of touched on this a bit now, but um – you mentioned how you played on different albums, and in a sense, there's a group of you who almost were like part of a Shifty stable, you're all on each others' albums, and I mean how was that – was that a – ?

WM: But that's a common thing on indie labels; if you look at the Americana scene in America now, which is kind of – exists outside of the mainstream, it's a very – very similar situation. It's often – because of like-minded people who don't like the corporate situation, they kind of congregate together; er – there's – there's a little bit of a – you know if you're alternative to something, then you – you tend to search out – y'know – fellow – thinkers. And you help each other. It's often – it's not about money. It's often low-budget. So people – you know, it's you're a friend, will you help me? It's often like that, so it's... Whereas the others – the other side of the industry it's all about y'know if you don't pay me I'm not gonna do it. Which I've also done – I worked as a session musician for a long time, and I earned money that way. But I've always – if it's my friends, and it's something that I'm interested in, and it's often much more enjoyable doing these projects that aren't gonna make any money, I say yes, because it's fun to do, and I'm often more proud of those things than of the mainstream stuff where often I've asked 'please don't – don't put my name on the cover [laughs], I'm only doing this for the money,' so – that's often how it comes about. So it's – it's a friend thing. It's a bunch of friends who – who work together like that. And Shifty was definitely a focal point for a – sort of a network around it. The – the Springs scene, with all those people: the Rats, and Lloyd, and Shi – and the – the Softies, and Carl Raubenheimer, those people all came out of the Springs scene; so I think it started there for Lloyd; he was the bass player in the – in the Rats

MD: For a while...

WM: I think, yah. So I think it kind of started there – he met that crowd, and then it got bigger. And, er – I think there was – I mean, um, in the 80s, because of the political situation there was also an 'us and them' situation. So I think that was part of it, so that – likeminded people politically also congregated around Shifty.

MD: Hm.

WM: And around Yeoville, it was a Yeoville scene. But it – it spread bigger than that eventually.

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MD: And I mean er – Shifty was obviously as you were saying they were recording – er – left wing bands maybe and also alternative musically, so it wasn't that easy for them to get radio play, a) because of the playlisting policy and b) because of censorship. Er. And then there was distribution monopolies and things like that. So given all that – those restraints, do you think that they – did enough for the musicians who recorded with them? Could they have done more?

WM: Erm. [pause] Yah, I remember some of – some of the people in that crowd complaining. But, the fact is, we were up against the SABC, which had strict, y'know, censorship, and was definitely not likely to play the kind of stuff that Shifty was producing, or very little of it. That was the one factor.

There was some media resistance. I mean the lefty media would publicise, but the rest wouldn't. Y'know, there was – there was fr – it was a weird time, because in a lot of mainstream media, and record companies and so on, er – they didn't want to have anything to do with *political*. It was like a tag, like a stigma. You're political, we'd rather not because – you might get banned, you might get censored, we might have difficulty promoting you, your gigs might have problems; and so on and so on. So they preferred to have people who were not political. It was like a – a line in the sand almost.

MD: Yeah.

WM: So that's what Shifty was up against. And it was definitely problematic, so I understood the situation completely. Um, y'know – there are some record companies that operates [sic] purely like banks. They – they will fund you, in the form of an advance or whatever, but they want it back. They operate like a bank. And they – they – I tell people avoid them like the plague. Cause once they've got you they can *destroy* you.

MD: Yeah.

WM: Do it yourself. And Shifty was a kind of do-it-yourself. So the kind of record company where they would sign you and put you on a retainer, or give you an advance so you can live and – that was not the case. Shifty couldn't do that. It

was not that kind of financial deal *at all*. But... you *could* have your music out there. And you – if you played gigs you can sell your music to your fans, and – the left wing media, the *Rand Daily Mail*, later the *Weekly Mail*, and so on. They would give you some publicity. And if you play gigs regularly – I mean there were a couple of venues, Jameson's and a few others;

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but at *least* you could reach your fans and have your product out there. So I think just in terms of that – and the fact that what's happening now, is that it's now become of historical value, because the stuff exists. It might not have existed.

MD: Yeah. I mean this – this applies probably more to you than some of the other musicians, but um – because you were part of the Voëlvry thing – but did you feel, as part of Shifty, that you were part of a broader movement while you were actually there – did you feel that this was something special that – you were part of? Or did it only come to you later when – when – in retrospect.

WM: I w – I think I was quite aware. Like I – like I say, we – we – it was like 'us against them;' in a sense. And erm – it was also like a Yeoville thing. It was an amazing place in the 80s, despite all the crap that was going down. Because a whole lot of creative people congregated there who had a – they – something in common, that – *we're against that*. So, er. Yah, it's a – how can I put it? Er. I think what happened is – we used to joke that we – we used to drink against apartheid at Jameson's. Because to some extent it was a pretty small bunch of people, maybe a few hundred people. Sometimes I thought as many people as you can squeeze into Jameson's on a Friday night. That – that – were part of the scene. Or, who supported the scene. What happened with Voëlvry is it suddenly got *much* bigger. Because it – it – it went to all the campuses around the country, so – um – that's where Shifty – that's the first time I think they had, like, when an album went gold. Actually sold in substantial quantities although they were still tiny in – er – in terms of *global* sales, but in terms of South African sales, it actually made some *impact*. And er that's because it went – it actually went on a national tour. And actually reached – It's because of the Afrikaans angle of course. Cause suddenly the people in power had to take notice of it. They couldn't ignore it *because* it was in Afrikaans.

So that was a shift. And gen – definitely took Shifty to another level.

MD: This is the last question I've gotta ask, is just um, what do think is the main – or – are the main aspects of Shifty's legacy? Looking back now.

WM: Well. Major major artists that have come out of this country. James Phillips for one. Er... Johannes Kerkerrel. The Lurchers. Erm erm, The Genuines. Nobody else was interested in recording these people and I think they're major talents.

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So that's – just for – for Lloyd's vision – to – to recognise this talent and record them. And to give a home to – to – er – a – a really an alienated bunch of people. Creative people in the 80s who were really cut off from a – from means of expression to a large degree because of censorship and because of the mainstream's – er – basically tacit support of the government, cause it was safe.

MD: Yeah.

WM: And – a support that didn't wanna piss off the SABC and so on. So a whole lot of people – creative people – had very little means of expression. And Shifty gave a home to them. And I think that's a major legacy.

MD: Yep.

WM: And – just, just one other thing is that – I mentioned when we started that – er – when I first became aware of Shifty as – as a label that would actually sign bands that I believed in, it was a – production-wise it was on a lower level – it was on demo level, or not professional at all compared to the 24-track studio. But Lloyd is actually a brilliant engineer and producer, and he soon upped his game. And a lot of those productions, if you listen to them now, he actually captured those bands, he captured the energy. And they might be raw on some levels; but he actually knew what he was doing. And the – those things stand up today. And they actually capture an era. And that's a part of the – of the legacy that I think – will live on as well.

MD: OK. That's great.

WM: Cool. You got what you want?

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