

# MUSIC

## ..m.i.x. By GUS SILBER

### HAPPY AS PIGS IN SHIPS

The Happy Ships make me want to finger-paint. Alternatively, the Happy Ships make me want to stick my fingers in my ears. Why? To spread the paint around, of course.

Red, blue, yellow and loud, the Happy Ships can be heard on "Sound Future" (Shifty Records), a deliciously scrambled and deliciously stir-fried compost of fingernail scrapings and stainless-steel shavings and whatever else — lemon rinds, naartjie pips, nicotine and cement — happens to get caught up in the flotsam of urban decay.

Put this in your wok and smoke it, baby. Not so much Dada as Gaga, and not so much a pop group as a kibbutz, the Happy Ships succeed in making music that is both graceful and ugly, both friendly and aggressive, both joyful and manic-depressive.

In other words: we are dealing with a bunch of schizophrenic nutsos here, children. They splash their canvas with prima-



ry colours — Brass! Drums! Bass! Guitars! — and then they curl up and go crazy when the colours start to run.

Red and blue makes purple; red and yellow makes naartjie; red and yellow and blue makes the sun go down. The result: a magnificently loony effort that recalls the spirit, if not the abrasive agit-prop ideology, of earlier sound-collage experiments by Frank Zappa and Henry Cow.

But these homegrown happy sailors are more of a collision between Pigbag and David Byrne. Like Frankenstein's

monster, a lumbering concrete riff emerges from the labour pangs of shoulder-shrugging saxophones and corrugated percussion and mad tongues licking guitars, dogs bark, cars hoot, tapes loop; and suddenly we have a voice: *I don't wear gloves, I walk about nude, I speak about love, I think about food.*

On "Making Out", a chorus of synchronised puffing horns draws breath for a guitar that cuts like a butcher's knife. On "Egg and Bacon Plantation", a puk-puking saxophone spirals

into the American national anthem and tands on its head in the pig-trough.

On "We're Not Important", a chorus of "So wah, wah, wah" finally elevates these existentialists into infancy. But wait a second. The Happy Ships are important.

More important, the Happy Ships are fun. And downright dangerous.

PS: The Happy Ships have a surprise for you. Write to: SURPRISE FOR ME, Shifty Records, PO Box 27513, Bertsham, 2013. ●

**THE HAPPY SHIPS**  
Sound Future  
4 (Cross-National Product)/Shifty Music  
(2013)  
review: Jay Savage

It is, with more than a little pleasure that this is a record that pigments not only its own existence but also attention and praise.

The Happy Ships avoid the rigours of our music's traditional parts; they appear to have nothing but disdain for the "process" and display a vague antipathy towards their own position as recording artists. It's refreshing to come upon a group who are adventurous and innovative without being smug or deluded as to their own significance.

But it is sad (and true) that Sound Future, must, of necessity, be an indictment of so much else that surfaces as pop-papi; think, if you will, of the calculated smarm of a Bright Blue or the misplaced confidence and self-satisfaction of an Ella and this is a reminder that the Happy Ships have little in common with these groups.

But then, while remaining the most sane of all groups, they have little in common with most local groups. A collection of some six acquaintances (who live in different parts of the country), they create their boisterous sounds when whim or convenience dictate. Put together under the control of Shifty Music's headman, Lloyd Ross (who, with Kalahari Surfer and fellow Shipper Warric Swinney brought us the engaging debut from Sankamoto last year) this disc has been long in construction.

Fragmentary, this record certainly is. Instrumental tracks were laid down individually over many months and this contributes to the range and diversity of the content. The LP has its flaws but its boldness (and by this I don't mean inaccessibility — the music is easy and dazzlingly melodious) is sufficient to merit its purchase. The Ships take occupation of your mind with their discomfited, unreserved, (this includes Cigarettes, Hooper, Nothing Inside and Teething) and that's just the first side! You will not see them on Follow That Star.

Lloyd Ross' success in completing this exasperated document of the privileged South African's aspirations, fears and empty joys is an admirable one and one that is — thank God! — never sacrificed wit (better as it may be) for sobriety.

In an article in the emerging new magazine, *Vula!* (issue No. 2), Lloyd Ross claimed, in typically self-effacing style, that Sound Future was an "aimless LP". I know what he means, but I prefer to think of it as an LP of unrestricted, tangential development and direction. Now, if only he'd get together with East London's Not Even The TV... 8413,50 to Shifty, Box 27513, Bertsham, 2013.

The Happy Ships' first LP 'Sound Future' sits alongside Lou Reed's 'New Sensations' as my most favourite record of the past three months. I saw them live on stage once — dancing, laughing out of control — heard their scruffy demo tape by accident, and now, in possession of a beautifully silkscreened cover of a pristinely clear, loud LP, I am happy. It is joyfully eccentric, the panicked sound of chickens gracing a song called 'Egg and Bacon Plantation', firmly revving Volkswagens and sundry traffic noises introducing a pummeling version of 'Car Hooper', and the deeply concerned lanes of Hamish throwing themselves across a sincere 'Cigarette', as indeed they do throughout an album of ABSOLUTE ORIGINALITY. Nothing could possibly have presaged this debut: a bass thrums, walking; sparse whining guitar and a saxophone of guttural, asthmatic fury. This music tends to circle curiously rhythm motifs, reminiscent of dub, accelerating into bursts of extreme melody or, yet again, a hostile blast of sax or intense Hamish prognostication: 'You're Not Important' imparting torpor sentiment with an edge at ridiculous humour; the solemn (?) line 'I don't like guns/I think about food' filled out by a very sad and extremely silly whistle. Throughout this album there gradually fills out a vision of intelligent beings musing and raging on topics of disarming trivia, twisted enough to see the darkness underneath — fortunately emerging more poignant and hilarious than po-faced. And dance! Hey!

(The Happy Ships album is the first in a series of releases that promises to completely pervert the face of corporate South African pop. Produced by Lloyd Ross from a caravan called the Shifty Mobile (see Fast Forward April 18, 1984 — gosh, we are quick around here), under the Shifty Records label, it ushers in a month-by-month assault by the likes of Bernardus Niemand (who he?), the Kalahari Surfers, the Saffies, Roger Lucey, Timothy AND MORE. With the noble ideal of creating some sort of homegrown pride, emphasising originality, and incorporating all the neglected areas of management, promotion, touring etc etc, this merits mass-scale support, everybody. The records will be cheaper than local pressings, and better (imported Italian vinyl, no less), and available at various outlets in the big cities.)