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Interview with Koos Kombuis

Emphasis in *italics*.

Michael Drewett [MD]: Ok, so erm, Koos, could you begin by just talking briefly about how you got involved with Shifty, and why you went to Shifty initially with your, with your demo?



Koos Kombuis [KK]: Well I had some Afrikaans songs written already, and – it was sort of way out of the – the norm of usual Afrikaans music, of that time. Er – I was – I had sent some demos to record labels, and – ich – there was no interest *at all*, and no-one took me seriously. I was recording with a coloured girlfriend I had at the time, Gillian Botha, and it was like Afrikaans protest music.

And then – I one day – I heard about Bernoldus Niemand, the album – and I found – I finally bought a copy of it on the Greenmarket Square and I checked the name of the record label and thought hmm, maybe they'd be interested. I knew Bernoldus's music was better than mine, especially in terms of musical quality and notes and stuff. My – my stuff was mostly about lyrics. But I made a cassette and I sent it off, and – it took a while and then Lloyd wrote back and they actually accepted it. I was *overjoyed*. It took them another year or two [laughs] to get it together to actually make a recording, but we – it was the beginning.

MD: You've sort of answered my question – next question, which is – what – what did you know about Shifty before that? So you knew of Shifty just because of [...] – Bernoldus Neimand?

[Timecode – 00:01:36]

KK: I didn't really know anything about them, except that they sounded a bit shifty. And then I – I travelled up north to meet the people and they explained to me that they used – they had started out as a mobile recording studio, that they were shifting around all the time. It was – very much like a home industry. And I – eventually I got so involved with them I settled in Jo'burg.

And I became one of the Shifty crowd, with Shifty – one of their recording artists. I – and I finally realised my dream of meeting James Phillips in the flesh, becoming friends with him, it was – it was – I was quite awestruck I remember. These people were my heroes and my role models. And even though we were marginalised in South African society of those days, these were the people I looked up to and I emulated them. Yah.

MD: Did you feel like, in other words, there was a kind of camaraderie amongst Shifty artists, you felt you were part of something?

KK: Yes, we were – it was us against them. [laughs] I – I must add those were not happy days. I – I wasn't – I think of those days as very dark times. It was difficult being – protesting against that system. It was a all-pervading system. The National Party ruled every aspect of our lives – or every aspect of the lives of black people, and everyone in the country. It was *extremely* difficult – we – we – we had – very – tough times, we were, the office at Shifty – offices were raided once or twice by the security police; there was a lot of pressure on us. So, I remember those days as extremely – confusing, and – I actually think of myself in the third person, as if – I wasn't really there, I had put on a mask and I was just going through the motions. I knew I had to do this thing, but it wasn't always pleasant, it was terrifying. Yah.

MD: What was your experience at Shifty like itself in terms of the recording process [KK laughs] – how did you find that?

KK: Erm. They had integrity, but they were not always all that professional. [laughs]

MD: OK.

KK: I remember the morning of the first recording, we couldn't find a guitar. We had to *break* into – I think it was Roger Lucey's house, he was on holiday. Break a window, open his house, get his guitar, climb out through the window, go to the studio.

[Timecode – 00:04:16]

Because we couldn't find an acoustic guitar that was like the one I was playing. Heaven knows where my guitar was, I probably didn't have one. [laughs] So and then Lloyd sort of parked me in front of a microphone and he said 'Sing! I'm going shopping.' And he left for – two, three hours, and I sang all the songs I knew. [laughs] That was sort of the first recording.

MD: And then your – your second album was great – it was like really well – it seemed like, y'know, he brought a lot of really good musicians on that, yeah –

KK: Yah. The second one, was, yah, on the contrary, that was a very professional product. Thanks to James, who actually wrote sheet music for every song, and arranged every song. And then we did it the hard way, we – we did a live recording from – from the music. We rehearsed it, with a full band, and then we played it all together, there were no separate tracks. And that was – that was – I thought at the time that was the way you do it. I didn't realise that was the – that was the *hard* way to record – also the most decent way to record, 'cause that – that was a true, authentic recording of us playing together. And I think – I still think that's probably my favourite Koos Kombuis recording, it was *fantastic*. And the spirit of everyone really came through, it was a *great* record.

MD: Were you given any directives on – on what to record, or song choices, or did you just kind of do your own thing?

KK: I had pretty much freedom, although Lloyd would say I like this song and I like that one, he wouldn't sort of say I'm not – I'm not *allowing* this one at all; and that was nice, because one reason I went into music at the time – because I was a writer before that – with Afrikaans publishing firms, and – where I always felt that people were looking over my shoulders and – trying to censor my stuff, in terms of politics. I always felt the presence of the *broederbond*. With Shifty there was no such nonsense. I mean, we could do what we wanted to – as long as it was funny and good and interesting, and – everything goes, it was like, there were no restrictions on swearwords or anything like that. So that was lekker, yah. And – James, sort of took me under his wing for a while, and he – he tried to teach me – music. Like, Jannie Hanepoot as well, he tried to explain music theory to me, but – it was useless,

I didn't have any – I couldn't cope, it was like – still today my kids take music lessons at school and their teacher sends them home and says 'your f – your dad would probably be able to explain that thing to you.' And – I don't know the first thing. I can't even – that chapter about music theory, I don't even understand the first sentence on the first page, it, it's... So I've got no musical talent whatsoever; I've got a feeling for rhythm, and the few chords I know I can do, but then I'm OK with lyrics, but – [Timecode – 00:07:10]
James tried very hard [laughs]. It was just – no way...

So maybe I was lucky, I think in spite of the shortcomings of Shifty records, they were the perfect company to get me going, I think. Definitely.

MD: So on that note – the shortcomings – I mean do you think Shifty did all they could for you? I know you had a bit of a – I mean you, after that second album you left for a major, so how did that...?

KK: I never had a serious fight with Shifty or with Lloyd. I can't remember any... I remember fights with fellow musicians *ach* but that's irrelevant, but I never had a fallout with Lloyd or I never left Shifty under a cloud of anger. Er. I would have liked to make more money [laughs], but then again – we didn't sell that many records and – there w – there was one point of contention and that wasn't Lloyd's fault, er – We never got properly paid for the Voëlvry tour because halfway through the tour the money got stolen. By one of *us*, we don't know who. And that was quite a lot of – cash. We – probably shouldn't have travelled with all that cash, but... So Lloyd couldn't pay us, I mean we got like a session fee of 50 rand a – a gig, which is ridiculous, because the tour should have made much more money. But that – I never held that against Lloyd, I mean – I think I know who stole the money, but I can't prove anything. [laughs] It's just water under the bridge. Yah.

And er – and exac – in fact when I let for a bigger record label, I – I ended up with Gallo which was much worse than Shifty in every way, I mean... It was horrendous, they had all the facilities, they had the big studios, they had the marketing, they had – they were able to put my CDs in the shops, but – *my goodness me*, the way that – they found legal ways of cheating me out of every possible cent, with contracts and with small print, and – I'd *never* go back to Gallo, not in my life. I mean, or – I don't like companies like that. [laughs] No way.

MD: So um, I mean what – what do you think Shifty could have done more for you then than they were doing at the time? I mean how did you feel at the time about it? Can you remember?

I don't actually think... They were *severely* restricted by the situation in the country. I mean – we all wanted to be rich and famous, but then they would have had to go mainstream, and – I don't think they knew how and I don't think they were supposed to. Because the mainstream music of the time was – ah [big sigh, pause] –

[Timecode – 00:09:46]

There were bands, like Mango Groove, that were trying to do the right thing, and also go mainstream, and – even that didn't sound real to us, I mean they were having this sort of – township sound... still today I don't like Mango Groove [laughs]. They got a big sponsorship from somewhere and they went all over the place. And – we couldn't do that. I couldn't – I am perceived – today I'm perceived as a mainstream artist, for the simple fact that – the – the – the scenery has changed, and public opinion has shifted to a point where I'm somewhere near the m – not quite in the middle, but somewhere left centrefield; I can make a living, because our music – we didn't change but our music got accepted eventually, gradually. And bands like Fokofpolisiekar are invited to Huisgenoot Skouspel. So the doors have been opened. I haven't sold out in any way. I can make a living – I live in a fucking double-storey house. And this morning I checked the dumpsters – the *perkies* had raided the dumpsters again, and I think – how can people be that poor? And I remember, fuck / used to be that poor. I mean we were living in Hillbrow and going to the flats next door to score empty cooldrink bottles from the blacks living there and – that's where I come from, that's my roots and here I am now; well, thanks to Shifty, they started [laughs] – started me on this road.

MD: So talking about Voëlvry, Shifty was obviously crucial to Voëlvry happening, weren't they?

KK: They were a – Shifty was a little bit slow on the uptake on certain things – I had to *sell* Ralph Rabie to them as a product, Johannes Kerkorrel. They didn't – they heard his music on tape and and – but they – they – only when Lloyd saw him live, he realised that this was a guy – that could go places, and then he actually became – I rea – oh that's also something I realised in retrospect that he was actually the leader of our alternative movement – he was the brains behind it. We were all a little bit envious of him. He – he had vision. He was quite far ahead of his time – but –

Also the idea of a live tour – Dirk was my manager at the time. And he also had – some kind of vision, he was also quite far ahead of his time – he realised – he – he – he sort of forced me into a rock and roll thing, when I only wanted to play folk music. In the end I – I realised folk music was probably my

strong point, and I was sort of – I did the folky thing on the Voëlvry tour and I only occasionally played with bands. But Dirk realised that rock and roll was – would be the medium of protest. And he – he got this band organised around Ralph – and he – he got the musicians together, and then he told Lloyd, we must go on a live tour, and it took Lloyd a while to – to warm to the idea. He was a bit slow on that as well. [Timecode – 00:12:47]

But eventually we got it together, and we got a – small sponsorship and we went, and that tour changed everything. I mean, that – that was the beginning of *awesome* stuff – we got international press and s – [laughs].

MD: So just going back a bit then, back to the thing of going to the major, when you went to Gallo. Why did you leave Shifty and go to Gallo, was it about hoping for better distribution and –

KK: I wanted a CD deal. Er. OK. I was – extremely dishonest at that point, I – I had a thing on with Durban Beach Studios, they were recording a CD; and then I got this offer from Anton Huisen and Gallo, and I dropped these good guys like a – like hot potato, and I went up north and I recorded with Gallo, which was *extremely rude* of me. I probably deserved what was coming my way with Gallo. I shouldn't have done that. I should – I mean I should have stuck with Durban Beach Studio, they were also a small outfit like Shifty, they were trying to do the right thing, they didn't have all the resources, they were slow, I was impatient; I wanted to be a big star, and I thought Gallo, here I come. So [sigh], that was a terrible thing. I apologised to them *years* later – to Durban Beach Studio, and I said 'I was an arsehole,' and – I deserved the way people treated me at Gallo because I went there with all the wrong motives, and – I was extremely selfish. And that was the – that was a *low* point in my career. I was fighting with Johannes Kerkerrel, I was – me and James, our friendship had sort of died down, it was a terrible time.

But I suppose you have to go through that kak; [laughs] and come out the other way. If I was a sellout it was then. Not now. But at that time I was a complete sellout. And I made this *horrible* record – 'Elke Boemelaar se Droom'. It sounded like, a bit like the – I mean the lyrics were OK but the production was like – [sigh] it was a total compromise, no. I *hate* that record still today, I can't stand it.

MD: OK I just want to ask you one last question, which is um: What do you think are the main aspects, or is the main aspect of Shifty's legacy, looking back now?

KK: Shifty recorded a lot of people like myself who never would have gotten recording deals... Many black artists, I think my favourite guy was Simba Morri, he disappeared somewhere in the middle. And then there was the guy that became a bank robber later, what was his name, Mzwakhe?

[Timecode – 00:15:15]

MD: Mzwakhe – Mzwakhe Mbuli.

KK: Mzwakhe [laughs] – I mean they were all these outcasts – and – and then there was these horr – these *incredible* musicians like James Phillips – the Lurchers, I mean – people will appreciate those recordings for years to come, it will never go away, it's like – part of our history now.

So – like I said, in spite of the shortcomings, Shift – Shifty played a major role in my life, and – I'm very grateful – for those days and – Yah. Sometimes I think I still need people like Shifty [laughs] in other aspects of my life. Yah, I'm trying to sell science fiction stories overseas, and I keep thinking 'if I could only find a literary agent in England that – that's got the mindset of Shifty Records.' But they're all so *la-di-dah*, and they want literature, or they want Mills and Boons and I – my stuff sort of – falls between the cracks. So I need somebody like Lloyd now in my life, but unfortunately, Lloyd can't do that for me any more [laughs].

MD: OK. Thanks very much.

KK: OK. Thanks.

[/ends]