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Interview with Lloyd Ross.
Emphasis in *italics*.

Michael Drewett [MD]: ...OK, Lloyd – I've spoken to you in the past about the history of Shifty, so that's – got all that on record; but just a few things around that – um – I was just – I've always sort of been puzzled about, given the sales of Shifty weren't that great, how did you manage financially until you got funding? I mean what was the...

LR: Well, um – it was a labour of love, so – I sort of supported it. I made money in the film industry, doing – first of all location sound on films, and then as a composer, of film scores. Um. And I kind of brought in a bit of money, and that's how I originally, actually, bought the equipment. And from then on really, it was – because we owned the studio, we owned the studio equipment, we didn't really have to pay for studio time and that kind of thing; so it was just my time, and the musicians' time – that er – and that's not really an expense, y'know?

MD: But then you had the album art, and the cost of all the –

LR: Yeah you had to pay for – obviously pay for getting the albums manufactured and that kind of thing, but you know we – sort of small steps to start with, and erm, you know, right from the beginning with Sankomota for instance, it was always er – um – a case of learning as we were going along. So, y'know, we

tried to find a way to put it out ourselves, and – distributing yourself is very very difficult – then we went to the major distributors – which was, at that stage, Gallo and EMI – and neither of them wanted it. So we actually put it through *another* record company that was distributing through them.

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Called 'We Are Music'. And they did very well with it. So we made some money with that, and sort of funded some other stuff. But no, we never – there was never really a big hit, y'know?

MD: And when did the idea come about to release through Rounder Records and people like that?

LR: Well, obviously, you know, one of the dreams is to have some kind of hit record of some kind that will *fuel* other productions that you're doing. And so you're always looking for opportunities. So I would be sending stuff out every now and again. I think with Rounder, they got hold of us; yah, because they were very active in – er – the sphere of independent record companies around the world, they were getting into world music. Plus, they were very interested I think in protest music. They've got a lot of protest music on their catalogue; and so we were kind of an obvious – and erm – Bill Nolan from Rounder actually came out here and – and erm – it was actually after, after it was signed I think. Although I think he signed one of Warrick's records as well ...at that time. But ya. So you'd basically send stuff out, and then people would – yeah, so it was a mixture. Like with Sankomota going out through Earthworks in England, for instance, Jumbo Vanrenen. Um. I think I got hold of them. I'd heard of this guy Jumbo Vanrenen, ex-South African, so I thought OK, connection – let's try that, yup. And it worked.

MD: And then, when did the Swedish funding come in and what was the deal there?

LR: Well, I – I only ever wrote two proposals in my time at Shifty, for money. And both of them came off. One was to SIDA – and that must have been I guess '86 or so – I think we might have received our first funding in '87, and it continued till '90, I think. Erm, it could have been one year – but it was three years funding. And what they do is they put you in touch with organisations in Sweden that have a similar interest. So we were put in touch with a – a organisation called [?], which had this very broad er – network of youth facilities, cultural facilities around Kontaktnätet Sweden. 180 of them actually; so a very sort of far-reaching youth organisation. Um, and so the funding was channelled through them, and they kept an eye on how it was being used and that kind of thing.

MD: And what were the conditions of the funding? Was it to record political music, or anything you wanted...?

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LR: No, there weren't – there were no strings attached at all, y'know. I think they just kind of saw what we were up to – they saw the spirit in which it was being done; and er – they entrusted the money to Kontaktnätet – that's the Swedish organisation – because they were involved in a similar kind of thing, yeah. Yah, that's the way it went, and Kontakt – they never imposed any sort of restrictions on us, and how it was spent.

MD: And did that make quite a big difference?

LR: *Yah*. Well it paid salaries, and for instance for the Voëlvry tour, it allowed us to buy a PA system, and all that kind of thing.

MD: OK, yeah.

LR: The only other funding we really got was from I think the Canadians, for the Voëlvry tour – it was sponsored by *Vrye Weekblad* and erm a small grant from the Canadians; it wasn't really much funding but we got some from them, and of course the funding from the Swedes helped a long way in that as well.

ARCHIVE FOR JUSTICE

MD: Yeah. Now I mean, bearing in mind all the problems that one had in South Africa – censorship, radio play policy, and monopoly of distribution networks, all that kind of thing – is there much more Shifty could have done for the artists than what you did?

LR: Yah, I'm sure there probably would have been, if there'd been a businessman amongst us; erm, somebody that understood the various dynamics of, first of all, I guess the traditional distribution networks, and radio kind of things. I think if you were *clever*, I think there probably would have been ways to slip stuff in there, you know? That could have maybe – that wasn't maybe wasn't quite as ban-able as the other stuff, and to support – and also I suppose getting the – it's all about marketing, music, y'know? You've got to hear it to like it, right? So um – it's really getting it into people's imaginations, and getting them to hear it. And, you know, essentially I just wanted to record music. I ended up running a record company because nobody else *would* ...release our stuff. So, it wasn't – certainly my first choice of er – my career choice, first career choice. Erm – and – to this day, I'm terrible at business. Erm. And we didn't – we employed a couple of people; I did, should I say, I employ a couple of

people that were supposed to take on that mantle; but, you know, I employed friends, which is always a mistake.

[Timecode – 00:06:41]

MD: But you did do some – you *tried* some innovative things. I mean Roger Lucey was telling me how he went round to the different universities and tried to get Shifty played on student radio, for example, and er – things like that, so you weren't – you weren't *not* trying.

LR: Yeah, no – for sure, I mean we had kind of some of the ideas that one would have, if you were trying to market something that was left of field – like going to universities. But, you know, you gotta keep at it; you can't, because somebody says no or somebody says yes, and then then don't play it that week, you get all upset and you think oh, well that's not working. No – you carry on doing it. And we didn't – we didn't really do that. I mean essentially it was – if something *looked* like it wasn't working at the beginning of the process I would think 'oh well, all I'm interested in is recording music anyway, so that's what I'm going to do'.

MD: I mean the SABC was notoriously difficult, but you didn't have much luck with 702 and 604 either, did you?

LR: A little bit more luck; but – no. You know the problem is that they were all really under the same commercial whip, you know. And to stick – you know – to stick your neck out and go on a limb for something... and a couple of people did – there were a couple of DJs that did. I mean that understood the necessity of it. Bop Radio. Erm... Tim Modisa. He was a DJ, on Bop Radio. And, er, we went up there, and I think one of his favourite albums – was the first album I gave him, which was Sankomota; to this day, y'know?

MD: I mean musicians always complain about their record companies, as you know – whichever record company it is. But d'you think that the Shifty musicians had any justification for doing so?

LR: Well, yah. I mean y'know, I think that some of – some of the people that I respected the *most* did complain. I mean I didn't – you know – I think James didn't – Phillips didn't speak to me for like years, five years or so, I mean because... You know, if you are obviously very talented, and the people in your immediate vicinity actually build that impression up for you, y'know, which James was, and you don't have a career, and you're not earning any money, you of course are going to look for somebody to blame. You know, you can blame the radio and all that kind of thing, but – you'll generally be looking for the next person up the ladder; which unfortunately was me. I didn't

want to be up the ladder at all, because I saw myself very much on the same plane as the musicians; erm – contributing to the creative process as the producer. But er – I was kind of the white collar worker I suppose, because I *owned* this record company, y'know. [Timecode – 00:09:30]

Little did they know that I just *really* was as interested in business as they were. Which was not. So um; yah that was a frustration. Also, I think Koos Kombuis also wrote me a couple of quite colourful letters about – money, and that kind of thing. And Mzwakhe of course, we had a big blow-out with him. Not so much with me, but with international people that had released his records, because he thought 'well, every single person that comes through the country comes to talk to *me* about the state of culture here – and my records are released there, and I'm *sure* that *everybody's* buying them.' Y'know.

So it's really – it's a combination of not having a good grasp on how things actually work – I mean solid – political music doesn't really sell anywhere else other than the country that it's made. It's really just solidarity just sort of listening that you'll get in other countries – you'll never have a big market there.

MD: Cause um – I mean it's a normal pattern for indies to find artists and they do an album or two and they go on majors. And you had that experience – did you find it frustrating, or was it kind of expected?

LR: Um... I think initially I did find it a bit frustrating with every time it happened, but – um – essentially – because you know your ego is always involved – you know – but er – if you pull back a bit and you have a look at it, it's – y'know, I actually felt good about – just about everybody that went to a bigger label. Depends how it happened, you know? Um. With Sankomota it was very – I didn't know it was happening. Y'know? That's bad. Also with Tananas, the same thing happened. In fact I recorded the second album completely – and then they went and recorded the same album with Gallo...

MD: Really...

LR: ...and that upset me a lot. And so we had a bit of a fallout about that; because they thought I did a kak production, which they might be right about. Erm. I just thought that – y'know – there could have been a bit more talking, or a bit more, sort of involvement between myself and – y'know, they could have actually cut me in, somehow, to a deal with Gallo, by us having found them and – and the rest of it.

So yah, there were a couple of sort of frayed egos and that kind of thing, and that's... y'know. But generally speaking, I didn't have a problem with that happening, no.

[Timecode – 00:11:48]

MD: Did you ever give your artists – any directives in recording, or would they just come in and do their thing, or – I mean how much...

LR: Yah, I mean I was a producer – as a producer I saw myself *mainly* as a facilitator. I would let people do their things, but yes, I used to then – I had – sometimes had quite strong musical ideas; in fact Mac; erm, I was – the first sort of reality check for me was when Mac was – after running Shifty for I don't know how many years, you know, I mean we sort of six, seven years – sort of said to me that, that 'we come here with cap in hand', kind of thing. I didn't get fucking that *at all*, because I thought that you know we were all like *buddies* and you're [clicks fingers?] you know, all in it. But apparently I could often be a bit of a tyrant in the studio. I didn't – absolutely had *no* idea.

MD: Really, yeah...

LR: Yeah. It's probably because I get very involved, and you know – I get quite frenetic, and I speak very fast when I'm kind of – er – got an idea going. Erm. But yah. So those things happened, I mean it's a creative environment, so you get – you probably get ruffled egos and all the rest of it as well. But it's all part of creating something, you know?

MD: Yeah...

LR: I mean essentially what comes out at the end is a combination of *all* those different energies, whether that be the purely creative, or the argy-bargy that goes into – changing – changing something or making a decision to go elsewhere with the music.

MD: Yeah. So if you think about a Shifty stable, if you like – d'you think there was a Shifty sound, or d'you think it was broader than that, or is –

LR: No, it was kind of impossible for there to be a Shifty sound, because – we were the only people that were really recording social, political comment – music – in the country. It meant that we – we had an incredibly eclectic catalogue;

MD: Yeah, it is very, yeah

LR: Yeah, so right from – you know, *avant garde* kind of rock stuff like the Kalahari Surfers, to – erm – people's poets, worker choirs, *boere* – *boerepunks*, you know?

[Timecode – 00:13:48]

MD: Yeah, the whole – and your – your contracts, you were far more generous than the majors in terms of the kind of percentages; was it a sort of 50/50 cut with your...?

LR: Well it's er – you can't really do a 50/50 cut unless you get everybody to pay for the actual manufacture. So yah, no, what we did was we gave a percentage of the – I think it was – in terms of the industry it was a couple of points over; you know...

MD: OK. So it was also quite a lowish, what, about 8% somewhere around there?

LR: It was 10%, yeah. Erm – the – publishing – we didn't sign any contracts, by the way, apart from publishing. So we didn't sign artist contracts – so we didn't sign people up for three albums, or – I've never signed one on an artist contract. It was all done, y'know, basically, OK we're recording this album – let's see what happens, you know?

And er with publishing of course a song has to be protected, so we needed to get that sort of properly – properly done. Yah. And um, our split was 60/40 there, with publishing. And later on, it was 80/20.

MD: In the favour of the...

LR: Of the composer, yeah...

MD: Of the composer.

Now, one thing that interests me, and it's striking to me now when I'm going round doing the interviews, is how few women there were at Shifty, in terms of musicians. Was there a dearth in South Africa, or what – y'know, how would you explain? You know 'cause you were obviously around with your ear to the ground...

LR: Yeah, and there was, y'know...

MD: ...you had Jennifer, and then – you know... yeah, I was just interested to hear your thoughts on that.

LR: Well – you can only record what there is... y'know. And... that's what there was. Y'know. Anybody with good music that came through the door, it was – that had sort of vital lyrics and some kind of originality about the music, I would – I would record them.

MD: Yeah. And of course a lot of black women artists were going to the majors, anyway – that were sort of around, I suppose...

LR: Nobody was writing that kind of music, y'know? They were all stuck inside the industry pop thing, y'know, where they don't question anything and all the rest of it. I mean, some of the bigger artists made sort of, yeah, 'We love you Manelow,' or 'Black President' or something like that; but um – they would never have done it as debut artists, or debut – 'cause they just, they would have known they wouldn't get radio play, and the record companies wouldn't have recorded them, y'know? So in terms of black artists, it was really the most dedicated people that really believed that – the only way they could actually make music is by saying something about what was going on, those are the people that ended up in Shifty.

MD: Yeah. Um. Just a general thought then about – what for you is the most important aspect or components of Shifty's legacy. Looking back on it now.

LR: Um. The fact that it actually... it captures the – er – the existence of – of a – a certain energy, and across a very broad spectrum of the South African population. Um, y'know? It's – it's kind of like any art – it's a very small proportion of the population *do* it; and in South Africa – and also a lot of art is commercial; other art people do it *regardless* of the consequences in terms of their careers, and you know, what they bring in every month; y'know, bringing home the bacon.

And I think that legacy is that we documented what there was; and – um – I think the quality of the music speaks for itself. Even though, y'know, nobody made a lot of money out of it, and had a really big career; er, if you're go back and listen to it now, there are some really really fantastic songs there, um – that, a lot of the time defined a period – an era in South African history, y'know, in the most sort of... In a way music is the most accessible of the art forms – you can actually put it out there on the radio, you can put it out there and perform – it's a performance medium, it's everything, y'know? So the fact that we have that, I think that is the greatest legacy, of Shifty Records.

MD: And er, the final question is around... I mean it's very frustrating that during the apartheid era, the music, often good songs, but certainly songs that reflected what was going on just weren't heard by people; that Shifty was

bringing out. Which is frustrating. Then you get '94, and you think, now, people are going to hear this stuff now and they're going to have some idea of their musical heritage; [Timecode – 00:18:44]

especially for white South Africans, you know, that we've been told that – we didn't do anything, or – we've been written out of the history; and you could point to people and say, 'well there's this music, but people aren't hearing it'; d'you think there's any way around that – I mean ... have you thought about any of this could maybe *get* heard by broader people?

LR: Yah, but I don't think one can approach it in a righteous way; I mean, not a righteous way, but like in this thing that oh, it's the righteous thing to do, people should hear this because they *ignored* when it happened, all that kind of thing. I remember that when the SABC was going through its changes, and it think it was er – radio – what's it called? *SAFM* – was just starting off. Tony Lancaster had a meeting with a lot of, like the more liberal types out there in terms of music. And there was myself, and there was – um – Dave Marks, and a couple of other people, y'know? *Finally*, we – y'know, our opinions were welcomed. And er Dave had this idea that we should just – y'know, *play* that music on the radio, like all the time. And it was never gonna happen, and it just was never going to work; because, y'know, people are – they're here, they're now; they want to know what's happening now.

So I think that, um, y'know, when I've thought of how to popularise that music, for sure there will be people that are gonna be interested and go back and look at it – especially with, y'know, the Afrikaans scene, with um – y'know, Johannes Kerkorrel, and er – Koos Kombuis and the Voëlvry guys – I mean they had a very, very big influence on the Afrikaans youth, and the Afrikaans music that is happening now; so they always go back and look at that. I mean Kerkorrel is like a – he's a legend now, in a way; I mean, they have these *fiesta* programmes and this, that and the other thing – they're always re-hashing his music and redoing it, and – he's entered the mainstream, y'know? Of course after his death. Which is – classic, kind of thing.

But with other stuff, like James Phillips's songs and all the rest of it – I think that his songs *will* one day get known, y'know? Er, whether it's through me, or through somebody else I don't know. And maybe not even him singing them. They might – they might well be covered by other people; I'd really love to do a cover version album of James's songs. And maybe that's the way to get them out there; because the songs stand up for themselves, no matter what the situation; and they are as contemporary as anything else, y'know?

Yah. So. You have to take cogniscence of the fact that er – pop music is – there’s a reason why it’s called pop music, ’cause it’s popular now, it’s contemporary and it’s happening.

[Timecode – 00:21:29]

MD: But – there is a frustration in that a lot of the regional stations play er – ‘golden oldies’ as part – as quite an important part of what they play; and they – they’re always playing the Bright Blues, the Flash Harry, or whatever – those things that were hits and that people can remember – éVoid and so on – and you sort of think ‘if only they could be playing that stuff now, but they – they – because it’s not known, they don’t...

LR: Exactly – it’s the same – it’s the same reason why they don’t play – you know on 702 on the weekends – they play *all* the songs that you know from back then; you don’t know these songs from back then; so they don’t *fit* into that even, even they don’t fit into that, y’know, the Shifty stuff.

MD: And no-one wants to – to break oldies...

LR: No...

[/ends]

