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Interview with Simba Morri

Emphasis in *italics*.

Michael Drewett [MD]: Simba, could you begin by talking about how you first became involved with Shifty?

Simba Morri [SM]: Yes...



MD: When was that and how did it come about?

SM: Yes. Um. I – basically came to South Africa as a student from Kenya – to complete my ordinary levels, 'cause I did not complete my Matric. Then – as soon as I arrived her, um, I met ...Gali Bestry – the late Gali Bestry, at the university headquarters, where the students used to stay – a place called Phineas[?] Court [00:00:40], in Braamfontein. And er – from there Gali introduced me to the late James, and I met some members of Amapantsula [NB: SM refers alternately to Amapantsula and Mapantsula, though it's published as 'Mapantsula']; then we started a group, with Amapantsula, John, Trafford Wally, er – myself, and we had different drummers. And it was during that time when we – whilst we were doing various concerts and parties in the northern suburbs, that I got to know Lloyd Ross. And – basically – I was introduced to Si – Shifty by the late James Phillips. Because after listening to us play, he thought that 'I – I think you should go and speak to this independent – record company or record label; they might be interested in recording your kind of stuff. Because the commercial companies would not dare – er – be interested in the stuff you played.' This is how I got to meet

Lloyd – er – formally; and – erm – and... in 1985, when they were doing their 'Forces Favourite' [sic] compilation albums, ah we were featured as a band Amapantsula, we did one song, which was called 'Pambere;'

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which was an anti – a protest song, in Shona, '*A luta continua*', and ah from there on um – the contact and the ties with Shifty just grew stronger and stronger – um – until I left the group, Mapantsula, we split; and um I did my first album, and started discussing with Lloyd arranging to record my first album, which was called 'Wasamata.'

MD: Yup.

SM: Yes.

MD: OK. And um, what was your experience at Shifty like, in terms of the recording and – and distribution and things like that?

SM: Well, I could say I – I have been – I – part of the family. I looked at Shifty as a sort of a family record – ah – company or stable. Because all the musicians in the groups seemed to have closer ties with each other; I got to know The Kerels; I got to know Jannie van Tonder; I got to know James – the late James Phillips with the Cherry Faced Lurchers; a lot of people – the Gereformede Blues Band, Isja, Ian Herman, The Genuines from Cape Town, Vusi Mahlasela, Sankomota. So I – I got to know – I got to get exposed and have the privilege of meeting those *artists*. And have – even – a greater privilege of *working* with them, because at times when we were playing at Jameson's, some of the artists would – would just rock up and join us on stage, like Jannie van Tonder, he would come with his trombone; Ian Herman playing drums; and I even worked with Lloyd: we went to Grahamstown with Lloyd and Ian Herman and the late Gito Baloi, before the Tananas project; we performed at Cuyler Street there for about a week or two. So it was good even having my producer, Lloyd Ross, playing guitar in my songs and – it was quite good. So, overall, with Shifty I still feel as part of that family, that ongoing legacy, I feel as part of it, and I feel very privileged, and honoured and lucky to have – to have these kinds of people around me. Because even till today I am still in contact with Lloyd; if I have problems I – [laughs] just call him and say 'Lloyd, I'm going through this, can you help me? And Lloyd 'I'm OK, I'm here in Cape Town, or I'm in Durban, I just came back from home,' things like that – so we have a very, very – a close tie, and it's almost like family. Yes.

MD: And how was the actual recording process itself? Were you happy with, y'know, the way it all went?

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SM: Yes, the recordings – um – I would say because – it was my first experience to go into the studio. Like I said I never came to South Africa as a musician; I came to South Africa as a student. So music developed here; although it's been part of my upbringing at home in Kenya: my uncle was a guitarist, my mum was a pianist – ah, at the church and, we have that musical upbringing, and then I started strumming the guitar whilst I was still at home.

So, er, Shi – Shifty gave me the opportunity and the platform to – to expose my talent. And – they even pushed me, and – and encouraged me to go into the studio. Because I – never knew that my songwriting skills were – that good; until they came to me and said 'you're writing – are these your songs that you are singing in Kiswahili, and er – and broken English, and a bit of other languages, in Shona, and Kimasai[?] etcetera,' and I said 'Yes, I'm – I've started messing around with that from – a very early age. So um that – they gave me that opportunity to go into the studios and realise that I had this songwriting talent, and music arranging as well. And um – the recordings; although here in South Africa I had to sort of compromise a bit of it in terms of – of avoiding being hardcore Kenyan *mbenga*, and – and try and make it universally acceptable; some songs were in a mixture of English, and Swahili and Shona; and er, one song would be sung in three different languages, which was good – it was also a learning experience for me. And er to have a person like Lloyd – who had such big experience with working with very professional people, to get closer to him and – listen to him, and – explaining how I should [laughs] er, sort of conduct myself and um – approach erm the recording project, because I've never recorded before – it was very good; and um I think er, they've done – my – their very best to get me off the ground, as a person who was not *au fait* with recording and the music industry *at all*. And the recordings of 'Wasamata,' the first album, my first debut album, um, I think the reception was exceptionally good, in the alternative music scene, because, commercially, the Shifty, er catalogue and the Shifty a – artists were not, like, the Gallos and the Sonys and the BMGs.

So eventually I even ended up um – selling the music myself, at the fleamarket: selling all the Shifty artists, now – music from the Lurchers, Mapantsula, the Wasamata, the – um – Isja, the Kerels albums, and *all* the Shifty – Warrick, Kalahari Surfers... I would go there every Saturday at the fleamarket with the radio and Lloyd would give me the – all the CDs and then I would start promoting that, even the Mzwakhe ones, even the banned ones I

would sell. That was quite a tremendous experience, in terms of recording and – er – getting involved the technical side of music, so Shifty – yes, has been – big, er – very supportive to me, to introduce me to – to...

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MD: So you're saying that even though, um, Shifty was alternative and – broadcast was difficult, and distribution was difficult, you felt that they did everything they could for you.

SM: Yes – *very much so*, because um – if you remember quite well, the music was not played at – in the radios, except for Neil Johnson. Who was then working for 702; who would now and then shove in some Si – Shifty – er – production, in his programme. But that was not enough; because he – had only one slot [laughs], and um – the rest of the radio stations and SABC, they – they didn't touch the stuff at all. So it meant like – Shifty had to work *extra hard* to try and market their artists. By themselves with their limited resources. And fortunately we have people like Lloyd and Warrick, who were also musicians, so in that way, *they* would work together with all of us and sometimes organise shows at the Market Theatre; sometimes at the Market Warehouse: we had a few Shifty festivals with all the Shifty artists were performing there, from Tananas to – to Johannes Kerkerrel; Andre le Toit and Koos Kombuis, and – all those artists and myself and Mzwakhe. And erm – I think they – you could not ask for anything better than what they've done, really, they've done everything in their might to promote and market the music. Yes.

MD: OK. Now just the last question I want to ask you is, um, what do you think is the most important or are the most important aspects of Shifty's legacy?

SM: Yah, because, er – there's quite a – *loss* that we've gone through in terms of our artists, like the late, great James Phillips, Gali Bestreen, ah Johannes Kerkerrel; there's quite a lot of artists that we've lost. *Very prominent* Shifty artists. And I think the legacy is to keep *their* legacy going. Ah, what I'd love to see Shifty doing is – to revive those Shifty concerts, and – and probably have an annual Shifty music festival. I would really appreciate that. It would be good to have, to bring all those – because – a lot of erm the followers are still relatively young, in their 50s, 60s, they are not that old, I mean I'm in my early 50s, so... even the – er the – their children that they used to bring to their shows might be in region of late 30s/40s; that mus – the Shifty music I think does ring in their ha – heads and – and erm, of course the relationships; because we've split now, like er – er Koos Kombuis is in Cape Town, of course Steve Newman is also in Cape Town, we barely see... And if Shifty could, sort of, start organising those kinds of festivals or concerts for us to come together and – because we have new blood in our groups, in our bands

and so on – and so that the new members and the fresh blood that we have in our groups can be aware, of Shifty; and um, probably the media now –

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maybe is opening to world music, which Shifty has done *years* ago. Thi – I think this would er – really – *re-educate* people and make them aware that Shifty has been there since time immemorial, this is not a new thing. And I think people would really, some – a lot of [the up?] coming up and young blood would sort of group around the Shifty archives and look for something that they might love, and build up from, you know. I think.

MD: Yeah. So – so I mean, why do you think Shifty was important at the time?

SM: I – I think Shifty has been important at that time particularly because at *that* time it was *very very* hard, to even – perform music that would, er – irritate the state... lyrically, and sing about the truth. And also conscientise the young ones, of what is happening. What was happening, then. You remember, we had a anti-conscription album, which was 'Forces Favourite.' That was to conscientise the young, or white counterparts, who were conscripted to go and – to the borders, and say 'your enemy is not in the township, these are the fellow people that we have to work with.' And um, and the government did not like that, and Shifty did that. And um – and – some of us were jailed, and Mzwakhe's album was banned, and some – y'know? And every concert, most of the concert that we used to do was being disrupted by the police and – and... so it's been a very tough, struggling times, and with Shifty, sort of *through* music, you know? Music, cause we use music as the weapon, to conscientise, to move forward, ah – and – I think Shifty was the *only* – *only* record company that did that; when other people were in for it for the profits, despite of what was happening. So Shifty has been *very* important; I think people should know – should – should be informed about that, they should know. Even the politicians today who are sitting in parliament, some of them used to come to the Shifty shows.

And um, even in future; I think the future generation, even the present generation *needs* to know where we come from, that there's been this force – that's been *there*, and very strong, and *fighting* for the liberation of the people, of the music, the freedom of music; the freedom of people mingling. And that force has been Shifty. And I think there's – the future can be bright as well, if we – can take it further, us who are still alive to keep the Shifty legacy going on, and um, yah, and take it – erm – further like I said earlier, by doing the concerts, have a Si – Shifty annual festival; I wish sponsors could get on board on that. And even have an *international* Shifty album. Or, international Shifty festival. Because a lot of Shifty artists go abroad. Like I get invited to

Japan sometimes. I do a lot of African gigs, I play in Zimbabwe, play in Zambia, Botswana, up north in Malawi, Namibia; I have not played in Kenya, though – so... [Timecode – 00:16:53]

so there's that international connection with Shifty artists, like Vusi Mahlasela is a big international artist, Sankomota has been a big international artist, Mzwakhe Mbuli, there's a lot. Tananas... Steve Newman. Um. All – I would just say all the Shifty artists, yes. Yes.

MD: OK. That's been really great – thanks so much for your time.

SM: It's been a pleasure – very good talking about Lloyd and the company [laughs]. I hope it goes on stronger and stronger and stronger. Yes.

MD: Thanks.

[/ends]

