



SHIFTY RECORDS

What you won't hear  on the radio



A SHIFTY STORY



making music with caravan



shift verb\ˈshift\

- : to move or to cause (something or someone) to move to a different place, position, etc.
- : to change or to cause (something) to change to a different opinion, belief, etc.
- : to go or to cause (something) to go from one person or thing to another.



The Shifty origin story can be traced back to the burgeoning alternative music scene in the late 70's and early 80's. Ivan Kadey, guitarist of the provocative mixed race punk band, National Wake, and Lloyd Ross, of Radio Rats and Happy Ships, were both becoming frustrated with just how difficult it was to get original music recorded. When Lloyd stumbled across Ivan's commune by chance after following the sweet sounds of a Fender Stratocaster, they started to hatch a plan to thumb their noses at the establishment and go it alone. Originally set up to provide a cheap recording facility for musicians determined to make alternative music a force to be reckoned with, the fledgling label fitted basic recording equipment into a claptrap old caravan

and hit the road. Ironically, the first full Shifty album had little to do with alternative South African music, but was instead made with a band from Lesotho called Sankomota. There were no studios in their landlocked country and they were forbidden entry into surrounding South Africa after being kicked out when touring with their previous band, Uhuru, so Shifty took the studio to them. Lloyd remembers:

This is when I discovered the benefits of owning a mobile studio. I parked the caravan outside the recently deserted studios of Radio Lesotho, ran a cable inside to one of the rooms and we were in business...

From the release of the Sankomota album in 1984 until the early years of democracy, Shifty averaged an album every two months, resulting in one of the most comprehensive and diverse collections of South African political and social commentary music in existence. From kaapse goema, mbaqanga, jive, rock and folk, through avant-garde, isicathamiya, spoken word, boere punk, jazz and maskandi, to controversial cut-ups of political speeches and traditional workers songs, this eclecticism in the Shifty catalogue is easily explained - no other label dared to record such diversity in the face of apartheid censorship, so Shifty virtually did it all... just so long as, Lloyd explained at the time, the music “oozes originality, is thought- or jol-provoking - makes us sad, happy or promises to upset an apple cart or two in this turbulent land of ours.” While Shifty struggled to gain exposure on SABC radio stations, its anti-establishment stance was appealing to young, politically marginalised South Africans, as became clear when Shifty joined forces with left-leaning Vrye Weekblad to take the Voëlvry ossewa on tour into the heartland of conservative Afrikanerdom in 1989. Distribution remained a perennial challenge but Shifty just kept on recording, often overshadowing the majors in its commitment to innovation. Shifty often felt more a like-minded collective than a record label. Because Shifty was always operating on a shoe-string budget, people pitched in. There were those Shifty repeat offenders who cropped up again and again on recordings – musicians like drumming maestro Ian Herman, trombonist Jannie “Hanepoot” van Tonder, and guitar slinger Willem Möller played on multiple albums. Others shifted roles between being musicians, producers, and even helping out in the Shifty office. James Phillips took it upon himself to write

sheet music and arrangements for every track on Koos Kombuis’ second album and mentored the young urban creeps, as Chris Letcher remembers:

it was amazing to have connections to bands that I was also listening to...like The Genuines, with Ian Herman playing on stuff we were recording in those days, which was just – crazy; it felt like a ridiculous privilege to have such a genius musician playing on the songs that we’d written ... it felt like everyone was in it together... it felt like really being accepted by this extremely talented and extremely warm and welcoming family.

There were, of course, more Shifty characters keeping busy outside the studio – like visual artists Sarah Hills who was responsible for putting together some seminal Shifty album designs. Officially tasked with the tricky job of getting the label’s seditious sounds on the airwaves, Shifty office staffer Toni Joosten recalls jumping repeatedly on a mining dump trying to clear the Jo’burg skyline in the background with each leap, all whilst dressed in a heavy Voortrekker outfit. Paul Weinberg’s photographs of her flying efforts would later be transformed into the iconic Voëlvry cover image. Shifty’s release schedule slowed considerably after the arrival of South African democracy in 1994. But the Shifty legacy lives on in its back catalogue. Awarded a tongue-in-cheek “Feedback Award for Outstanding Service to South African Ears” back in 1985, by now the feisty record label surely qualifies for a lifetime achievement award - for tracking down those seditious sounds that continue to “shake the cobwebs from the conservative mind attic”, for documenting the soundtrack of a revolution that might otherwise have been completely ignored.





A NAARTJIE IN OUR SOSATIE
singing for a just peace

Conscription into the South African Defence Force (SADF) became a rallying point for expressing resistance to an increasingly militant apartheid state in the 1980s. As conscious objectors were becoming more vocal about how compulsory military conscription was forcing white men to become perpetrators of state repression, many of the songs recorded by Shifty reflected these concerns. Into this context in early 1985, Shifty released the slyly titled *A Naartjie in our Sosatie*, a compilation of South African rebel rhythms by musicians who were, in different ways, trying to put their music where their politics were. Less than a year later, the country was deep in a state of emergency, troops were in the townships and more conscripts were refusing to report to duty than ever before. Shifty, in conjunction with the End Conscription Campaign (ECC), issued a potent new musical call for South Africans to support young men who were refusing to march to war unthinkingly for apartheid's army, choosing rather to challenge the system that had forced conscription upon them. The album title, *Forces Favourites*, was an ironic nod at a SABC radio's armed forces request programme that sent patriotic messages

of support to “our boys on the border” and played music that could not have been further removed from Shifty in spirit or intent. Featuring various Shifty musicians who had been performing at ECC concerts and speaking plainly about these dark days, Forces Favourites was “a brilliant cross-section of alternative white youth culture” demonstrating how disaffected young people were choosing to question apartheid, to get up off their feet and move to a different beat. Shifty provided the soundtrack to this partying for a purpose, for a just future for South Africa.





SONGS FROM THE SHOP FLOOR

trade union worker choirs

After hearing a trade union choir perform at a rally, Lloyd Ross and his friend Brian Tilley, then of Video News Services, spent the winter of 1985 recording songs sung by workers affiliated to Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), the predecessor to COSATU.

At Braitex, the National Union of Textile Workers invited Shifty into the factory and 100 workers gathered in a packing shed during lunch hour to perform for them. Other songs were recorded in hostels and church halls, at contests and union meetings. Fosatu choirs performed all over and Shifty happily went along for the ride, setting up trips to shop floors on the East Rand, then on to Natal, recording rousing live performances in Mooi River, Durban and Pietermaritzburg.

Shifty then put together 24 original workers songs, composed and sung by 10 union choirs, and released a new album Fosatu Worker Choirs, the royalties from which went back to the trade union federation. Later released abroad by Rounder as South African

Trade Union Choirs, some songs praise Fosatu and urge workers to join trade unions, while others sing about problems within their factories, issue jeers to police informers, or tell of the struggle to get workers at Sasol plants reinstated after they were fired for participating in a two-day stayaway in November 1985 to protest against the troops in the townships, "bantustan" education, and bus and rent increases.

Shifty then went on to record two albums with one of the choirs they encountered during this process, the K-Team. A longstanding isicathamiya choir from the Kwathema hostels in Springs on the East Rand, originally formed by Mr Agrippa Xaba and made up of employees of Kelloggs, hence the name, they were popular performers at many of the political rallies in the then Transvaal and Natal. Their songs reflect the issues of the day, from a tribute to senior shop steward and activist, Andries Raditsela, who died of head injuries after being taken into police custody near his home in Tsakane in May 1985, to the eventual release of political leaders in 1990.





PEOPLES POETS

MZWAKHE

**Banned
in SA**

putting verse to song

Lloyd Ross first heard Mzwakhe Mbuli perform at a JODAC event in Yeoville in 1985, a baritone voice responding to the political upheavals of the time, speaking out on taboo topics, sending a message to the heart of the masses. So Shifty approached the people's poet to workshop an album putting his words to sound. It was the first time Mzwakhe had recited over music, but with the help of Ian Herman, Simba Morri, Gito Baloi, all musicians from the Shifty stable, the experiment paid off, resulting in the album *Change is Pain*. Banned almost as soon as it was released, it was internationally acclaimed and went on to become Shifty's only gold album. This was followed by the defiant 1989 album *Unbroken Spirit* largely written during nearly six months of solitary confinement in 1988, speaking out against the injustice of apartheid and the state's attempts to break him down. Convinced of the power of mixing music with spoken word, Shifty was on the lookout for more to record. In 1989, Warrick Sony of Kalahari Surfers teamed up with Lesego Rampolokeng, a young oral poet-activist from the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW).

Together they recorded *End Beginnings*, with Lesego's hard-hitting word pictures of violence and oppression enhanced by Warrick's powerful "film-like atmospheric soundtrack." Of Lesego, Warrick says: His work was dark and painful, spliced up images and juxtapositions which he performed with a sharp menacing attitude. Here was a man who had been brutalised by the system and had risen to express it in a unique kind of African angst.

When Shifty received a recording of another COSAW poet, they discovered one of the sweetest voices to ever emerge from the misery of apartheid. Vusi Mahlasela, soon to be known simply as The Voice, rapidly gained worldwide acclaim after the release of his debut album *When you Come Back* in 1992, and toured extensively in Europe. 1994 saw Vusi team up with Shifty again. Featuring Lesego Rampolokeng and Zimbabwean Louis Mhlanga the album *Wisdom of Forgiveness* reflected a rapidly changing South African society.

This release was followed shortly by arguably the most important gig of his life, the inauguration of South Africa's brand new president, Nelson Mandela.





RADIO SILENCE

Die SAUK as sensor: Slot



While apartheid South Africa had a notoriously elaborate censorship system, few songs were actually banned by the official state censor, the Directorate of Publications. More often than not, it was the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) that functioned as an extension of the government apparatus of repression and surveillance. The SABC did not ban songs, it simply would not play what it did not want the country to hear. The Central Record Acceptance Committee (CRAC) interpreted the Publications Act of 1974 strenuously and with vigour, meeting weekly to review all music intended for airplay for evidence of anything that failed to comply with government policies. Reasons for a song being rejected – AFGEKEUR – were diligently recorded on lyric sheets. To ensure that these rejected songs didn't make it onto the air, stickers indicating what to AVOID were then placed on album covers, song titles judged likely to offend were rendered illegible with pen scribbles and vinyl records scratched so that the needle would jump when playing an “offensive” track to the next song on the album. Unsurprisingly, Shifty was hit hard by these avoidance tactics. Its first release, the self-titled debut from Lesotho band Sankomota, was deemed “undesirable” for

flying in the face of the SABC's “tribal purity” for mixing languages. Other Shifty artists were also muzzled - Koos Kombuis was rejected for mentioning sex and politics, and cursing repeatedly. Johannes Kerckorrel's damning indictment of white complacency, BMW, was deemed “repulsive” and Jennifer Ferguson's The Ballad of Black Jack and Crazy Jane was considered to be in “bad taste.” It was not only the state that shunned Shifty. Between the revenue-driven self-censorship of record companies, through the impact of the cultural boycott, to the country's only cutting engineer stopping the lathe because he didn't like what he was hearing, finding Shifty in conventional record stores could be a real shopping challenge. Shifty came up with some ingenious retorts to these silencing strategies – pressing albums by politically overt artists like Kalahari Surfers abroad, then smuggling them back into South Africa, distributing unmarked albums wrapped in brown paper bags through unorthodox channels like bicycle shops, using ironic word play to disguise rebellious intent, even securing Swedish funding to record less radio-friendly artists. However, the lasting legacy of this silencing sadly remains - the significance of the Shifty catalogue still far outweighs its fame.



HIS MUZZLED VOICE

...seks (sex) - struggle - geweld (violence) - polit propaganda - godsdiens (religion) - drugs - swak smaak (bad taste) - vloek (swearing) - anti-capitalistic - ANC - afstootlik (repulsive)...

RISE OF BOERE PUNK

Breaking down
barriers with
the Boere-blues

tunes for taking back the taal

A new type of alternative Afrikaans music began to make itself heard in the mid-1980s. Energetic, anarchistic and angry like never before, this was the beginning of a rock revolution, headed up by charismatic rebel boere-troubadours with defiantly absurd stage names intent on using music to criticise the apartheid regime and reclaim their mother tongue from the oppressors. They used music to free themselves from the confines of suiwer Afrikaans culture by refusing to kowtow Afrikanerdom's sacred cows, choosing instead to remix them irreverently. Lyrics often satirised the immense respect for the church and military, and they delighted in making the finger-wagging poster boy for the National Party monolith, President PW Botha, the brunt of their rage-fuelled jokes, in tracks such as "Sit Dit Af!", "Wat n Vriend Het Ons in PW?" and "Vakansie in Lusaka."

Ironically, it was two English-speakers who were instrumental in kicking off this revolution with the arrival of Bernoldus Niemand, the enigmatic Afrikaans cowboy alter ego of Springs musician James Phillips - and his album "Wie is Bernoldus Niemand?" released in 1985 by fellow rooinek Lloyd Ross. Promptly banned from the airwaves for its satirical deconstruction of Afrikaner society, this "Mr Nobody" was later recognised to be an inspiration for Afrikaans journalist Ralph Rabie's reincarnation as Johannes Kerkorrel (John Church Organ) of the Gereformeerde Blues Band (GBB), whose debut album "Eet Kreef" was released by Shifty in 1989. And Andre Letoit, later known as Koos Kombuis, acknowledged in pun that he was forging the path initially laid down by Bernoldus Niemand when he called his second album, released by Shifty in 1990, "Niemandslaan & beyond."

"We are liberating the language. If you can make a language into rock and roll, it can't be an oppressive language anymore. It's got to be free. It is just an African language like any other and it is certainly not the exclusive property of the folk."

Johannes Kerkorrel



TOTAL ONSLAUGHT

se naam is Voëlvry

"In a two-month blitz of nation-wide gigs, musicians on the Voëlvry tour won hearts and minds, and damaged countless livers and lungs. Somewhere in the vrot rubble of scattered beer cans, a committed cult following jumped up screaming, flicking their Bics and chanting for more. Hiding behind subversive pseudonyms, yelling inciteful slogans ... the Voëlvry brigade mocks the total onslaught with a rock and roll beat." - Michael Markovitz, Scope

Organised by Shifty Records and upstart Afrikaans paper Vrye weekblad, the Voëlvry tour of 1989 was the apex of Afrikaans protest rock, as Shifty's merry band of irreverent musicians climbed aboard the ossewa and took their youth uprising on the road, intent on making it cool to be an Afrikaner. Described as an "unprecedented orgy of Afrikaner anarchy", when they weren't banned, they performed to packed audiences at universities, in town halls, even churches, leaving "Boere Beatlemania" in their wake. After they were banished from the Stellenbosch campus, the supposed stronghold of liberal Afrikaners, the town witnessed one of the

Afrikaans is
voëlvry

Subversie
hier om

biggest demonstrations it had seen in years as 1500 students protested in anger. The Voëlvry pioneers steered their revolution into both the platteland and the crux of the volk identity: "it was rock 'n' roll learning to speak Die Taal that turned the cry of protest into a juggernaut."

TITEL: OSSEWA
KUNSTENAAR: JOHANNES KERKORREL EN DIE GEREFORMEERDE BLUES BAND
KOMPOSITIE: JOHANNES KERKORREL
LP TITEL: EET KREEF
LP NO: SHIFTY SHIB 32

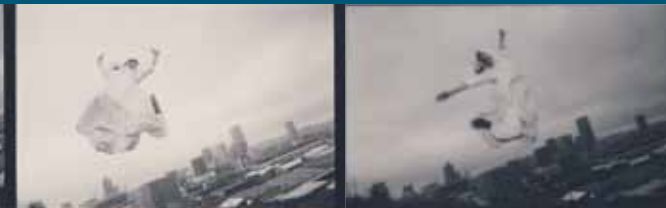
Ek staan langs die highway met my ou vriend Mike,
ons twee was op pad om Transkei toe te hike
die son bak neer, dit was baie warm weer
ons was amper reg om moed op te gee
maar skielik in die verte blink 'n spikkel
in die pad
dit kom vinnig nader. Ja die ding het laat spat,
ek kom my oë nie glo nie, my verstand kon dit nie vat
"God" Gert, dis 'n nuwe soort ossewa
ossewa, ossewa, ossewa, ja 'n ossewa

'n Klein entjie verder begin die ding kalmeer,
hy kom tot stilstand met remme wat skree
'n ou son klim uit, hy sê ons moet nadertree
hy goe nie om on vir ons 'n lift te gee
hy het sy ossewa woude gegee,
hy het 'n V6-enjin binnegemonteer
en 'n tape-deck waarop Elvis Presley kilphard skree
dit was 'n regte egte rock 'n roll ossewa
ossewa, ossewa, ossewa, ja 'n ossewa

Ons cruise langs die highway af
duidelik nie van hier,
teen 'n honderd en sesstig kilometer per uur
die ander karre op die pad het ons gou verby gegaan
hy bied vir ons bier uit sy wakis aan
'n groot span osse sleep hy agter ons aan,
in 'n uniek ontwerpte dubbel-sleeper
hy trap die lepel plat en ons is vinnig by die see
in ons funky, nuwe rock 'n roll ossewa
ossewa, ossewa, ossewa, ja 'n ossewa
sweet sweet ossewa, ons ry in 'n ossewa

afgetekener
Nemo No. 28

Swaak swaak



Afrika

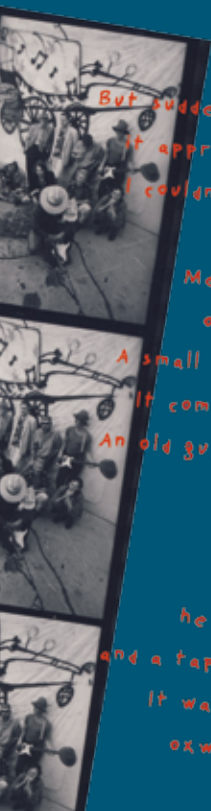
ans musos rock the ossewa!

e is
te bly

Boere rock 'n roll is here !

Boere rock 'n
roll is coming

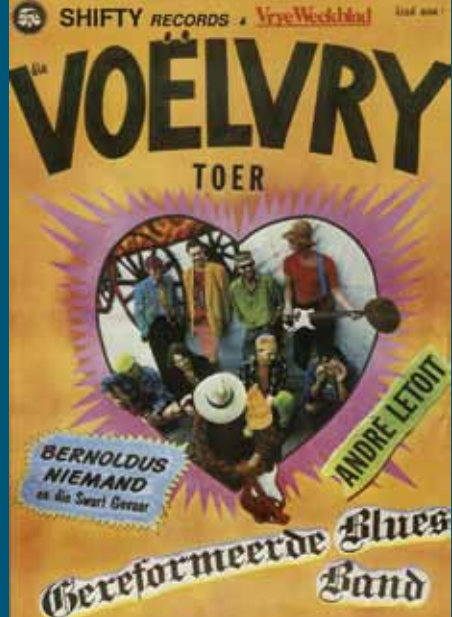
Velskoen
culture
on a roll!



But suddenly in the distance a dot appears in the road.
It approaches very fast, it's like it's on overload.
I couldn't believe my eyes, couldn't comprehend it.

Mercy me, it's a new type of oxwagon,
oxwagon, oxwagon, yes, an oxwagon.
A small distance further the thing settles down.
It comes to a halt with brakes that screech.
An old guy gets out, he says we must come closer,
he doesn't mind giving us a ride.

He revved his oxwagon,
he had a V-6 engine mounted inside
and a tape deck from which Elvis Presley cried.
It was a real, true rock'n'roll oxwagon,
oxwagon, oxwagon, yes, an oxwagon.





JAMES THE MAESTR'OU

Do the Lurch, baby!

Famous for not being famous

One of the most influential stalwarts of the Shifty Stable, James Phillips was a performer, composer and cultural pot stirrer who refused to compromise. James the Boplist, Bernoldus Niemand, Bartholomew Biased, ex-Private Willie Smit from De Aar... he used various musical incarnations to show that white musicians could sing about what was happening in their own backyards, in unashamedly South African accents, or even in Afrikaans, using mordant wit to poke at the belly of the apartheid beast. It was the raw, angry, frenetic, politically incisive street sound of his first band, Corporal Punishment, with tracks like "Brain Damage" and "Darkie's going to get you", that inspired Lloyd Ross to start thinking about recording non-commercial South African music. After a short-lived summer holiday band, Illegal Gathering, that also pulled no punches, and his sly turn as the satirical, enigmatic South African everyman, Bernoldus Niemand, Phillips formed the Cherry Faced Lurchers in 1984. 'Do The Lurch' became the signature song at Jamesons bar where they kept the fire of the

Jo'burg jol burning. But it was the Lurchers' "Shot Down" that evoked the terrible Emergency Years and spoke "directly to the hearts and minds of a youth taking a cold hard look at who they are as white South Africans." Commercial success eluded James, but he remained the real South African musician's musician. According to Koos Kombuis, "he was way before his time. In another time, at another place, James Phillips would have been an international star." A homage to serious rock and roll (horn section and all), his Sunny Skies album drew on the talents of Shifty comrades. Willem Möller called it "James's most accomplished and most sophisticated album... his new songs reflected his hopes and fears for a new South Africa, and the dark and angry words of the 80's were being replaced with songs of optimism..." James died in 1995, aged 36, after a car accident but he lives on through his extraordinary back catalogue. For Lloyd Ross, the honour of having recorded James Phillips' entire repertoire remains one of Shifty's greatest achievements.

*My story is over / My song has played / For it's love that chains me / But my fetters are all frayed /
I live at the crossroads / Of the choices I have made / I ache for something / That I know I'll throw away*





Founded by frustrated musicians Lloyd Ross and Ivan Kadey in the dark beginnings of the turbulent 1980s, Shifty Records was a fiercely independent maverick label intent on recording original South African music – sounds that spoke about what was actually going on in the country, songs that the government of the time more often than not did not want to be heard. In their quest to capture those sounds that, if left to the major record companies, might never have seen the light in the control room, Shifty asked three simple questions:

- 1) Is it original?
- 2) Does it have quality?
- 3) Does it occupy a time and a place in this country's musical development?

By sticking to these rules, Shifty produced almost all the seminal “alternative” music of the time.

**BUSINESS
AND ARTS
SOUTH AFRICA**

This booklet is based on an exhibition developed by the South African History Archive (SAHA) using materials from the Shifty Records Collection (AL3296), as part of the Shifty September celebrations for Heritage Month 2014. Thanks to Business and Arts South Africa for funding the production of this booklet, and to the Alliance Française of Johannesburg, the Atlantic Philanthropies, the National Arts Council, the SAMRO Foundation and Spier for their generous support of the Shifty September programme of events.

