

In memory of Steve Albini.

Chicago, October 2015. We just did our sound check at the Lincoln Hall and took a taxi to an Ethiopian restaurant where we met with Steve Albini to catch up and have a nice dinner together. It wasn't always possible to see each other's shows, but we wouldn't want to miss a nice dinner together and there was always a lot to talk about. Starting with a few words about the tour maybe, but switching to food quite fast. How to ignore that in an Ethiopian restaurant?

"What is that spice they use?" Steve asked.

"You mean berebere?" Andy answered. "The bright red one? It's a mix of typical spices from Ethiopia, including ajwain and korarima. All Ethiopian cooks make their own blend."

"We usually take something like twenty kilo's from Addis back to Amsterdam for our favourite restaurant", Terrie added. "And Ethiopian fighters threw it in the face of the Italian soldiers when they tried to conquer Ethiopia under Mussolini."

Steve laughs: "The first pepperspray."

"Yeah, and it worked!"

"Bloody Italians. Shellac played in Italy this year. Great food too. Always."

I think that conversation jumped subject more than sixty times. Loaded with little facts and details, but they never felt trivial. Steve had an interest in everything. Sometimes he would just say "I did not know that", and ask for more ins and outs.

"Didn't you make an album about an Italian dog, I mean, the title of the album was something like the name of an Italian dog? I forgot the title", I ask.

"You mean Excellent Italian Greyhound", Steve answers. "Yeah, that's Todds dog. Uffizi. He has this dog, his buddy, they even look almost exactly the same. It's an Italian greyhound. And he's excellent. Todd brings him to rehearsals too. And, I think we recently had our biggest moment of fame in the musical history of Shellac because of Uffizi. TV channel Animal Planet found out about Todd and Uffizi. Probably because of the album title. And they came to interview him for a special about the Italian Greyhound dog breed. So they ended up coming to the studio with a whole camera team filming us in rehearsals. And some time later we could watch ourselves on DOGS 101. A very popular show. Millions of people watch it."

Five years earlier we spent three days at Electrical Audio to record our album Catch My Shoe. In those three days I saw how Steve Albini worked. We were going to play all our songs live. I would do guide vocals but ended up only overdubbing vocals for a few songs, most guide vocal tracks became the real vocal tracks. The whole band was recorded on tape, of course, twenty-four tracks. But just for the drums alone he used twenty-five mics. So they were mixed down to sixteen. Guitars and vocals and a trumpet on Maybe I was the pilot by Roy Paci who happened to be in town, somehow it felt like the space was endless. And so was the sound. We recorded two versions of Life Whining, the first one had the best last few minutes, the second version had the best first bit. What to do? It's on tape. Well, you, or better, Steve cuts the two inch tape exactly at the right spots and sticks the right parts together. Perfect. And that long part in Bicycle Illusion, with the whole build up, was all improvised. So how could I ever figure out when my vocal overdub should start. Well, Steve just played the tape and stopped it on the right spot, slowly moved it to the point of Kat's kick drum attack and then rolled it back eight kicks. He took a pulse from a synth and recorded eight pulse-sounds on the eight kicks advancing the 'one' beat that should be the start of my vocal overdub. I watched it all happening and was perplexed. I grew up with Pro-Tools and Ableton Live and was convinced those tricks you could pull only with digital. So, I learned. I learned a lot those three days. And we went back to Amsterdam with a great album, absolutely full of the love for sound and music from Steve Albini. What a treat.

And what a loss now he's gone. We were convinced we would meet up with Shellac soon again. We just had dinner last October in Amsterdam, at our favourite Ethiopian restaurant. Shellac was playing a few shows in Amsterdam and Antwerp but would come back to Europe in May. With a new album. But now it feels like we all just plunged into a vacuum. Steve, you were amazing, we'll never forget you. Thank you for all your sound, music, love, punk and fun.

The Ex / Arnold