

The East African country of Ethiopia is most renowned for four of its staples: coffee long-distance runners; the father of Rastafarianism, Emperor Haile Selassie; and – perhaps surprisingly – jazz.

Jazz instruments only came to Ethiopia's musical shores in the 1920s, after Haile Selassie returned from a state visit to Jerusalem having adopted a forty-strong brass band of Armenian orphans. Selassie's fondness for the new palace band helped popularise the genre across the country in the following decades.

But in the mid-Sixties, a young Ethiopian musician named Mulatu Astatke started fusing Western-style jazz with traditional Ethiopian folk music, and others soon followed suit. Thus was born the genre 'Ethio-jazz', which swiftly became the nation's dominant sound and eventually came to fame in the West in 1997 through Francis Falsetto's 29-disc compilation Les Ethiopiques.

From Beyoncé to the dancing of northern Ethiopia's Gumuz tribe, in a wide-ranging interview Mulatu Astatke tells Ollie Gordon about Ethio-jazz's past and present, highlighting Ethiopia's historical contributions to the evolution of world music along the way.

Ollie Gordon: Mulatu, how did Ethio-jazz come about? Can you describe the circumstances in which the genre was born?

Mulatu Astatke: Ethio-jazz was created in New York after I left Berkeley. There were some great teachers always telling me: "Be yourself, be yourself." Always this 'be yourself' thing. After I left Boston for New York, I formed a group called The Ethiopian Quintet. That's where Ethio-jazz started fusing the Ethiopian five notes against the twelve notes [of Western jazz]. And it's not all that easy because twelve notes – the chromatic scale – are complicated, but to use them against the five notes you really have to be careful of the blending so you don't lose the colour and the beauty of those five notes. But I was so happy when we managed to do it and make it sound so different.

Photography

Giulia Savorelli

Words

Ollie Gordon

Now I tell you, I have been playing different places for many years but this latest tour I just did in Europe, this is when I really found out what I had done. The support of the people, they love Ethio-jazz; really it was something so crazy and I have such big respect for them. Standing ovations, all nineteen of my concerts: in England, Germany, France, Finland, Poland, all of them. I played at the Shakespeare Theatre in Gdansk, Poland!

I mean it's been hard work for fifty-three years. You know, there have been some great people who invented music and have died before seeing the results. I have been so lucky. Europeans accepting you, loving you and loving your music, your inventions and giving you all these standing ovations. Man, that is my business, my life. I enjoyed this whole tour, it was so beautiful: the acceptance of the Ethio-jazz music.

OG: So where did it all start for you?

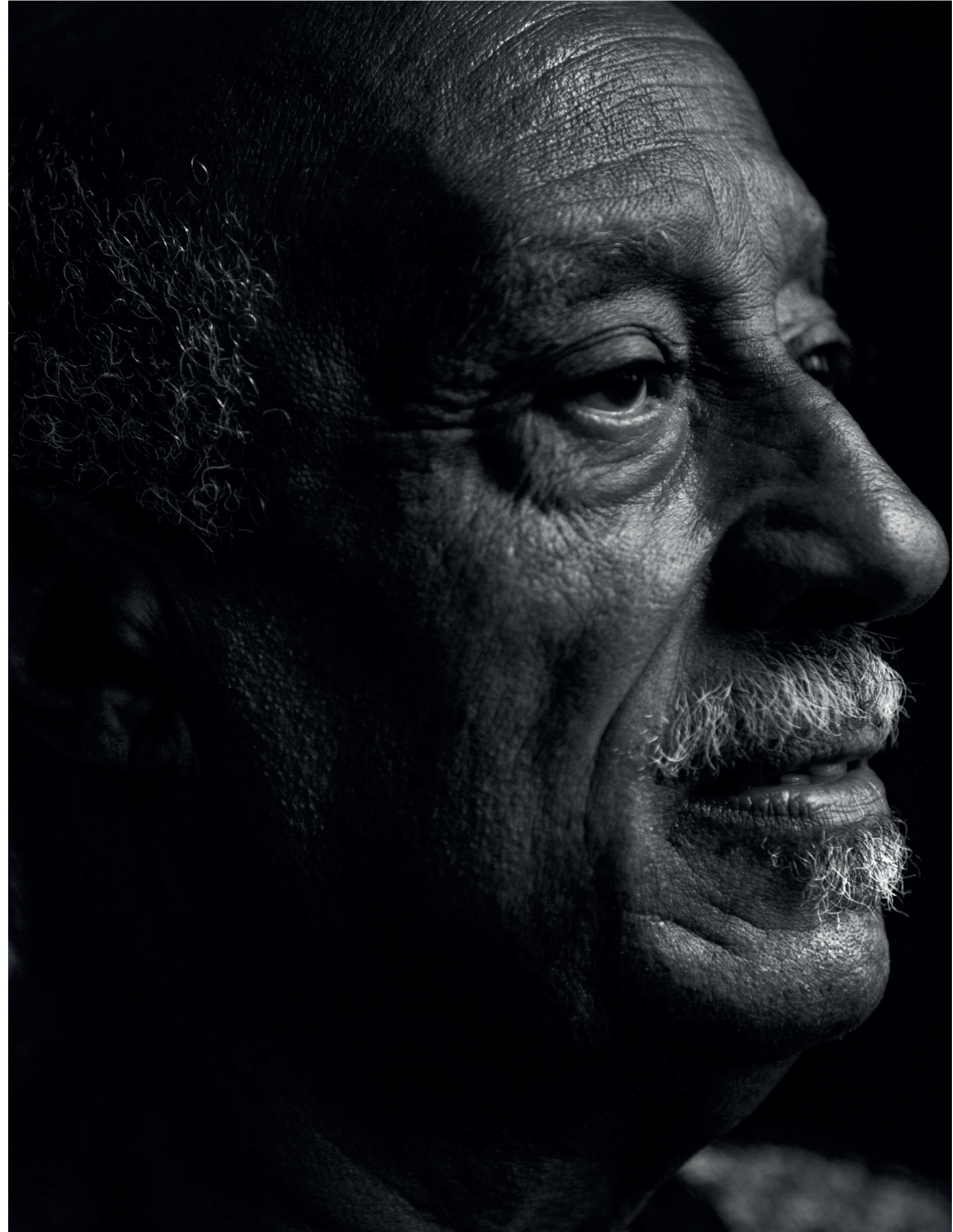
MA: The whole thing started in North Wales. I was sent to high school in Ruabon. I did my O Levels and things over there and then I went to London and made friends: I knew Ronnie Scott, Tubby Hayes, I knew all those people at that time. I saw a lot of Africans from different parts of Africa playing their music in London, but nothing Ethiopian. I played with Edmundo Ros: we played at his club on Regent Street, I was his conga player. You know that was the time when music was acoustic, so beautiful.

I then left for Boston in America. I was the first African to enrol at Berkeley College; I am also the first African to get a PhD from Berkeley. I am also a Fellow of Harvard University, I was there for two years; and I was also at MIT, doing experimental work on the krar (Ethiopian lyre).

We call those people who play the krar, Azmaris. So I had a programme called 'Bringing the Azmaris to the 21st Century'. I developed the krar and we played 'Never on Sunday', 'Summertime', all those kind of pieces. But the project is only half finished and I will go back sometime to finish it, but I've been so busy with other stuff.

I wrote a beautiful opera at Harvard using the resting staff of the Ethiopian Orthodox priests. In Ethiopia we were conducting music in the sixth century when there were no symphony orchestras in the world. If you watch those priests conducting, it is like the military marching band-leader waving his stick.

M U L A T U A S T A T K E





So I wrote a beautiful opera about this, an orchestra conducted by a European and the choir conducted by an Ethiopian priest. I have combined both in a beautiful work.

OG: That's a real fusion.

MA: Yes, yes. So I do these kind of things. I love it, I enjoy it.

Ethio-jazz experienced its golden years in the Sixties and early Seventies with musicians such as Astatke, Mahmoud Ahmed and Gétatchew Mèkurya achieving cult-hero status in the process. But the genre's heyday came to an abrupt end with the introduction of Ethiopia's infamous Communist junta, the Derg, in 1975. Under the regime's double-decade reign Ethio-jazz all but went extinct as result of the suppressive efforts of dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, who was highly suspicious of the music's free-form nature.

After the Derg's demise, Ethio-jazz embarked on a slow comeback in the 1990s. But with the helping hand of Astatke and other Sixties proponents, the genre's reemergence has picked up pace in the capital, Addis Ababa, since the turn of the millennium. Ethio-jazz is now played everywhere on the radio and you can find formal jazz concerts all over the capital most nights of the week. The genre is also taught at all Addis' music colleges, and a new crop of musicians is beginning to blossom as a result.

OG: Mulatu, where do you think Ethio-jazz now finds itself in Addis? Obviously the scene went underground during the time of the Derg, but is it now experiencing a comeback in the capital?

MA: You've seen the reason: kids playing Ethio-jazz. Most of my pieces they are playing. It's becoming big and it's becoming loved by the youngsters. I had this radio programme, actually I still do it: for seven years I was pumping out jazz, Ethio-jazz, world music. I would talk to the people, try to tell them what it is, what it was about. And it's gradually coming back, which is great.

OG: So when you walk down the likes of Bole Road [Addis' main nightlife district] are you increasingly hearing Ethio-jazz come out those places? Or do you worry that there's a growing Westernisation of local musical culture?

MA: Both, both. There are influences of pop music, rock music, jazz all coming together. But to me, I support people who do what they love: I wouldn't say it has to be Ethio-jazz. I progressed this Ethio-jazz thing fifty-three years ago, and I see how it is developing now in Ethiopia, how much people love it, how the youngsters are coming to it. But I am sure it will develop more and it will really come back to the people again. But now I am concentrating on the people who created traditional Ethiopian musical instruments, and the unrecognised influence they have had on the rest of the world. For example, take the washint.

OG: What is it called?

MA: Washint. It's kind of like an Ethiopian flute, made of bamboo.

OG: Ah, I've heard it. It's beautiful. It's got quite a snake charmer-like sound.

MA: Yes! So I do washint and flute fusions. I also do fusions between masinko, a single-stringed bowed lute, and the cello. True jazz fusion. And it's not just the music, it's the dances as well. I can analyse the two worlds and I can see the contribution from one to the other. You take Beyoncé, it is the dance of Gumuz tribe in the north – exactly. She is doing their dance. People don't know, they say: 'American dance, American invention.' I said: 'No, it's from here, look at it.' I have no objection to this kind of fusion. I respect those people who do it, because it's art, it's their creation. Beyoncé does it beautifully. But it is the Gumuz dance.

OG: Do you consider yourself as much a musicologist as a musician?

MA: Well, I do both. But the more you do these things, the more you find out about people who contributed to all this music and these instruments. I did a lecture at the Royal Albert Hall in London talking about musical notations. We [Ethiopians] were the first to create musical notations. The Europeans came behind us, but they made their musical notations the language of the world. I don't speak French, I don't speak Italian; but if I write a note and give it to them, they play it. Amazing thing. But I'm just trying to get recognition for the tribes who contributed to things like that.

OG: Are you impressed by any young Ethio-jazz musicians coming through in Addis at the moment?

MA: Well, this guitarist called Girum Gizaw (from the band Meleket): very nice, good heart, great musician. He plays a lot of my compositions, but he's building up a lot of his own.

OG: Have you heard much of Samuel Yirga?

MA: Well I hear him of course, but he is upcoming also. He's definitely another coming up.

OG: Does it inspire you that he's now signed to Peter Gabriel's Real World Records in the UK, and they are getting Ethio-jazz out for the rest of the world to hear?

MA: Of course. But they have to invent something else to be themselves. Ethio-jazz is Mulatu's baby, my friend. Like Charlie Parker and Coltrane created different directions for jazz music, they should be able to take Ethiopian music in different directions. As long as they play Ethio-jazz, it just won't inspire me. Mostly the people who inspire me at the moment are these bush people, the creators of these instruments. Those are my heroes.

OG: Are you still hearing new types of tribal music when you travel around Ethiopia? Or have you heard it all now?

MA: From the tribe people I still hear very interesting stuff, interesting rhythms, interesting voices, beautiful voices. I hear counter voices, counter rhythms. Tribes like the Gamo have beautiful voices. They have like eight different ranges: like you have soprano to tenor, they have eight! Crazy guys. I love to travel and meet these people, and talk to them. They are my heroes. I told you: 'Be yourself.' Try to be yourself; try to be somebody. And that's exactly what these tribal people do. They create their own identity.

OG: It's an incredible story. Both yours and that of the genre itself.

MA: Ethiopia is a great country, it has contributed a lot to the evolution of the world: music, dancing, development. But we need more research. We need to explore more our great scientists of musical instruments. That is what I'm trying to do now.

OG: Thank you so much, Mulatu.

MA: Anytime, anytime.







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