

## Ethiopiques Bio

Bill Murray's American road trip to visit old lovers in Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005) had unforeseen side-effects. The use of Mulatu Astatqe's sensual jazz on the soundtrack revealed to a wide audience a lost world of sophisticated Ethiopian music, more strange, yet more familiar, than anything else from Africa. A triumphant performance by the nation's Mahmoud Ahmed at Womad 2005 was, meanwhile, followed by his winning Radio 3's 2007 African World Music award.

Awed comments about Ethiopia's musical wealth from Elvis Costello, Arcade Fire's Win Butler, Robert Plant, Patti Smith and Brian Eno have added to the acclaim. And the catalyst for all this has been one heroic act of musical excavation: the *Ethiopiques* series, 21 CDs and counting.

A double-CD best-of next week shows what the fuss is about. Its 28 tracks were almost all recorded during a brief "golden age" between the slackening of Emperor Haile Selassie's rule in the late 1960s and his overthrow by President Mengistu's Derg dictatorship in 1974. The Frenchman Francis Falceto, who has curated the series on his Buda Musique label, talks of "Swinging Addis Ababa", Africa's equivalent to London's 1960s effervescence. Here, American funk and jazz opened up a music scene too proudly nationalistic to admit other African influences, resulting in a surreally unique brew.

The *Very Best of Ethiopiques* inverts the usual "World Music" tale, showing an African country absorbing American sounds for its own ends. Listening to it is a constant surprise. Ahmed is here, of course, his easily conversational then imploring voice rippling over Stax-style organs. Then there's a still greater singer, Tlahoun Gessesse, Ethiopia's national hero, unknown elsewhere. He scales strange notes with a shocking, piercing voice. But underneath, again, you can hear Harlem jazz and soul transmuted to Addis, alongside more ominous, exotic atmospheres. His "Sema" could be a "Ghost Town" for Selassie's last days.

Astatqe shows why Jarmusch wanted him, with dreamy jazz soundscapes and pulsing tempos, while Alemayehu Eshete combines muezzin wails with James Brown barks. And as you dig deeper into the album, you realise how foreign this music is, for all its familiarity, as mesmerising Ethiopian rhythms, ululations and instruments appear. By then, you will be wondering: what on Earth was that?

Falceto has spent 20 years discovering the answer. His obsession began after a party in 1984, when a friend played him an Ahmed LP he had heard by chance in Addis Ababa. Falceto flew there the following month. A curfew imposed by Mengistu in 1974 had already destroyed Addis's nightlife, and the world that Ahmed's LP hinted at.

Movement of the musicians who remained was so restricted that Falceto could do little to help them until the regime's collapse in 1991. Still, he persevered. "This LP of Mahmoud Ahmed [Era Mela Mela] on Crammed Disc in Brussels in 1986 – this was the first release

abroad of modern Ethiopian music," he proudly told journalist Benning Eyre. "It was a kind of fetish for me. This was the LP that opened the doors for Ethiopian music."

Other early LPs had to be completed with French musicians. But Falceto had made contact with Amha Eshete, producer of Addis's greatest label Amha Records, in exile in Washington in 1987. In 1997, the pair tracked down the label's master-tapes in Columbia's Athens archive (for Falceto, "the greatest day of my life"). In October that year, the first two Ethiopiques came out.

Each volume is themed, by artist, region, instrument, genre, or era. As Falceto dug deeper, buying up vinyl from other labels, and interviewing the original artists, in Ethiopia or its Derg-fleeing diaspora, he formed a picture of Addis's amazingly diverse, fertile golden age, played out in decadent, liberated hotel nightclubs. And he pieced together the unique national history that allowed it.

Ethiopia's defeat of an Italian invasion in 1896, the only African nation to repel colonisation (till Mussolini's brief occupation), caused early European fascination. The Tsar's gift of brass instruments and a Russian music teacher was followed by Selassie's adoption of an Armenian orphans' band and its teacher in 1924.

By the late 1940s, with Glenn Miller's records another unlikely foreign influence, Ethiopia was developing cosmopolitan pop. As US military-base radio stations pumped out soul and funk in the 1960s, and Selassie's grip weakened, Ethiopia's multi-cultural brew reached its peak.

Ethiopiques' unlikely Hollywood star, Astatqe, shows the fragility of the achievement. He learnt classical music in London and jazz in the US, before forming the Ethiopian Quintet with Puerto Ricans in New York. Combining jazz, Latin and Ethiopian styles into his own "Ethio-jazz" in the 1960s, Duke Ellington praised him. But back home, things were very different. "I tried to do a jazz concert in Addis Ababa," Astatqe recalled last year, "and people couldn't tolerate it. It was too progressive. People were actually shouting."

The true extent of the "golden age" in Ethiopia is questioned, too, by producer Neway Mengistu. "It was music for the élite from Addis Ababa," he says, "but 90 per cent of Ethiopians live rurally. And even in the urban areas, very few could go to the nightclubs where it was played."

That hardly invalidates the wonderful music Falceto has uncovered. If Ethiopia never quite created a source-equalling mutation of its own from US soul and funk, as that other Selassie-revering nation, Jamaica, did with reggae in the same period, these sensual, atmospheric records still match America on all counts.

Falceto plans 35 CDs in all, including one of 78rpm records of deep rural music from the time of the Fascist occupation, just coming to light. He has little time for Ethiopian music since the Derg's depredations, which left most of the musicians of the "golden age"

retired, or dispiritedly wandering the diaspora's outposts, playing weddings in Little Ethiopias in Washington, DC or New York.

Falceto believes the flowering of the 1960s was permanently crushed by 18 years of censorship, and the rule of soldiers on the Addis streets, where once there was dancing. Clearly feeling nostalgia for a place and time he's never been, he has almost stopped going to the city's nightclubs to look for Ethiopiques acts, finding the new breed of synth-playing soloists too depressing. It may take a younger proselytiser of equal passion to say if he is wrong. Instead, another series is tentatively planned on Ethiopia's music of the 1940s and 1950s. "The Ethiopiques series is a small thing," he says, "compared to the mine that is sleeping there, forgotten."

Falceto is clear on why Jarmusch and the rest have become so addicted to these records. "What's known as world music made us think that we already knew all the music created in Africa. Suddenly, it turns out there is an Ethiopian musical culture that we weren't acquainted with." Nor does Addis Ababa's urban tumult begin to scratch the surface of a huge country the size of France and Spain combined, and so old that its Christianity predates most of Europe's. The murmured peace-prayers and buzzing strings of Alemu Aga's King David's harp (the instrument that fills Ethiopiques 11), the traditional, hoarse battle-songs Getatchew Mekurya has converted into Free Jazz sax honks, and the bowed one-string violins with which the ancient musicians' caste the Azmari still wander the land, are as much a part of Ethiopia. But the urge of its nightclubbing artists to outdo America is still what amazes.

Listening to The Very Best of Ethiopiques, you may not quite believe your ears. You may also find Ethiopia's modern image as a place of death start to blur, as visions of a life-affirming melting pot slip into focus.

-Nick Hasted