

Música em Contexto

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Éthiopiennes vs EthioSonic: about world music and globalized music

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Falceto, Francis. 2019. "Éthiopiennes vs EthioSonic: about world music and globalized music". *Música em Contexto* 13, no. 2: 118-130. Disponível em <http://periodicos.unb.br/>.

ISSN: 1980-5802

DOI:

Recebido: 03 de outubro, 2019.

Aceite: 8 de dezembro, 2019.

Publicado: 25 de dezembro, 2019.



Éthiopiques vs EthioSonic: about world music and globalized music

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Abstract: This article deals with music influences post-WW2 between North and South and vice versa. It traces the concept of “World Music” emergence, then the adoption of African grooves by mixed bands as well as non-African musicians, opening the way to “globalized music”. Because Ethiopia remained never colonized over 3000 years (apart from five years under fascist Italian occupation), the modern part of the country’s musical culture remained totally unknown to the rest of the world. Recordings of modern (or urban) Ethiopian music were simply inexistent outside of the country before 1986, when other musics from Africa had kind of loud-speakers in the colonial capital cities Paris, London, Brussels or Lisbon, for example. A focus about Ethiopian musics through two music series (éthiopiques and ethioSonic) complete the scope of this study.

Keyword: Ethiopia. Modern music. Recording. World music.

Éthiopiques vs EthioSonic: sobre a *world music* e a música globalizada

Resumo: Este artigo trata das influências musicais mútuas entre os hemisférios Norte e Sul pós-Segunda Guerra Mundial. Traça o conceito de surgimento da “World Music”, seguida da adoção de grooves africanos por bandas mistas e também por músicos não africanos, abrindo caminho para a “música globalizada”. Como a Etiópia nunca foi colonizada por mais de 3.000 anos (exceto cinco anos sob ocupação italiana fascista), a parte moderna da cultura musical do país permaneceu totalmente desconhecida para o resto do mundo. Gravações de música etíope moderna (ou urbana) simplesmente inexístiam fora do país antes de 1986, enquanto outras músicas da África já se encontravam presentes nas capitais coloniais como Paris, Londres, Bruxelas ou Lisboa. Um enfoque sobre as músicas etíopes por meio de duas séries musicais (éthiopiques e ethioSonic) completam o escopo deste estudo.

Abstract: Etiópia. Música moderna. Gravações. World music.

Éthiopiques vs EthioSonic: sobre la *world music* y la música globalizada

Resumen: Este artículo trata sobre las influencias musicales mutuas entre los hemisferios norte y sur después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Traza el concepto del surgimiento de la “World Music”, seguido de la adopción de ritmos africanos por bandas mixtas y también por músicos no africanos, allanando el camino para la “música globalizada”. Como Etiopía nunca fue colonizada durante más de 3.000 años (excepto durante cinco años bajo la ocupación fascista italiana), la parte moderna de la cultura musical del país permaneció totalmente desconocida para el resto del mundo. Las grabaciones de música etíope moderna (o urbana) simplemente no existían fuera del país antes de 1986, mientras que otras músicas africanas ya estaban presentes en capitales coloniales como París, Londres, Bruselas o Lisboa. Un enfoque en la música etíope a través de dos series musicales (éthiopiques y ethioSonic) completa el alcance de este estudio.

Palabras-clave: Etiopía. Música moderna. Grabaciones. Música del mundo .



Introduction

I am extremely surprised, delighted and honored to be among you today¹, after nearly three decades of close frequentation of music from Ethiopia and Eritrea. I was not formatted for that. Not formatted to speak at Harvard in such a conference, not formatted to become an observer of the musical cultures of this region of Africa, not formatted to become a researcher – and possibly a finder... As a teenager, I had no particular vocation. I belong to this generation of baby boomers who wanted to change the world, to make freedom universal and compulsory, and share in an egalitarian way all the wealth (including cultural) of our planet. Absolute as well as precocious music lover, I was furious at the lack of open structures of education and training in my country.

Sometimes the fate of the researchers is strangely the result of mere chance.

Let me first underline how much I appreciate the 's' plural in the title of the conference: "Africa Remix: Producing and Presenting African *Musics* Abroad". So many English speakers friends of mine told me repeatedly that music is invariable in English, and that one shouldn't add an s to express the plural... Even the automatic computerized spelling corrector underlines musics when I type it with a final 's'!... I had serious problems with this so-called invariability, and for two reasons.

One is related to African music in general. In French for instance, many people speak

generally about "la musique africaine". This singular is shocking to me. More than ignorance, I see it as deny of the incredible diversity of musical genres, styles or cultures of the African continent. Nobody in Europe would speak about "la musique européenne" – singular –, so obviously ridiculous and inappropriate it seems to anybody. Any European feels the real differences between music from, let's say, Sweden, France and Spain. I am sure that for all Americans, speaking about "la musique américaine", singular and in general terms, is laughable enough, knowing that there are at least three Americas... So, following the hosts of this conference, let's do a pleasant violence to academic English and let's consider it like a Latin language that adds a visible and hearable 's' to underline the plural of music.

Two is specifically related to musics in Ethiopia: For the same reasons of a huge diversity of musical genres, styles or cultures, I am reluctant to let the reader or the listener think that music in the plural can be meant by an invariable word, the same than the one in the singular. As an anecdote, I mention the "Ethiopian Music(s) Festival" I have been co-curating in Addis Ababa for ten years (2001-2010) with my friend Heruy Arefe-Aine. To cool down the fundamentalist English speakers, I had suggested to put the s of Ethiopian Music(s) in brackets – which was actually a graphic way to emphasize on the plurality of Ethiopian musics we were presenting in this festival.

This short introductory linguistic issue is also a pretext for me to apologize in advance for my limited and sometimes pretty broken English speaking...

1 This paper was given as a keynote lecture in the frame of a one-day conference "Producing and Presenting African Music abroad" at Harvard University on February 8, 2013.

A brief reminder about modern music emergence

What an evolution, what a giant step ahead in the appreciation and scattering of African musics worldwide since the invention of the talking machine in the late 19th century! If many recordings have been done since then, most of the pre-World War 2 production was rarely available in the northern hemisphere but above all in the concerned African countries. The small market there was essentially formed by open-minded European settlers (there had some!) and wealthy enough natives of the colonies like high-ranking civil servants, merchants, nobility, etc.² It was not anybody then who could afford to possess a shellac player and phonograms. It is mainly after World War 2 that some musics from Africa, devotedly recorded and released by pioneers scholars, became publicly available in northern countries for a bunch of happy few. Still we were far from today's large distribution. This was also the time when these same researchers agreed on a new word to name and specify their research field: *ethnomusicology* (as opposed to conventional musicology that didn't pay enough consideration to non-European music). All this recorded and released music was then strictly "traditional", even if modern music had started to emerge in many parts of Africa at least from the early 20th century. About 30 years later, in 1979, the first Ethiopian musicologist, Ashenafi Kebede,

would highlight and deplore a paradoxical situation:

Records of traditional music are scarcely found in Ethiopia. It is almost ironic that an enthusiastic researcher of traditional music living in Ethiopia must obtain records of Ethiopian traditional music from abroad – from Europe and the United States. (Kebede 1980, 86)

Actually, modern music in Africa (and in other continents affected by colonization as well) has generally proceeded from the contribution of colonial and military marching bands. Basically trained to perform a European repertoire of marching band music, native Africans have gradually mastered these instruments coming from elsewhere, enough to transpose their own local music. Thus were little by little elaborated the modern musics of Africa. This slow cultural evolution can be summarized in a simple equation: Modern music = traditional music + appropriation of European (or colonial) instruments.

The early ethnomusicologists had systematically ruled out from their researches all musics that borrowed anything from colonizing Europe, starting with its instruments. Moreover, they used to see these developments only as devastating the musical traditions. Even though this obviously deserves to be discussed, isn't it questionable whether it belongs to researchers to be active – even if only by denial – in the evolutionary dynamics of popular music cultures, regardless of the alleged denaturing or "*deculturing*" impact of exogenous factors or influences?... Still today, many ethnomusicologists continue wrapping themselves in the dignity of outraged purists or referees of elegances, if not even as

2 For example, see the invoice dated 20 September 1910 and sent by Beka Records from Berlin to Tessema Eshete and Astatke Habte-Weld in Addis Ababa, as well as to Dedjaz Teferi Makonnen in Harar for 6 crates of records (pdf, p. 71 in CD2 of *éthiopiennes 27, "Azmarî Tèssèma Eshètè – Centennial of the First Ethiopian Recordings"*, Buda Musique, Paris 2010).

censors of modern music from Africa and elsewhere³.

It is not my intention to debate here about acculturation and other more or less ethnocentric questionings. Of course, it is necessary to observe, record, analyze, compare, and even comment without limitation. This conference shows at least that there are also people with the mind, eyes, and ears wide open, hopefully.

Of course, with the pompous colonial repertoire⁴, we are still quite far from the groovy music that arose largely in the fifties and reached a pick of sophistication quite parallel to the decolonization time, from the early sixties on. On top of the dominant brass sections of early modern African musics came then into the picture electric guitars popularized by worldwide Rock'n'Roll irresistible invasion and, later on, electric keyboards.

From the 50s, the public and the African market have expanded and democratized. It was no longer a confidential market exclusively reserved for the privileged people and the notables, but a real popular phenomenon. Initially dominated by European expatriates producers, this African market was nevertheless still dependent on Europe for manufacturing. Gradually, African producers have emerged and, with decolonization, it is even African governments that have also organized, supervised and controlled all or part of the local production of discs. (At all times, African potentates have tended to use popular

3 Can't we reasonably believe that the presence of music researchers in the field is no less likely to disrupt the development of local music than historical influences of the past?

4 I don't know if you have here in the USA a critical saying like we have in French, stating that "Military justice is to justice what military music is to music". The reverse is true too.

singers and musicians, for better and for worse). It took some time before this African production reaches the northern hemisphere consistently because it was not distributed outside Africa or only residually. Extra-African market really developed with the advent of the "World Music" phenomenon starting by the late 80s. And yet this phenomenon would deal then principally with African musics of the moment. Time for a true and almost systematic musical archeology of Africa, reflecting the production of the *golden years* (let's say from the 50s to the 70s – and earlier), would happen hardly before the end of the 90s and the beginning of this century, even though most of these musics as well as the creative enthusiasm which had led to their birth were no longer existing – a setback among others of what is often called the failure of decolonization. There is still much to do in terms of reissue and rehabilitation of this heritage. To this, we must add the technological dependence of Africa and the always higher cost in rare foreign currency of this dependence for everything related to instruments, sound systems, recording studios, discs manufacturing, etc. Remarkably, one can observe a parallel decline in the politico-economic situation of Africa and the music market. In this regard, the emergence of the cassette tape appears to be a significant marker of this decline.

About the term "World Music"

It happens that I have paid some interest in the past to the musical influences of Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in Ethiopia (and elsewhere, such as in China and South America) in the 17th century. I often think of baroque music as one of the earliest "world music" (Falceto 2002). Although supposedly a

recent invention, one can say that this concept is actually as old as the world – and the history of neighborhoods, conquests, invasions, missions, travels, migrations and other diasporas. Globalization has a long history behind itself, but the contemporary and considerable extension of diasporas and the emergence of electronic communications have considerably amplified its impact. Furthermore, baroque music was a modern music in his time, a musical revolution. Moreover, it was instrumental in unpredictable crossbreeding between musical cultures that nothing destined to be combined, if only by virtue of their geographical splits.

It is worth reminding briefly about this designation “World Music”.

This term “World Music” has been conceived in June 1987 by a bunch of British musical personalities, producers and music journalists especially concerned with music without borders. Note that they had also the rare distinction to be real music lovers too, a rather unusual singularity in the generalist music business. The idea of these dedicated musketeers was to provide an effective visibility to all kinds of musics that had not previously found their place in record stores. Simple and practical idea, concerted efforts for an appropriate marketing aimed at boosting accessibility of musics hitherto downplayed – starting with African musics.

Ian Anderson, editor of *fROOTS* magazine (formerly *Folk Roots*, between 1979 and 1998), made it very clear in 2000 in order to close a debate about this “World Music” label that had turned into polemic over the years:

It wasn't a new name, just one of many that had floated around in the preceding decades. But the logic (...) was that an established,

unified generic name would give retailers a place where they could confidently rack otherwise unstockable releases, and where customers might both search out items they'd heard on the radio (not knowing how to spell a mis-pronounced or mis-remembered name or title) and browse through wider catalogue. (...) Nobody thought of defining it or pretending there was such a beast: it was just to be a box, like jazz, classical or rock... (...) Nowhere in any of this was there the faintest whiff of exploitation, exclusivity, cliques, ghettoisation, conspiracies, cultural imperialism, racism or any of the other nonsensical -isms that have been chucked at the notion since (...). It was simply a great idea, followed up by a lot of unprecedented co-operation between enthusiasts (very few thought of each other as business rivals) who wanted others to have more opportunity to share their enthusiasms. Yes, it was good for business, but by being so it was automatically good for the incomes of the artists too. (Anderson 2000)⁵

The “Yeke Yeke” syndrome

Almost symbolically, as roughly at the same time (August 1986), Paul Simon released his album “Graceland”, strongly impregnated by South African influences. And the Guinean Mory Kante “Akwaba Beach” with the worldwide hit “Yeke Yeke” (produced by the British Nick Patrick for the French record label Barclay in 1987). This track became in 1988 the African best seller ever with millions copies sold worldwide. I cite these two musical events for their global success marked the beginning of a *World* bang orgy that would continue throughout the 90s and until today.

5 See also the minutes of the meetings where the new strategy of the “World Music” label development had been drawn up: <https://frootsmag.com/world-music-history-minutes-and-press-releases>.

We are no longer there in the presence of African music *made in Africa*. To summarize, this revival of attention to African musics coincided with a sudden flood of African music revised and corrected, largely westernized, developed by western producers for a western market. With very few exceptions, the musical Africa that was given to us then to listen had the qualities of a fiction, the perfection of clichés, it was filtered and formatted, arranged – *overproduced*, in one word – to reach the widest market possible. And often with the full agreement of the great African voices, rather delighted to benefit of the supposedly absolute modernity. Many are disillusioned since. Right or wrong, one can see in this frenzy the result of a productivist approach to compensate or restart and boost a pop music market considerably slowed down after 30 or 40 glorious years of continuous expansion. That's the way markets go. One borrows from the other what is no more available at home. Or: about exhaustion of Western musical imagination as motor for a vital economic regeneration.

"Africa Remix" is a product derived directly from the saga "World Music" – its most developed offspring, the most visible, the most successful as well. During the past quarter century, after another quarter century of incubation, it is the musics of Africa that have found the most resonance worldwide. There are countless groups largely inspired by the musics of this continent. To the "classical" covers performed by musicians playing the good old "classical" instruments were added all those that use the facilities of electronics. Any computer now enables anyone to create quietly all kinds of music. As any new instrument, any device or appliance brings generally new forms and new aesthetics, this has also

contributed to numerous musical innovations.

Innovation and Tradition

Of course, here is not the place where to invalidate such a production in the name of who knows what purism. This would be just ridiculous. *Authenticity* is a word to ban when it comes to music, which is rather akin to a gas of extreme volatility, unstable and versatile, imaginative, caring little about rational historical continuity, with a pretty hazy territorial marker. Moreover, many of these more or less mixed experiments turned out to be seriously groovy, which in itself fully justifies all kindness.

This kind of undifferentiation bears the signature of globalization. Endless debates about tradition and modernity have served hitherto to maintain quarrels of ideological type. After all and generally, doesn't the music evolution operate in close conjunction with the pleasure, or at least with the need to meet compelling social obligations? Of course the *tradition* means something essential to the understanding of musical cultures – who would think to deny it? –, but something historical and especially dynamic. Hasn't it always been so? Most people agree that the musical traditions have remained almost unchanged for centuries. Some of them, starting with European musical traditions, have been studied very closely, sometimes over several centuries. While there is no doubt that the traditions are dynamic and not static (or even eternal, as too often local chauvinisms would like us to believe), it is also clear that the changes they have experienced were extremely slow and that they have developed over generations and generations. Since the late 19th century

and especially since the invention of the “talking machine”, it is clear that mutations are phenomenal. And that goes for the musical traditions of the “old continent” as well as those of the “new world”, or furthermore of what was called yesterday the “third world”. Today, a simple man’s life, whether you are a musician, a listener or a researcher, is sufficient to measure the speed and acceleration of these changes. Where several generations of writers on music, sound hunters and other musicologists had allowed us to size up the current developments, many of us [here] know from experience that within a few decades everything has accelerated to the point that we sometimes feel it difficult to follow – and to enjoy. The reality of the day is a very long way from descriptions reported by our predecessors. The artists themselves, traditional and modern, or neo-traditional or “tradi-modern” as it is said more and more, give the impression they don’t have the situation under control anymore, they are torn between compulsory competition, economic hardship, political constraints, ever-increasing modernism and compliance towards a more and more mixed audience – less and less local.

Any energy degrades with time. Entropy is at the traditions’ door. An avant-garde of today will become tomorrow a tradition of reference. Innovation is an integral part of the traditions destiny, ever since. Is it reasonable that it gives way to despair? It seems that this kind of torment is reserved for observers, analysts, museum curators, encyclopedists, traditionalists by vocation, ordinary nostalgic people, forensic scientists, formalin-addict taxidermists and irreducible conservatives of all kinds – each in its own way. They are here to save and keep record of

what can be saved – for the good and the bad. Probably I am one of them.

It seems as well that it is the least of the peoples worries. Shouldn’t we fear ethnocentrism in our confrontation with otherness? In any case, this should not justify edicts and prohibitions, definitive value judgments and school *fatwa* when it comes to understand anything that is not supposed tradition.

***éthiopiennes* and ethioSonic series**

The idea of contributing to the reissue of Ethiopian modern music had germinated as soon as my first visit to this country in 1985. Absolutely no modern recording was available then in Europe or America⁶. This modern Ethiopian music was not even ignored: it was as if it simply did not exist. Not a single book dealing with modern African musics would include then an Ethiopian chapter. And sources of information such as the internet did not exist at that time. Only recordings of traditional music had been published and yet they were not easily accessible. They had been made by pioneers like Wolf Leslau, Harold Courlander, Jean Jenkins, Ashenafi Kebede, Hans Helfritz, Ralph Harrison et Ragnar Johnson, Lin Lerner et Chad Wollner, Cynthia Tse Kimberlin, Bernard Lortat-Jacob, Ivo Strecker...

By 1986 I published “Ere Mela Mela”, the fetish LP of Mahmoud Ahmed that had alerted me about the excellence of this music. The idea of the *éthiopiennes* series dates from the same

⁶ I found later on one song of Alemayehu Eshete stray on the first compilation of John Storm Roberts, “Africa Dances” (Original Music, 1972): “Feqer feqer new”, soberly presented: “Love is Love, by Alemayno Eshirtay Group. Ethiopia: soul” [sic].

time, but for reasons that stood the political situation in this country, I had to wait actively for over ten years before achieving.

Indeed a military-stalinist dictatorship harshly controlled the country since the overthrow of Emperor Hayle Selassie in 1974 and left no freedom of movement for the citizens. To give an idea of the atmosphere that prevailed in Ethiopia, you should know for example that it was impossible for an Ethiopian to leave the country without an exit visa. Exit visa! Can you imagine begging for an exit visa to go to Canada or Europe! Of course, it was hopeless for ordinary citizens, and hopeless for artists who would have liked to go elsewhere than a brother country like China, the USSR, Cuba or Poland. Only privileged people and few artists subservient to the regime could benefit from these favors. Moreover, the whole culture was fully controlled, supervised and organized by the regime and devoted to the socialist-realist propaganda. Add to that a curfew that lasted from the beginning of the revolution, prohibiting normal nightlife since it was raging from midnight to 6 am (during calm times, because in period of tension it could be extended or permanent). It will run without interruption from 1974 to 1992 – more than 18 years... A foreigner who had bought cassettes or discs had to go through the censorship office and have his purchases examined and stamped before leaving... And so on. Various checks, frisking, intimidation and harassment were daily. And it was never good for an Ethiopian to be seen along with a *Ferenj* – a foreigner, a non-Ethiopian. To interview someone could only be done sheltered from view.

It is for historical reasons that the musics of Ethiopia remained so long unknown outside their borders. What sets Ethiopia apart from

every other country in Africa is the fact that it was never colonized (aside from five years of occupation by Mussolini's Fascist Italy from 1936 to 1941, a mere trifle for a country whose history spans three millennia). No European metropolis or capital, then, to spread its culture in general, and its music in particular. It is no coincidence that Paris became the capital for the musics of the former French colonial empire, that London is the loudspeaker of choice for the musics of the Commonwealth, Brussels for Congolese rumba and Lisbon for Luso-African musics. Ethiopia's long tradition of fierce independence and even isolationism did the rest, and so it is that its musics are the very last from the African continent to have reached our shores.

In Ethiopia itself, a seeming lack of any urge to export is compounded by the fact that the words are far more important than the music. It is essentially the lyrics and the capacity for verbal improvisation that have always been the criteria for musical excellence, and the age-old art of the feverishly jabbering *azmari*, the wandering minstrels akin to our medieval troubadours, is something of a national sport. These sharp-tongued orators, the mouthpieces of a syrupy yet scathing brand of free-thinking, can be labeled as rap artists before their time⁷.

7 For a long time I have been thinking the first written mentions of the Amhara *azmari* would go back to the late 16th century, made by Bahrey in his History of the Galla (a term which was formerly –until the Derg period– and derogatively used to refer to the Oromo). In fact, much older mentions can be found in mid-15th century. Cf. Manfred Kropp, "Antiquae restitutio legis. Zur Alimentation des Hofklerus und einer Zeugenliste als imago imperii und notitia dignitatum in einer Urkunde des Kaiser Zär'ä Ya'qob im condaghe der Hs. BM Or. 481, fol. 154", *Scrinium. Revue de patrologie, d'hagiographie critique et d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 1 (2005) [Mélanges Sevir Chemetsov], p. 115-147. Mentions of *azmari ras* and *zan azmari* (as well as of *bäälä bägäna*) are to

A great artist like Mahmoud Ahmed, the first Ethiopian singer to have ventured onto stages the world over, needed several years before he could believe in the good will and then the genuine enthusiasm of the *ferenj* audiences. At first, his great worry was “Are there any Ethiopians in the crowd?” Even today, there are other Ethiopian artists who anxiously ask if there are Abèshas “over there” – in Japan, for instance. As if their absence was a guarantee of failure.

It was not until the burgeoning international fame of Mahmoud Ahmed, and then of Aster Aweke, Gigi, Getatchew Mekurya, Alemayehu Eshete and, more recently, Mulatu Astatke, became so undeniable that Ethiopians would at last come to believe that their musics had become virtually universal and no longer simply and strictly “national”.

Hence, Ethiopians have always been totally incredulous regarding the ability of the *Ferenj* to appreciate their musics. And indeed, early travelers from the Northern Hemisphere (traders, missionaries, adventurers, hunters, diplomats...) always abundantly recorded in their accounts how absolutely “impossible” Abyssinian music was to listen to. For Ethiopians, not understanding the language automatically and immediately precludes any pretense of taking in or enjoying a culture that is not one's own. What the *Ferenj* mean by music – beautiful melody, vocal timbre, instrumental virtuosity, refined arrangements – definitely takes a back seat for Ethiopian listeners. But the “modernity” [zämānawinät ΣLô¨òè:] introduced by the intrusion and the subsequent appropriation of European

instruments, starting at the very end of the 19th century and especially since the Italo-Ethiopian postwar period, changed the givens: the lyrical flights of the brass spurring on those incredible voices was enough to warm the ears of any music lover from anywhere on earth, whether or not they can speak Amharic, Gouraguigna, Oromiffa or Tigrigna. No more than the world's baby-boomers and other teenagers of the 50s or 60s needed to understand English to immediately take to Rock and Roll and Rhythm and Blues; just as today's young people, wherever they are speaking or listening from or whatever their color, universally embrace rap. Beyond the supposedly indispensable codes, energy, beat, groove, generational pleasure and provocation are part of the package and make all the difference.

Initially, a dozen CDs only were planned to be released in *éthiopiennes series*, all from Amha Records catalog. Contacted as soon as 1986 while living in exile in the United States, Amha Eshete gave me a key help to retrieve the original masters. Still it took ten years, because of the regime ruling then in Ethiopia. Very quickly, due to the international media response and thanks to the echos that had reached the country, other historical Ethiopian producers and major artists have offered to be part of the series with their golden oldies. Maybe they were teased by international fame by selling records like hotcakes – which is not exactly the case, despite the large and rather laudatory coverage enjoyed by the collection. Moreover, it seemed to me necessary too to pay tribute to the impressive diversity of traditional cultures of Southern Ethiopia, especially despised and ignored in Ethiopia itself. Many of them have never been documented. Still much remains

be found p. 120, 125 and 135. I am very grateful to Bertrand Hirsch for having conveyed this capital information for the Ethiopian music history. Shall we find soon still more older mentions and sources?

to be done. The 28th volume of *éthiopiques* (Ali Birra / Great Oromo Music) has just been released, and a last dozen remains virtually forthcoming – I say virtually because it seems that the CDs have a limited future.

Internet, symbol of globalization

The mere chance of encounters and the capital intermediary of internet made me cross the path of foreign musicians (non-Ethiopians) so enamored of this missing link of African musics that they have made up their mind to present their own sonic version of it. This led to the release of “Jump to Addis / Europe meets Ethiopia” (*éthiopiques*-15, 2003) and of “Either/Orchestra Live in Addis” (*éthiopiques*-20, 2005). “Jump to Addis” was the result of the meeting of four free jazz musicians based in Amsterdam with traditional Ethiopian musicians. These four musicians (two Dutch, one German and one French) went spontaneously to Ethiopia to experiment a musical adventure. It happened we were neighbors in the same small hotel in Addis in 1999. As for the Either/Orchestra, it is thanks to the internet that I got in touch with its leader, Russ Gershon, in 2000. Russ and his gang were immersed in Ethiopian musics since the mid-90s, through the first edition of “Ethiopian Groove / The Golden Seventies” which I had released in 1994.

The near release of these two discs caused some confusion among music critics and fans of the collection: Was it the end of golden oldies? Was the vein exhausted? Had everything been said about “Swinging Addis”?

From 2003 on, not a single month passed without receiving demos or live recordings from bands interpreting Ethiopian music – from everywhere, from all Europe, from the

USA, from Canada, Brasil, Israel, Japan, Australia... What must be stressed here is that I had never personally initiated such a process. I had never suggested to anyone to play covers of Ethiopian music. I was first to be surprised by this spontaneous generation of which I am now at a loss monitoring the developments. I have not enough time to surf as much as I would like on internet music sites such as YouTube or SoundCloud – not to mention more and more Ethiopian websites devoted to all kinds of Ethiopian music. It is no longer only distinguished and “old style” musicians who are struggling with more or less success with difficult exercises of cover or interpretation, but all kinds of electro hackers entered the dance – Remix, sampling, edits and other mashups, etc. And the joyful epidemic has continued to spread – for better or for worse. Today there is no counting the many covers and other delectable abuse that the Ethiopian standards have been subjected to pretty much all over the globe.

Faced with this avalanche of musical proposals, the idea came to me in 2006 to create with Buda Musique’s boss, Gilles Fruchaux, a new series devoted precisely to these improbable developments of Ethiopian music, in all diversity. “Today’s Ethiopian groove, in all its forms and wherever it may come from – Ethiopia, the diaspora or *ferenj*”, such is the moto of ethioSonic’s project.

Machines and music evolution

From the beginning of this kind of spontaneous generation, it seemed to me that these new musical turbulence were likely to increase interest in music of Ethiopia – originating from Ethiopia, made in Ethiopia. This healthy turmoil carries with it an

incentive to go and hear a little more about the original references. But also and perhaps more importantly, it seems very useful to provoke and boost today music scene, in Ethiopia as well as in the diaspora. It really needs.

Many are wondering rightly about this contemporary Ethiopian scene. What is it about exactly? Is it as exciting as in the *Swinging Addis* era? Questioning, interest and expectations are deep, many foreigners would like to make the pilgrimage to Addis to find embers that are not ashes. I'm obliged to answer clearly in the negative. I am the first to be saddened, though some observers do not share my critical views. I have often pointed to the lack of dynamism, militancy, commitment, inventiveness, creativity, of new generations of Ethiopian musicians. The equation they have to solve is simple: it is not about copying the music dating back fifty years ago, no one is expecting from them a revival, a dreary identical copy. They have rather to be at least as good, as groovy, as clear and convincing as the imperial generation, but by inventing new forms, a new repertoire. It is about recreating a dynamic equal to the country – a minority in its start, underground, before reaching the popular recognition. I have often wished, secretly, the advent of a kind of punk movement in Ethiopia, a radical revolt against the cultural establishment – the national radio and television, the media in general, the National Music School, and all the music production circuit in the hands of producers (the music shops), greedy and without the slightest concern for artistic innovation. This is probably too much to expect of a culture based largely on obedience and submission, respect for the established order and supposedly eternal values. I must say that 18 years of an

abominable dictatorship (sorry for the redundancy) are enough to dishearten the ones with inclination to revolt. But whatever one thinks of the current regime, it is still more than twenty years now that a new era has begun for the country – almost a generation...

I have mentioned music shops among the main obstacles to any evolution, to any upheaval. Unlike historical major records producers such as Amha Eshete (Amha Records, 1968-1975) or Ali Abdella Kaifa (more known as Ali Tango – Kaifa Records, 1973-1977, and until the mid-90s for cassettes), today's producers are not interested at all in innovation or challenge. "Do the same tape as the previous one and get the same success. Don't rock the boat..." seems to be the only instructions they give to the artists of which they release the recordings. The less they invest in production costs, the better they are. Their dream, often attained, is to have one single musician (preferably a keyboardist able to play all the parts) to be paid for the accompaniment of the lead singer. Added to the general downturn in the market, the invasion of electronic keyboards is a plague of today's Ethiopian music (like in many other countries), so much so that one speaks about laughable "one man band"!...⁸ Instead of contributing to the invention of new forms, this new machine does little to miserably "replace" brass, bass, drums and other instruments. Out of question to explode budgets by paying a real orchestra. In recent years, pop stars have decided to produce

8 For the past ten years, an Ethiopian electronic scene worthy of the name seems to slowly extricate itself from the near-atony of the times. The challenge is resolutely contemporary – "tradition" and modernity, heritage and innovation, local and global, 'being Ethiopian' (ityopyawinnät) and globalization... How to carry an Ethiopian groove? Cf. Marye (2019).

themselves their own records and deliver the masters “turnkey” to music shops that take in charge the distribution only. More than from the real market (the CD sale), self-produced lead singers get their income from industry and business sponsors. One might expect from artists as famous as wealthy to invest in a big way for themselves. None of that. Same reluctance, same greed, same mediocrity in production – except some rare and timid exceptions.

One can rightly wonder about competition, innovation, creativity during imperial times: How is it that institutional orchestras, entirely under the control of Emperor Haile-Selassie, with singers and musicians employed on a monthly salary base, could have been that effective, innovative, sophisticated in their creations? We do not usually expect that from civil servants. It is true that there was then a real emulation, a sense of competition and a scarcely believable competition between orchestras. Every New Year day, Imperial Bodyguard Band, Police Orchestra, Army Band, Municipality Band, Haile Selassie Theatre Orchestra, etc., were confronting each other in a lengthy concert that could last seven to eight hours. They would present to several thousands of people their new pieces concocted in the greatest secrecy. This public and broadcasted contest would determine the new hits for the coming year. Every band would be full of inventions, discoveries and surprises. Each orchestra housed workshops for authors, composers and arrangers. The latter have virtually disappeared from the contemporary scene. Such emulation, under this form or another, seems to have completely disappeared. Today too often a rickety unison replaces the sophisticated arrangements of the imperial era.

The picture is even darker if one comes to consider the state of protection and remuneration of rights of artists and producers...

Glass beads and trinkets

Since the *éthiopiennes* project is on the tracks, I have always refused to respond favorably to production proposals, artistically speaking, of Ethiopian musicians. Too many white magicians are in fact charlatans ignoring the cultures they claim to “develop” and promote internationally. This is not the studio or the technology that makes the music, but the musicians. (This is also not the musicologist or *ethnomusicologist*). If technological advance of the North often takes advantage of its dominant position towards South, inflation of fully African studios that now criss-crosses the whole continent is no more a guarantee of a better purpose. Not to mention that consumers and markets are in the North. Misrepresentation of the product: glass beads and trinkets.

My fieldwork leads me to meet regularly both veterans of the historic “Swinging Addis” and the finest of the new generation of musicians who are part of today’s Ethiopian scene. The foreign researcher and the Ethiopian musician are sharing mutual interests: one seeks to understand a culture, its roots, function, and history, possibly its future, the other seeks to strengthen his or her position as an artist by absorbing potentialities from elsewhere. Transfer of culture, like one talks about transfer of technology (between the U.S. and Europe on the one hand, and China, for example). That’s the way it is, cultural exchange and trading exchange feed themselves, more or less voraciously, more or less harmoniously, on the other.

Probably am I more pessimistic and nostalgic than I think.

It seems to me evident that Ethiopian musics are and must be above all a matter for Ethiopian musicians. Nevertheless, today, these musics are defended and illustrated in *Ferenjland* in a way that feels more dynamic, more feverish and more creative than inside the country itself or amidst its huge diaspora. In a singularly paradoxical situation, this explosive propagation is often more vibrant than many of the platitudes bearing the “made in Ethiopia” label. Let there be no mistake: while there may be few truly innovative groups or solo artists in Ethiopia, there is no lack of individual talent. It is the difficulty or the impossibility of supporting such groups that is to blame for this state of affairs, linked to a sclerotic system of production that is allergic to innovation and too eager for easy money, and a broadcasting system plagued by corruption and by the censorship of institutional radio and television medias – without forgetting self-censorship entertained by intimidation and government pressure, at all times. When it comes to art, in Ethiopia like anywhere else, it is only the exceptions that are truly exciting and hold the promise of any kind of future.

One uses fast, often and too easily dirty word like acculturation or cultural loss when it comes to reporting on Western pop influences on “modern” African musicians, but do we think about reversing such diagnosis? Does one speak in the same terms about European and American (or Japanese) musicians who love the musics of Africa so much that their covers or “original”

compositions sound purely and simply African? Ethnocentrism is pretty resilient. A globalized world (and the music of the same metal) should it not eradicate all borders from our assessments, criticisms and judgments, all chauvinism and all critical maximalism about so-called authenticity?

We must remain humble. Any pretension to tell the future is little compared to the people genius who alone made and unmade evolutions and revolutions. No marketing will never abolish the mere chance of cultures in perpetual fermentation. Decline and rebirth, rebirth and decline seem the two breasts of any living entity.

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