

The Light & Sound of Mogadishu

Posted At : May 20, 2008 10:05 PM | Posted By : Matthew LaVoie

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Blue and White, the colors of the Somali flag, Blue and White, the colors of Mogadishu. This city, that over the last seventeen years has become a symbol of anarchy and suffering, was once one of East Africa's most appealing capitals. Friends and colleagues who lived in Mogadishu in the early 1970s remember a city of whitewashed corral houses, with Arabic arches and elaborately carved rosettes, of Italian art-deco cafes and colonial administrative buildings, a city of tree shaded boulevards, and the cobalt blue of the Indian Ocean. They remember a city where young women in miniskirts strolled alongside older women in colorful and billowing Direh, where young dudes grew Afros and strutted, in bell bottoms, past groups of men in ma'awis kilts and white skullcaps. Today, living far from Mogadishu, these friends and colleagues feed their memories with a steady diet of thirty-year old recordings by their favorite poets and singers from 'back home'.

These rich memories, and reveries, of the early 1970s are captured in this set of 45s on the 'Light & Sound' label from Mogadishu. The label was an offshoot of the successful 'Light & Sound' electronic appliance store located in the center of the city. The store, which shared a building with the famous 'Cinema Hamar' (which was the first enclosed movie theater in Mogadishu), and the label, were both owned by Dahir Omar. The recording studio was located in a back room off the main sales floor, and may have been the first private recording studio in Somalia (at the time most recordings were made in the studios of Radio Mogadishu or Radio Hargeysa). Today, both the store and the 'Cinema Hamar' are closed. I do not know how many singles were released on 'Light & Sound' (I have not yet been able to track down Dahir Omar, or anyone who worked at the store), but the 45s below represent some of Somalia's most loved artists.



Although Somalis remain divided politically, and dispersed geographically, they generally agree that 'Halima Khaliif Omar', known as 'Magool', was the greatest singer of her generation. She was born on May 2, 1948 in the city of Beledweyne, the capital of the Hiraaan region. In 1959, she made her professional musical debut with a Mogadishu-based group, and within the year had moved to Hargeysa (the capital of Somaliland) where she joined that city's municipal orchestra. In the mid-1960s she returned to Mogadishu where she became one of the most popular singers in the Radio Mogadishu orchestra.

By the late 1970s, Magool was as known for her politically engaged songs as for her romantic repertoire, and by the early 1980s she was living in exile in the Middle East. In 1987, her triumphant return to Mogadishu was celebrated with a concert in the city's stadium that drew over 15,000 people. Into the early 1990s, she continued to sing out against the depredations of the Siad Barre regime. She died, of breast cancer, on March 19, 2004 in a hospital in Amsterdam. Her fans still call her 'Hooyadii Fanka', or 'the mother of Somali song'.

These two recordings are love songs (both songs are split between the A and B sides of the single). In 'Wal'y Sita' she sings, 'I don't know what I am doing. I don't know where I am. Do I have to be patient? Should I sleep? I am waiting for you, what should I do?'

↳ [Magool 'Wal'y Sita'](#)

'Shimbir Yohou' is one of Magool's most famous recordings from the 1970s. Addressing herself to a little bird, she sings, 'where do you fly? Do you serve the people, or do you just follow the air streams? Can you take a message for me? I am lost and tired. Little bird can you find your way? If I tell you where to go, can you take a message for me?'

↳ [Magool 'Shimbir -Yohou'](#)

Hibbo Nuura, who today lives in Rochester, Minnesota, and has been performing for almost three decades, made some of her earliest recordings for the 'Light & Sound' label. Born in the Northeastern city of Boorama, she grew up in Mogadishu, and started singing at the age of 7. In 1970, when she was only 14 years old, the singer and composer Ahmed Rabsha discovered Hibbo, and three years later, he brought her to the 'Light & Sound' recording studio.

Ahmed Rabsha was born in Mogadishu in 1945, and started singing when he was only 13 years old. He made his public debut in 1963, performing at weddings and parties, and six years later formed his first group, 'The Soul Full Five'. In 1970, he was hired as a music teacher at the Institute for Traditional Arts in Mogadishu. One of his first responsibilities was to recruit talented young female singers and teach them a new repertoire of patriotic songs (General Mohammed Siad Barre had taken power in 1969, and was just kicking off his 'social revolution'). In 1974, Rabsha won a scholarship to study music in the Sudan, and by the end of the decade he had moved to Dubai, where he trained the Police Orchestra. He spent the last years of his life in London working on a history of Somali music. He passed away last fall.

This duo with Ahmed Rabsha, which was released back in 1973, was Hibbo's second recording. She described this music to me as Somali Rumba.

↳ [Ahmed Rabsha & Hibbo 'Bohol You'](#)

These next four tracks are built on the deep-grooves of Ahmed Naaji and his great 'Sharero Band'. The Naaji family is from the Benadir ethnic minority, who have roots in Yemen and the Persian Gulf, and who were some of Mogadishu's earliest residents. In the early 1970s, Ahmed, who for many years was a member of the Radio Mogadishu orchestra, formed a band to perform a new style of Somali music; one that was inspired by Santana, The Doors, and James Brown.

His new group was originally called 'Gemini', but by the early 1970s it was going by the name 'Sharero band'. The core of the group consisted of Ahmed on keyboards, Ali Naaji on bass guitar, Anter Naaji on drums, Said Abdallah on lead guitar, and Mohammed Abadallah 'Jeeri' on lead vocals. They performed most weekends at the Jazeera nightclub in southern Mogadishu, at the Juba nightclub in central Mogadishu, or at the Al-Curuba nightclub, located in the majestic Al-Curuba hotel. The group split up some time in the 1980s. Today, Ahmed Naaji lives in Yemen, and continues to perform throughout the Somali Diaspora, Ali Naaji lives in Denmark, and a new generation of Naajis is making music in Toronto.



Here is the Sharero Band backing Faadumo Qaasim, one of the most appreciated Benadiri singers. She sings, in the Hamari dialect of the Benadiri, 'whoever God brings down to earth will see many surprising things. Who

should I trust? Who should I lean on? My luck has turned sour. Who should I blame?'

↳ [Faadumo Qaasim & the Sharero Band 'Yaan Cuskanaa'](#)

This next single features the voice of Ahmed Abukar, a blind singer from a Benadiri family from Northern Mogadishu. This is my favorite single of the bunch.



This song is the first of a series of five recordings that tell the story of Abukar's tragic, and unrequited, love for a woman named Asha. Ahmed Abukar is currently living in Yemen, and is said to be in poor health.

↳ [Ahmed Abukar & the Sharero Band 'Caashooy'](#)

Our final pair of 'Light & Sound' tracks are B-Side instrumentals (don't pay attention to the 4A you see written on the label below).



Both of these tracks feature Ahmed putting the squeeze on his Farfisa organ, and Said Abdallah giving his guitar 'the Shaft'.

↩ [The Sharero Band 'Sharero 75'](#)

↩ [The Sharero Band 'Sharero'](#)

Very special thanks to Hibba Nuura, Abdi Yabarow, and Farhia Absie for their time, memories, and help with translations!