

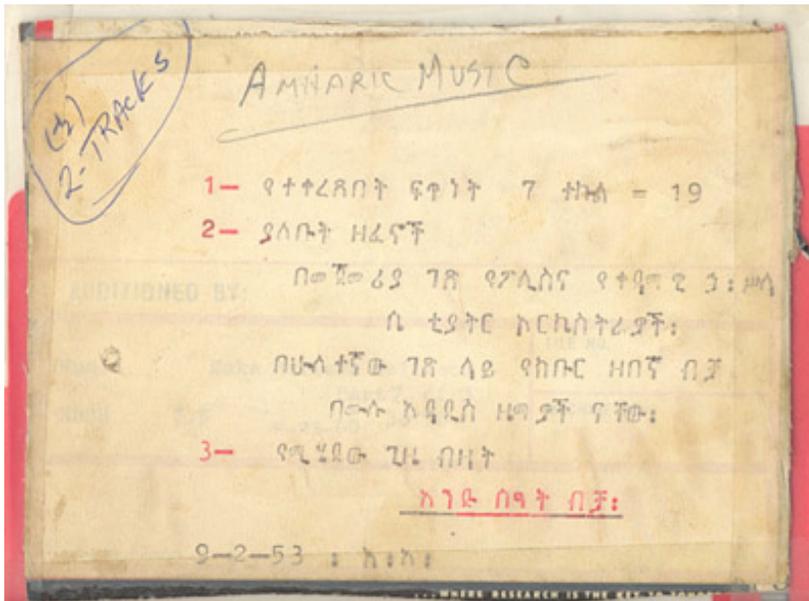
Ethiopia's revolutionary sixties

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Over the last ten years, thanks largely to the herculean efforts of French researcher Francis Falceto (he's the man behind the Ethiopiques CD series released by Buda Musique: each of the twenty-three volumes so far released are essential listening), curious music lovers have discovered the glories of 1970s 'Ethiopian Groove', a potent brew of traditional rhythms, brilliant arrangements, swinging horns and soulful vocals. These stirring recordings from the 1970s were the fruit of a decade of musical innovation. Influenced by the musical wisdom and instruction of Nerses Nalbandian (a composer, arranger, chorus leader, and music teacher of Armenian origin, who worked with hundreds of Ethiopian musicians), and the R&B, Soul, Rock and Pop hits broadcast by the American military radio at Kagnew Station (an American military base outside Asmara, the capital of Eritrea), and played in the nightclubs and discotheques of Addis Ababa, a young generation of Ethiopian musicians, throughout the 1960s, created, to again quote Francis Falceto, a 'societal revolution' through music. These 'adadis zefanotch', or 'new songs', were distinctly modern- in their instrumentation, arrangements, and groove-and uniquely Ethiopian, in their melodies and 'feeling'.

This new style of music was nurtured by two of the country's great musical incubators, the Police Orchestra and Emperor Haile Selassie's Imperial Bodyguard Band: these ensembles, like all music ensembles in Ethiopia at the time, were controlled by the government. The greatest singers, and musicians, of the 1970s-Tlahoun Gessesse, Mahmoud Ahmed, Bzunesh Beqele, to name just three-honed their skills through thousands of performances with these ensembles. Unfortunately, aside from a few 45s released in the mid-1960s, no commercial recordings of these ensembles were made until 1969, when Amha Eshete created Amha records, Ethiopia's first independent record company (according to Falceto there were just under 500 Ethiopian 45s and around 30 lps released between 1969 and 1978, when record production stopped completely). There were, however, reel-to- reel recordings of both groups made by Armenian merchant Garbis Hayzagian, and by Radio Ethiopia.



In the late 1960s (probably 1967 or 1968), Leo made his first trip to Addis Ababa, where he quickly met many of the city's musical luminaries. One of Leo's more gracious hosts was the composer and conductor Tsegaye Debalqe, who at the time was also the Music Director of Radio Ethiopia. Before Leo left Addis, Tsegaye Debalqe gave Leo this reel with fifteen songs featuring the Police Orchestra, the Imperial Bodyguard Band, and some of the era's greatest singers. These recordings were made in 1961 (the 1953 date on the label above refers to the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar, which is eight years behind the Gregorian calendar), and are a wonderful snapshot of the opening salvos of Ethiopia's musical revolution.

The first song on the reel is a duet between Lieutenant Mesfin Haile and Hirut Beqele accompanied by the Police Orchestra, featuring a terrific violin player. They sing, "Life is Tough. This world is an unforgiving and bitter place, and now you are leaving me.

↳ [Lieut. Mesfin Haile, Hirut Beqele & the Police Orchestra](#)

Next up is a recording of "Altchalkoum", one of Tlahoun Gessesse's most famous, and most controversial songs; ostensibly a dispute between two lovers, this song was actually a protest against the imperial regime. The title of the song can be translated as 'I can't stand it anymore', and after the failed coup d'etat of December 1960, this song led to Tlahoun's arrest and imprisonment. Tlahoun kicks things off and Bzunesh Beqele takes it home.

↳ [Tlahoun Gessesse, Bzunesh Beqele & Police Orchestra 'Altchalkoum'](#)

Bzunesh Beqele was the greatest female singer of her generation, one of the first artists to embrace the 'new

songs' of the 1960s. She was born in Harar in 1935, came to Addis at a young age to attend school, and by her mid-20s had joined the Imperial Bodyguard Band, where she spent most of her career. She released a series of singles in the early 1970s, and at least two cassettes in the 1980s-both of which are fantastic. She passed away, in 1990, at her home in Addis Ababa; she was only 54 years old. Several years ago, the Ethio Sound record label released a great compilation of her early 1970s Phillips singles. This next track is the earliest Bzunesh recording I've heard.

↩️ [Bzunesh Begele & Imperial Bodyguard Band](#)

Next up is a dance song composed by Gelan Tessema, who was one of the first dance teachers and one of the stars of the Imperial Bodyguard Band's stage show. In 'Endete Menewot', he sings, 'I wished for her and I got her, I wanted her and she is mine. Because of her I am happy.'

↩️ [Gelan Tessema & Imperial Bodyguard Band 'Endete Menewot'](#)

Tefera Kassa was another of the Imperial Bodyguard's great singers. Although he doesn't seem to have made many commercial recordings, he was very popular in the 1960s. He still lives in Addis. (I have heard that parallel to his musical career, he also worked, for many years, at the Ministry of Information).

This next track is one of my favorites on the reel. It is a charming distillation of the different spirits that would eventually create the potent 'Ethiopian groove' of the 1970s. He sings, 'When we dance to the Dorze rhythm, we are really happy. Merengue cha-cha.' The song brings together Latin rhythms, the traditional dance style of the Dorze people (from Southern Ethiopia), with a Dorze melody and singing style, resulting in a song that is simultaneously traditional and modern! The chorus singing the response includes Tezera Haile-Michael, Ayele Mamo, Tlahoun Gessesse, Bzunesh Begele, Askale Brhane, and Laqo Ayele.

↩️ [Tefera Kassa & Imperial Bodyguard Band 'Merengue Cha-Cha'](#)

These next two songs are modern arrangements of more distinctly traditional material. This first track, by the Police Orchestra, is a popular melody sung in Oromigna, the language of the Oromo. This song features the voice of Taye Tessema. He passed away in the 1980s, and this was his biggest hit.

↩️ [Taye Tessema & Police Orchestra 'Shegetu'](#)

Here is the Imperial Bodyguard Band interpreting a Dorze melody from Southern Ethiopia. The dominant male voice is that of Demisse Komba, and the chorus features Bzunesh Begele and Askale Brhane. I love the vocal polyphony.

↩️ [Demisse Komba, Bzunesh Begele, Askale Brhane & Imperial Bodyguard](#)

Last but not least, an accordion-driven instrumental by the Imperial Bodyguard Band. For many years this song was played by Radio Ethiopia to kick off the day's programs.

↩️ [Imperial Bodyguard Band 'accordion instrumental'](#)

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