

Music of Eritrea

Eritrea is a country in the Horn of Africa. Perhaps the most famous Eritrean musicians in history are Engineer Asgedom Woldemichael, Bereket Mengisteab, Yemane Baria, Osman Abderrehim, Alamin Abdeletif and Atowe Birhan Segid, some of whose music was banned by the Ethiopian government in the 1970s. Also of note is Bereket Mengistab, who has had a lengthy career, and 1960s legends Haile Ghebru and Tewolde Redda. The latter was one of the first electric guitar players in the Horn region, a singer, and reportedly a writer of the famous Eritrean independence song "Shigey habuni", with an allegedly coded political love theme.

Eritrean music is distinguished by its unique rhythm. Modern popular stars include Bereket Mengistab, Teklé Tesfa-Ezighe Tekele Kifle Mariam (Wedi Tukul), Tesfai Mehari (Fihira), Osman Abderrehim, Abrar Osman, Abraham Afwerki, Yemane Ghebremichael, Idris Mohamed Ali, Alamin Abdeletif, Tsehaytu Beraki, Atewebrhan Segid and Bereket Mengisteab.

Folk music

Traditional instruments include the stringed kraar, kebero, lyre, kobar and the wata (a distant/rudimentary cousin of the violin).

Popular music

Modern Eritrean popular music can be traced back to the late 1960s, when the MaHber Theatre Asmara began to produce stars like Osman Abderrehim, Alamin Abdeletif, Yemane Ghebremichael (also commonly known as Yemane Baria), Jabber, Ateweberhan Seghid, Yonus Ibrahim, Tsehaytu Beraki, Tewolde Redda, Teberh Tesfahiwet and Tukabo WeldemariamTukabo.^[1]

Since then, some musicians, like kraar-player Dawit Shilan, Yohannes Tikabo(aka Wedi Tukabo), Dehab Faytinga (also commonly known as Faytinga), Asmara All Stars and Temesgen Gebreselassie (also commonly known as Taniqo) have helped to incorporate the core indigenous Eritrean musical elements in popular music. Imported styles of music from Europe, North America, and elsewhere in the Horn region, are also very popular in urban areas of Eritrea.

Dancing

Traditional Eritrean Tigrinya dancing involves two main styles of dance. In the first which is called 'quda', the dancers form a circle and slowly circumambulator or move around in an endless circular motion to the rhythm of the music. Then, they cease the circular musical flow/motion and dance in pairs or 3's facing each other for a short while before resuming the circular motion in a file again. During this time, they shuffle their feet to the beat of the music and bob their shoulders in a rhythmic fashion. Female dancers usually move their shoulders more than the male dancers. Towards the end, the musical tempo increases and the drum beat quickens to signal this musical crescendo. The dancers round off their dancing by facing each other in twos and threes and moving their shoulders faster. This can also involve jumping and bending one's knees, as well as going down to the floor to sit in a squatting position while bobbing those shoulders and moving the head sideways to the strong drum beats.

In the second style of dance, two groups (often a group of men and a group of women) line up and face each other. The dance features a skipping step to the music. Periodically, the two groups will change places, dancing

across the floor and passing each other in the process.

Traditional dances practiced by Eritrea's other Afro-Asiatic communities include those by the Saho, which involve jumping on each leg in rhythm with the beat. The related Afar, Tigre, Bilen and Hidareb have similar moves. Additionally, the Rashaida also have their own unique dances.

Dancing by the Nilo-Saharan Kunama involves raising bead-strung legs in sync with the rhythm of the music. The related Nara have similar traditions.

Live Music

Piano bar culture

The music scene in the capital of Asmara has traditionally been known for setting the standard of *Tigrinya* music for listeners in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The relatively recent 'piano bar' phenomenon has been largely exclusive to Asmara because almost all contemporary musicians and singers live in the capital city.

The piano bar culture became popular in Asmara around 2004, when leading singers like Dawit Shilan played at the Ha.Ko.Se.E cafe. At the time - live music in bars being a new experience in the city - the cafe was overcrowded over weekends and many customers had to be turned away.

One of the intrinsic characteristics of the piano bars is that the artists remix a range of classic hits, instead of sticking to performing only their own songs. For example, Dawit Shilan playing Atewebrhan Segid's 1970s jazz not only brought these classic song back to life, but showed his mastery of performance skills, particularly on the *krar*.

Piano bars have thus been providing a platform for avant garde jazz and blues artists - and to a lesser extent the local dance music known as *Guayla*. The sentimental aura in piano bars is accentuated by nostalgic lyrics from the 1960s to the 2000s, which reflect heartbreak, separation, loss and nationalism. Piano bars are sites of true passion and reflection for artists, as they are not bound by the typical demands for upbeat music for dancing.

After the success of gigs at the Ha.Ko.Se.E piano bar, other hotels and cafes were quick to catch on the business. Hotels such as Sunshine, Savana, Bologna cub and Ayele family have been hosting contemporary favourites like Yohannes Tikabo, Tesfay Mengesha and Kahsai Haile regularly.

In 2013, the Berhe Aiba Hotel started a new type of live performance by giving prominence to musicians rather than singers. Jazz classics were played, with singers such as Yohannes Tikabo only featuring on certain tracks. Some of the best talents in Eritrean music - like Shonqie, Fanjai, Chobie and Gidewon - were brought together as a band to provide a unique experience for discerning fans. The place became a hangout for many musicians, many of whom would get on stage and start playing. Today Berhe Aiba hotel is regarded as one of the clubs in Asmara.

The success of piano bars in Asmara could have a lot to do with the *Gaeda* genre, which is played in Swa houses in Aba Shawel, a district of Asmara that has traditionally been home to many highly acclaimed artists across generations. *Gaeda* is a communal music experience where a singer plays songs accompanied by friends beating drums, clapping and singing along. Many of these songs are exclusively played in *Gaeda* settings and are never recorded or released on albums. Songs are often modified by whoever sings them, adding thought-provoking social and political messages.

Sibrit

In 1994, a year after Eritrea declared its independence and gained international recognition, a group of musicians were brought together under the direction of Kahsay Gebrehewet as part of Eritrea's nation building efforts.^[2] The musicians, who had previously performed in various revolutionary music groups, were brought together as the national music and dance troupe, Sibrit, which means heritage.^[3] Sibrit perform music and dance from all nine of Eritrea's main ethnic groups (Afar, Bilen, Hedareb, Saho, Kunama, Nara, Rashaida, Tigre and Tigrinya), they feature regularly on Eritrean radio and television shows and perform as representatives of Eritrean culture around the world.^[2] Their instrumentation includes the amplified krar, bass krar and percussion.^[2]

References

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Music of Africa

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