



PHIL PAVELS

Left: Ethiopia's musical champion at the Barbican in 2008
Right: Mahmoud Ahmed (far left) pictured with the Imperial Body Guard Band



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Seeing *Jailhouse Rock* at the cinema also fuelled his ambitions to be a performer

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

MAHMOUD AHMED

The Ethiopian singer has become an ambassador for the country's 'Golden Age' of music and he's still going strong. Chris Menist looks back at his career

Mahmoud Ahmed's life has the pleasing cycle of a feel-good movie; from being a shoeshine boy on the streets of Addis to becoming one of the key voices in what is often referred to as Ethiopia's 'Golden Age' of music, through to comparative obscurity during the oppressive years of the Mengistu era, back to international recognition at a time when many musicians might be considering a quiet retirement. That his voice still sounds as strong, searing and powerful as it did during any of those seminal recordings documented on Buda's *Éthiopiennes* series, is even more remarkable.

Whether it's wowing a large crowd in the open air at WOMAD, or grooving

into the small hours in a basement bar off Regent's Street, his revived career has allowed an underground musical interest to flourish in front of diverse audiences around the globe.

Born in Addis Ababa in 1941, he dropped out of school early to eke out a living as one of the city's many shoeshine boys. Initially encouraged to sing by his mother, he was further inspired by the Imperial Body Guard's twice weekly radio show, as well as Western acts such as Ray Charles, Sam Cooke and Pat Boone. Seeing *Jailhouse Rock* at the cinema also fuelled his ambitions to be a performer. Despite there being strict censorship laws for music, it was the bucking of these laws, aided by members of the Imperial Body Guard Band and Army Band moonlighting in local clubs, that would provide the catalyst, and ultimately the soundtrack, for the short lived 'Golden Age.'

An odd series of coincidences in the early 60s gave Ahmed his first break as a professional performer. A neighbour opened up a nightclub, the Arizona, and initially employed the teenager as a handyman. From there, he graduated to the kitchen, where, between cooking and washing up, he was exposed to some of the finest music in the capital. Tlahoun Gèssèsè, who was one of the best known popular singers at the time, giggled at the Arizona regularly, alongside members of the Imperial Body Guard Band.

One evening Gèssèsè failed to show up, whereupon, to the owner's surprise, Ahmed volunteered to take over vocal duties. He was so impressed with the performance that he purchased a new suit for Ahmed, and had him perform with the band regularly. In the end, Ahmed stayed with the Imperial Body Guard Band for 11 years, playing in various venues round the capital.

Against a backdrop of growing unrest as well as a vibrant nightlife, Ahmed released a string of astonishing singles (later collected on LPs) for the Amha label (the label run by the young entrepreneur Amha Eshètè) and later perhaps his best known work *Erè Mèla Mèla* for Ali Tango's Kaifa label. In turn, the album achieved semi-cult status when reissued in the mid-80s on Crammed Discs. He also set up his own label, which, as it would turn out, released some of the last vinyl of the era.

After 1974 came the deposition of Haile Selassie by a military coup, eventually presided over by Mengistu Haile Mariam. It is a period generally referred to as 'Derg' (the Committee) time. As well as horrific violence and the infamous famine, Mengistu's Marxist regime saw an end to this burst of creativity.

In 1980, Ahmed toured the US to great acclaim, particularly welcomed by the large Ethiopian diaspora. He could have emigrated, but chose to stay. He continued to play around Addis, but it was by no means an easy time.

The renewed interest in his music, and

Ethiopian music as a whole, came in the mid-90s, when, after tracking down Eshètè's master tapes, Francis Falceto and Buda Musique systematically reissued the music captured during that crucial period. This provided the catalyst for Ahmed, and other musicians of the era, to perform internationally again.

In 2007, he received a BBC Radio 3 Award for World Music, and the following year Ahmed and fellow musicians Alèmayèhu Eshètè, band leader Mulatu Astatke and saxophonist Gétachèw Mèkurya graced the stage at Glastonbury [see feature in #55] and

the Barbican to excellent reviews. Having been honoured for their discographies, it was fitting for these musicians to revisit the live work that had initially brought them recognition all those years ago.

Mahmoud Ahmed is currently on tour with Alèmayèhu Eshètè in the US and Canada. If his personal story to date is anything to go by, we can all very much look forward to the next chapter. ●

ONLINE Hear excerpts from each of the Best albums (right) on this issue's interactive sampler: www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/071



Mahmoud Ahmed pictured during Ethiopia's musical 'Golden Age', prior to the deposition of Haile Selassie in 1974



BEST...

...ALBUMS



Éthiopiennes Vol 7: Erè Mèla Mèla (Buda)
Ahmed's best known work, largely due to its reissue in the 80s by Crammed. There is not one duff tune on this dazzling collection, from the title-track through to intense numbers like 'Edenesh Gedawo'. The perfect starting point.



Éthiopiennes Vol 19: Alèmyé (Buda)
A total killer set, including a 12-minute version of the Ethiopian standard 'Tezeta', the remarkable 'Etu Gela' and the excellent title-track. This only runs a close second as the starting point to investigate Ahmed's talents.



Éthiopiennes Vol 6: Almaz (Buda)
Perhaps not as consistent as volumes 7 and 19, this nevertheless retains the same musical quality and energy. Check out the masterpiece 'Kulun Mankwalesh', an astonishing 3/4 workout with minor bass figures and Ahmed's characteristic soaring vocals.



Live in Paris (Long Distance)
Recorded in 1994, this is a well-produced and faithful representation of what to expect from Ahmed in concert. He is still in fine voice, and though the performance might lack the gritty intensity of the originals, his singing abilities lie undiminished. 'Kulun' and 'Mela Mela' are standout cuts.

...COMPILATION



The Very Best of Éthiopiennes (Manteca)
Subtitled 'Hypnotic Grooves from the Legendary Series,' this double album, released in 2007, features a couple of classic Mahmoud Ahmed tracks such as 'Erè Mèla Mèla.' Reviewed in #46.

...AVOIDED



The Best of Tizita Vols 1 & 2 (AIT)
To be fair, Ahmed hasn't really done a 'bad' album, but in recent years he hasn't exactly spread his creative wings either, compared to, say, his compatriot Mulatu Astatke. Both volumes of this series offer lovely vocal performances, but the slick playing and production provide a mere backdrop, as opposed to allowing musical interplay as with his previous work. For completists only, I'm afraid.



IF YOU LIKE MAHMOUD AHMED, THEN TRY...

MULATU ASTATKE



Mulatu Steps Ahead (Strut)
Brand new material from one of the key composers and arrangers of the modern Ethiopian canon. Alongside local musicians and members of the Either/Orchestra, Mulatu stretches his talents to provide a vibrant, up-to-date vision of his 'Ethio jazz' experiments. Reviewed in #68.