

Alexis Vayron

# Mulatu Astatke

**Jim Hickson** looks back over the extensive career of the critically acclaimed musician and arranger who is credited with inventing Ethio-jazz

Across the late 1960s and early 70s in Addis Ababa, musicians experimented with various styles of jazz in an Ethiopian way. But there is only one who can be called the 'Father of Ethio-jazz.' Much more than simply 'jazz from Ethiopia,' the sound of Mulatu Astatke's Ethio-jazz is his own, a distinctive blend of traditions and innovations, of particular textures and timbres, scales and rhythms.

Born in Jimma, Ethiopia, in 1943, with Addis Ababa as his spiritual home, Astatke's personal connection to the streets and sounds of his country is obvious across his art. It is from this point that his musical adventures abound. Like all innovators, Mulatu Astatke takes influences from every step of his journey to create his style, and his musical education kick-started this: playing with Ghanaian, South African and Caribbean musicians while studying classical

music at Trinity College, London; playing with Puerto Rican and Cuban musicians while studying jazz at Berklee. These experiences solidified his resolve to make his own sound – the musicians were all making music that reflected both their backgrounds and adopted countries, and Ethiopia was absent from that scene. So it was up to Astatke to put it there.

At every step, the traditional sounds of Ethiopia have never been far away for Astatke.

Large parts of what makes his sound so recognisable are the contrasts of the five-note Ethiopian *kiñit* modes and 12-note Western chromatic scales, of Ethiopian heterophony and Western harmony. It's a delicate balance. Speaking to Lucy Wilson in issue #68, he said of his fusion: 'when you are mixing different cultures, you really have to be careful that one doesn't dominate the other. You have the beautiful notes that were there at the start of Ethiopian music; if the 12 tones dominate the five, then the whole thing is lost.'

It's not just the scales that make Ethio-jazz unique. What set Astatke apart from his contemporaries in Ethiopian jazz was his addition of the Latin rhythms of the congas, *timbales* and *güiro* to the ride-cymbal swings of jazz and Ethiopian *kebero* drumming rhythms. It was the first time Latin music made its mark on Ethiopia despite the Cuban craze that had been sweeping the African continent for decades.

And so his sound as a composer is recognisable as Ethio-jazz, but his sound as a musician is just as striking. That comes from his tool of choice: the vibraphone. He also plays electric piano and percussion, but it is his vibraphone, with its warmly undulating tones accentuating his music's inherent dissonance and revelling in it, that immediately marks a piece with his involvement.

Astatke's first heyday came in the 70s, at the height of so-called 'Swinging Addis.' Jazz, soul and funk were all the rage in Addis Ababa, and he was in high demand as a musician and arranger, appearing on many recordings under his own name and as an accompanist. This exciting period saw him performing with the likes of Duke Ellington and Alice Coltrane on their Ethiopian visits, and with traditional Thai musicians in a project for Ethiopian Airlines.

But this came to an abrupt end as the Soviet-styled Derg deposed Emperor Haile Selassie and imposed draconian laws on its citizens, hitting musicians especially hard. The vibrant scene shrank, musicians moved abroad or abandoned their craft altogether. As well as the domestic scene, this period also resulted in a dearth of Ethiopian music in the international consciousness. Astatke carried on, but his influence and a promising international career waned. Even as late as 2006, in his chapter on Ethiopian music in the *Rough Guide to World Music*, Francis Falceto wrote 'No other musician in Ethiopia is anything like Mulatu, and it looks like his style

will die with him.' Luckily, 11 years later, it is obvious that he spoke too soon.

Astatke is now one of Africa's most popular musicians in the West, and his rise to global stardom can be pinpointed to two moments: the release of a dedicated compilation of his music in the now-legendary *Éthiopiennes* series in 1998 (the first album in the series to spotlight a single musician) and the inclusion of his music in Jim Jarmusch's comedy drama *Broken Flowers*, starring Bill Murray, in 2005.

Since coming back into the spotlight, he hasn't slowed down. In fact, some of his most vital work has been in the past decade. Even into his 70s, he plays sell-out tours across Europe with his UK-based band, as well as performing regularly in his own club in Addis.

His triumphant return started with *Inspiration Information*, his 2009 album with open-eared UK jazzers and serial collaborators The Heliocentrics. The album created the blueprint for his subsequent releases: mostly new compositions with a handful of reworked Swinging Addis classics thrown in, where European contemporary jazz players meet with traditional Ethiopian musicians, all under the stern gaze of Astatke behind his vibes and percussion. His subsequent solo albums follow this format and take the musical experiments to the next level.

Outside Ethiopia, Astatke's music has been a revelation. His impact on the world music and jazz scenes as well as more mainstream culture is obvious; there are now bands in Europe and the US dedicated to playing Ethio-jazz, covering classics and forging their own takes, and his influence can be heard on artists from Dengue Fever to Dr John. The hip-hop community have felt an affinity with Astatke's work too, his unmistakable sound finding its way into pieces by Nas & Damian Marley, K'naan, Busdriver, Cut Chemist and more.

And above all, the sound is coming home. There is a burgeoning young jazz scene in Ethiopia that takes in elements of Astatke's Ethio-jazz and other Swinging Addis styles together with all eras of jazz to make their own sound, headed by the pianist Samuel Yirga.

The death of Ethio-jazz has been greatly exaggerated, and, as he has been from the very start, Mulatu Astatke is still its driving force. ♦

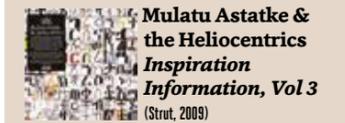
**+ DATES** Mulatu Astatke performs at London's Barbican on September 20 & 21 as part of the *Jim Jarmusch Revisited* concerts. He also plays at *Nell's Blues & Jazz club* on November 15

## Astatke is one of Africa's most popular musicians in the West

### BEST ALBUMS



**Mulatu Astatke** *Éthiopiennes, Vol 4: Ethio Jazz & Musique Instrumentale, 1969-1974* (Buda Musique, 1998)  
This is the compilation that reminded the world of Mulatu Astatke. Made up of pieces recorded at the height of Swinging Addis, this instalment of Buda's legendary *Éthiopiennes* series remains a classic in Ethio-jazz.



**Mulatu Astatke & the Heliocentrics** *Inspiration Information, Vol 3* (Strut, 2009)  
The young pioneers of UK jazz meet the old master of Ethiopian jazz; Astatke's return to the scene came in the form of a collaboration with The Heliocentrics. You can hear the crackle of creative electricity throughout the album. Reviewed in #60.



**Mulatu Astatke** *Mulatu Steps Ahead* (Strut, 2010)  
In his first solo album for several decades, Astatke obviously enjoys free rein here. It is everything he is known for, turned up to 11: traditional instruments and scales, free jazz, dance floor salsa and experimentation, up to the brim. Reviewed in #68.



**Mulatu Astatke** *Sketches of Ethiopia* (Jazz Village, 2013)  
The ceaseless adventure and experiment continues with a more pan-African feel on this album, which includes guest singer Fatoumata Diawara. A Top of the World in #96.



**Mulatu Astatke** *Mulatu of Ethiopia* (Strut, 2017)  
Strut Records have remastered and reissued this classic from 1972. Recorded in New York, *Mulatu of Ethiopia* marks the birth of what we now call Ethio-jazz. Reviewed in #129.

### IF YOU LIKE MULATU ASTATKE, THEN TRY...



**Gétatchèw Mèkurya** *Éthiopiennes, Vol 14: Negus of Ethiopian Sax* (Buda Musique, 2003)  
This offers a different take on 1970s Ethiopian jazz. Mèkurya based his style on *shellela* battle cries and used his sax to imitate the *masenqo* (one-string fiddle), creating a sound that is not a million miles away from Albert Ayler or Eric Dolphy. Reviewed in #18.