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'Traveling Music': Mulatu Astatke and the Genesis of Ethiopian Jazz

by Kay Kaufman Shelemay

The global circulation of jazz is one of the most striking musical processes of the twentieth century. In this essay I discuss an aspect of jazz's history in and of Ethiopia, a region distant from the Western parts of the continent that have from early dates commanded the attention of scholars engaged with music of the African diaspora. The genesis of Ethio-jazz marks the emergence of a distinctive musical arena that has been in dialogue with global jazz throughout the second half of the twentieth century, but which has only begun to receive international acknowledgment in the early twenty-first. Here I seek to explore the processes through which Ethio-jazz took shape, laying bare factors that created both striking new sounds, as well as a distinctive historical narrative. Ethio-jazz emerged through the creative initiatives of an individual, Mulatu Astatke, so this tale will focus in large part on one man and his musical contribution.[1] My focus on

[1] He will hereafter be referred to as Mulatu, following the Ethiopian custom of calling a person by his or her first name; Ethiopian authors, however, are alphabetized by last name in the conventional Western manner. I thank Mulatu for providing information about his background and musical career in a series of interviews carried out during our collaborative, 2007-2008 fellowship year at the Harvard University Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study; Steven Kaplan of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem was the third member of our "Ethiopian creativity cluster" and participated in the interviews as well. I am grateful to the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for funding that

the theme "traveling music" takes its inspiration from a relatively recent chapter in Mulatu's career, the prominent use of his music for the soundtrack of Jim Jarmusch's 2005 film, "Broken Flowers."[2] The film tells the story of Don Johnston (Bill Murray), a more than middle-aged bachelor dumped by his most recent girlfriend. The morose Johnston receives an anonymous letter telling him that he has a 19-year-old son who may be looking for him. With the encouragement of his next door neighbor, an Ethiopian immigrant writer and amateur sleuth named Winston (Jeffrey Wright), Don embarks on a cross-country trip to track down four former girlfriends from about twenty years before, trying to ascertain if one of them might have had his baby without telling him. Jim Jarmusch has stated that he conceived the character of Winston as an Ethiopian immigrant in order to use Mulatu Astatke's music in the film's soundtrack. (Sisario) In a pivotal scene, Don meets Winston at a local coffee shop where Winston presents him with an itinerary, maps, and a CD of what Winston terms "traveling music" for his trip. The subsequent scenes of travel are accompanied by Mulatu Astatke's Ethio-jazz.

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supported a leave during which this paper was researched and conceived. I thank Bridget Haile, who helped transcribe and index eleven interviews with Mulatu, and Simeneh Betreyohannes, whose thesis provided access to Hages 1985. Russ Gershon provided useful feedback regarding different versions of "Yekermo Sew."

[2] This theme, which converges with the emerging field of mobility studies, will be addressed in part 4 of this essay. However, see evidence of broader interests in music and mobility studies in other sources as well, notably Raussert 2008.; Wagnleitner in that volume addresses the issue of mobility in jazz.

The characterization of Mulatu Astatke's Ethio-jazz as "traveling music" raises a host of issues. After all, Ethiopia's music might be thought not to have strayed very far beyond its borders, so little is Ethiopia known to the outside world. Ethiopia has historically served as a global metaphor for isolation and stasis by virtue of its location in the mountainous highland plateau of the Horn of Africa, its topography cross-cut by huge chasms. Hence Edward Gibbon's famous phrase proclaiming that "…the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten. (Gibbon 1952,Vol. 2:159-160)

What events brought Mulatu and his music into a global network as a poster child for cultural mobility? What does Mulatu's music tell us about the history of jazz and its circulation? In what way did mobility shape Mulatu's musical style? And what broader issues are raised by the case study of Mulatu Astatke and the genesis of Ethio-jazz? This essay seeks to answer these questions. A brief historical backdrop in the first section of the paper suggests that Mulatu's musical innovations and mobility emerged from a little-known Ethiopian engagement with the wider world throughout its history, although the impact of modernism in the late nineteenth century accelerated conditions that rendered the wider world both accessible and beguiling to Ethiopians. In the second section, I briefly detail Mulatu's personal history at home and abroad, which culminated in his invention of Ethio-jazz during his residency in New York City in the 1960s, and the subsequent development of his musical ideas after his return to Ethiopia late in that decade. The third section will focus on "Yekermo Sew," Mulatu's most widely-circulated composition, featured in the "Broken Flowers" soundtrack; [3] it captures important aspects

[3] *Music from Broken Flowers. A film by Jim Jarmusch.* New York: Decca, 2005.

of Mulatu's compositional style and enables us to track their relationship to his transnational itinerary. The final section of the paper positions Mulatu's Ethio-jazz in perpetual motion, arguing that it is indeed a lively "traveling music" with a full range of musical experiences and influences absorbed at home and abroad. Ethio-jazz, I will also suggest in closing, shares jazz's global musical circulation but gives voice to a counter-history, one that contrasts not just the emergence of jazz in the United States, but in much of the rest of Africa.

I. Ethiopian Modernism and Its Musical Outcomes

While most would date the antecedents of Ethiopian modernism to the nineteenth century, when foreign (mainly European) missionaries gained the approval of the Ethiopian rulers to enter the country and to proselytize among peoples not part of the

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"Yekermo Sew" is also readily available on *Ethio jazz & Musique Instrumentale. 1969-1974. Éthiopiques*, Vol. 4. Paris: Buda Musique, c. 1997. The original "Yekermo Sew" recording is dated by *Éthiopiques* editor Francis Falceto to a 45 rpm recording issued in Addis Ababa at the end of 1969, although it was also released by producer Amha Eshete on *Ethiopian Modern Instrumental Hits* in June, 1972 as AELP 10. (Falceto 1997b:18) A different rendition of "Yekermo Sew" included on the CD accompanying this volume, by permission of Mulatu Astatke, was recorded at Omega Recording Studies in Rockville, Maryland in 1992 and was released on his CD *Assiyo Bellema*. Washington, D.C., Ethio-Grooves Recordings, 1994.

Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Crummey 1972), [4] in fact Ethiopia had ties abroad from early dates. Distant links to the Jewish Middle East, some historical, some imagined, are most fully articulated in the Ethiopian literary work and national epic, the *Kebra Negast* ("Glory of the Kings"). This source contains a heavily mythologized rendering of Makeda's (the Queen of Ethiopia) visit to King Solomon; their subsequent union; the birth of their son, Menilek; and Menilek's subsequent return visit as an adult to his father's court, on which occasion he steals the Ark of Covenant and brings it to Ethiopia. (Marrassini) Ethiopia's later contacts with the Christian world are more deeply grounded in historical fact: From soon after the entry of Orthodox Christianity to the country in the early fourth century, Ethiopia's Church was in close contact with the Coptic Church of Egypt and much of the rest of Eastern Christendom. Ethiopian Christian clerics visited Jerusalem on pilgrimage as early as the 380s; established their own communities and chapels in the Holy Land by the 1400s (Pedersen, 274); and sent Ethiopian representatives to the Council of Florence in Italy (1437-43). (Martínez 554)

Foreigners also visited Ethiopia early on, not just the ubiquitous Jesuits (Harrison: 50-51), but also notable artists such as Nicolò Rancaleon (ca. 1480-1526), an Italian who sojourned in the country and introduced new pictorial elements such as dragons into Church painting during his stay. (Mann: 126-27) The nineteenth century saw yet more contact, including a marked increase in the presence of European Protestant missionaries in Ethiopia on a long-term basis. The missionaries served as mediators between Ethiopia

[4] The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, founded when the Ethiopian court was converted to Christianity by Syriac missionaries in the early fourth century, was the official state religion until the overthrow of the Ethiopian monarchy in 1974. (See Tamrat:22-23).

and Europe, and expanded the interest of Ethiopian rulers in the European "arts and sciences." (Crummey 1998: 88-89)

Italian colonialists entered Eritrea in the 1890s, while Ethiopia herself escaped colonial domination except for the brief and violent Italian occupation in the six years before and at the beginning of World War II. (See Marcus 2002) Yet, if modernity has been widely characterized as "sometimes irreconcilable with the historic tradition that preceded it" (Oja: 4), it is clear that in Ethiopia, modernism does not follow the usual script of increasing secularization. In the case of Orthodox Ethiopia, where the Church was at the center of cultural and political life, "religion was not progressively moved to the sidelines." (Crummey 2000: 10)

An idiosyncratic but significant aspect of Ethiopian culture that predated and subsequently interacted in a positive way with Ethiopian modernism was the pivotal role of the individual in Ethiopian society. Sociologist Donald Levine has written that this distinctive brand of Ethiopian individualism "may be defined as a positive valuation of the individual as such, with special emphasis on the realization of his human potentialities. (Levine: 240)[5] Ethiopia's relationship to cultural innovations from the West, then, in the absence of colonial domination and given the status of individual innovation in that society, is said, by the first two decades of the twentieth century, to have had "its own history, one of active appropriation…" (Crummey 2000:19) This

[5] See also Levine 1965:264, where he suggests that musical heterophony, with the independence of each individual vocal and/or instrumental line, reflects "a cohort of individual movements," showing highland Ethiopians to "accord a high degree of independence to the individual whenever he does take part in collective enterprises."

period saw the founding and expansion of the Ethiopian educational system at home and the sponsorship of an early generation of Ethiopian students to study abroad in Europe under the influence of then Regent Ras Tafari (1918-1930), who assumed the throne as Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1930 (Zewde 2002:20-34).

After the Emperor's return to Ethiopia from exile in England at the end of the Italian occupation and following the conclusion of World War II, cultural and educational ties with the West flourished and more Ethiopian students pursued education in Europe and England. By the 1950s, many Ethiopians began to seek educational opportunities not just in Europe, but also in the United States. (Ibid.:89) Western educational values, whether acquired at home in Ethiopia or abroad, had an impact in all areas of Ethiopian life, accelerating through the twentieth century until the advent of the 1974 Marxist revolution.

In addition to this general climate, two watershed events set the stage for important changes within musical domains in particular and provided the background for the emergence of Ethio-jazz. The first occurred in the late nineteenth century, when in celebration of the Ethiopian victory over the Italian forces with colonial ambitions in 1896, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia sent a full complement of brass band instruments to then Emperor Menilek II (Falceto 2001:18). Several months after the instruments arrived in the country, Ethiopian musicians tutored by a Polish conductor managed to perform the "Marseilles" before the Emperor. According to a contemporary account:

> "This brass band took turns with azmaris [traditional minstrels] and Abyssinian horns [meleket and embilta], which are the true trumpets of Aida, while, in the great courtyard where audiences are held, the timpanists, mounted on their mules,

drummed these strange rhythms that strike the foreigner so vividly." (Ibid., citing Mondon-Vidailhet)

These instruments were played intermittently over the next several decades at events for the Ethiopia aristocracy, albeit in various eclectic combinations, for entertainment at court diplomatic proceedings and feasts. (Ibid : 22)

A second transformative musical moment took place when, during a 1924 trip to Jerusalem, Regent Ras Tafari encountered a brass band performing at ceremonies welcoming him. The performers, forty orphaned youths who had survived the Armenian genocide, came to be known as the *Arba Lijotch* ("the Forty Children"). Ras Tafari immediately hired the entire ensemble and several months later they arrived in Addis Ababa with their instruments, becoming the S.M. Negus Tafari's Royal Marching Band (1924-29), the first officially constituted brass band of Ethiopia. (Ibid.:29-32) The emperor's continuing exposure to instrumental ensembles in Europe and elsewhere, ranging from brass bands to orchestras, is said to have led him to encourage the founding of other instrumental ensembles in Ethiopia.[6] This constituted a major shift in performance practice since Ethiopian traditional music largely consisted of instrumentalists who performed alone or as accompaniment to a singer or dancer.

[6] Orchestras were established in the late 1920s at the Menilek II School (founded 1908) and the Tafari Mekonnen School (founded 1925), respectively. (Zewde:23-25) Photographs of student musicians from the Menilek School Orchestra (dated only to the "late 1920s") as well as a brass band (dated "circa 1930") are found in Falceto 2001:34-35. It is clear that by the late 1920s, a marching band was considered to be a desirable component of a modern urban Ethiopian school.

By the 1940s, a popular brass ensemble had been established at the National Theatre in Addis Ababa; only in 1958 was an ensemble founded that included traditional instruments playing "cultural music" (*bahɔ̃lawi* music) as a group. (Woldemichael 1988:39-39) By 1950, the National Theatre brass band had "developed a so-called 'jazz' section, and played a repertoire mixing mambo, boogie-woogie and airy arrangements of Ethiopian tunes." (Falceto 2001:53) Other bands appeared on the scene as well, notably "The Imperial Body Guard Band Jazz Symphony" [*Yakebur Zebegna Orchestra Yajazz Symphony*], established in 1950 with a large brass section (Ibid.: 47); the Body Guard ensemble is said to have been the first popular band to have performed publicly at the Ras Hotel in 1950, playing versions of big band repertory and some arrangements of Ethiopian songs. (Woldemichael 1988:50-52)

Thus an independent African country, led by an established cultural elite, long grounded in tenets of individualism, encouraged by early (positive) engagement with Europe and aspects of its expressive culture, and familiar with the sound of brass ensembles, set the stage for the emergence of Mulatu Astatke and the birth of Ethio-jazz. Indeed, it was his own encounters with the big band at the National Theatre in the early 1950s that first sparked Mulatu's interest.

II. Mulatu Astatke's Transnational Pathway and the Birth of Ethio-Jazz

A discussion of Ethio-jazz is at once an exploration of the genesis of a new style that emerged around 1960 and an engagement with the peripatetic life of the individual who conceived, performed, and named it, Mulatu Astatke.

Born in December, 1943,[7] in Jimma, Ethiopia, Mulatu's family was primarily of Christian Amhara descent, although Mulatu notes that "I also have a little bit of Oromo, also a little bit of Gurage." (Interview, Sept 12, 2007) Mulatu sensed early on that "I have something musical in myself- just a feeling," and vividly remembers going to church with his family, "just listening and enjoying the *Qôddase*" [Ethiopian Christian Mass]. (Ibid.)

There were no musicians in his family and Mulatu's parents were angered by his musical interests since musicians "were considered really lower than an artist or a creator." (Ibid.) After his father moved the family to the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, where he became an official in the Ministry of Justice, Mulatu attended the elite Sandford English School. The Sandford School was founded by the English expatriate Christine Sandford, wife of Colonel Daniel Arthur Sandford, who had helped lead British military forces against the Italian occupiers in 1940, and then remained in Ethiopia as a royal advisor. Christine Sandford's efforts to home school her own children was extended with British Council support to other students in 1946. (Pankhurst: 627-28). While a student at the school, Mulatu accompanied the Sandfords on visits to their family farm located at Mulu in the Ethiopian highlands; he recalls listening to music there with the Sandford family as among his first Western musical influences.

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[7] Providing correct dates is rendered complex by the fact that the Ethiopian Julian calendar is approximately seven and one-half years behind the Western Gregorian calendar; the Ethiopian Millennium (2000 E.C.) was celebrated in September, 2007. There are also different dates provided for Mulatu's birth and chronology in various sources. As a result, I have here used (Western) dates provided by Mulatu during our 2007 interviews.

Among Mulatu's earliest musical memories are also "the bands … especially the big band at the National Theatre. And I used to listen to this band coming, playing at the big parties I went to with my family. They played all kinds of music, they played Ethiopian tunes… but arranged in a beautiful way. They had fantastic singers, and I was just listening to them… (Interview, Sept. 12, 2007)

In 1956, Mulatu was sent by his family to study aeronautical engineering at a private college in North Wales, joining others of his cohort sent abroad for educational purposes. (Getahun: 41-44) There he began to take music lessons for the first time and learned to play the trumpet. During school vacations, Mulatu often visited London, where, after completing studies in Wales, he enrolled in the Trinity School of Music. In London, Mulatu heard a great deal of live music and interacted for the first time with Caribbean and West African musicians who were performing publicly for British audiences. He recalls that "…Nigerians, Ghanaians, were all performing their music nicely…. You know, I said, 'What are we doing?' I was one of those Ethiopians who have the chance to go travel all over and they find other African countries really respecting their culture, respecting their clothes and playing their music, and so forth… I have to do something of Ethiopian music." (Interview, Sept. 12, 2007)

In 1958, Mulatu moved to Boston, where he was the first African student to enroll at the Schillinger House of Music, which was founded in 1945 and would soon after become the Berklee School [later College] of Music. He began studying the vibraphone, which became his major instrument, and then moved on in 1960 to New York City, where he participated in the lively world of American jazz until late in the decade. This was Mulatu's longest period of residency in the U.S. During these years he made records,

performed in concerts, and worked on television and in radio; his music was heard on jukeboxes in New York City. “I had a group called the Ethiopian Quintet,” Mulatu recalled, ”with which I made three albums for Worthy Records.”[8](Interview, Sept. 12, 2007)

Mulatu frequented clubs such as the Village Gate and completed a course of study at the Harnett National Studios in New York City. He was particularly drawn to Latin musicians and began to experiment with musical fusion. Although the vast majority of his music was instrumental, he recalls composing during his New York years bilingual songs that included texts in Amharic and Spanish. But perhaps most important, recalls Mulatu, “I came up with Ethio-jazz at that period. A different direction… But the idea, the concept, came while we were studying, while we were playing with big bands, when we studied the harmony class at Berklee and everything.” (Interview, Sept. 25, 2007)

Mulatu returned to Ethiopia in around 1966 having formed a distinctive, experimental identity in the United States as well as deep connections to the American jazz world. His mobility already well established, a poster with his picture advertising Ethiopian Airlines appeared as the cover of his third New York album released in 1972. (See Figure 1) Once back home in Ethiopia, Mulatu’s intense compositional output and activity continued: it included contact with jazz musicians from abroad, including Duke Ellington, who visited Ethiopia on a U.S. State Department tour in the fall of 1973.

[8] The recordings included *Afro-Latin Soul. Mulatu Astatke and his Ethiopian Quintet*, Vols. 1 & 2, 1966, and *Mulatu of Ethiopia*, 1972, all released by Worthy Records in New York City.

After the inception of the Ethiopian revolution in 1974, and amidst the increasing violence that followed, Mulatu managed to maintain his career and mobility by cultivating a studied, apolitical position. His purely instrumental music did not comment on current events, and he avoided engagement with political issues.[9] In this sense, Mulatu's stance reflected aspects of the early modernist discourse in jazz that he had encountered in the United States, centered around musical craft and aesthetics, "a constellation of ideas about form and content, abstraction, individuality, iconoclasm, rebellion, the autonomy of art, authenticity, progress, and genius" (Monson, p. 19) The impact of race and racism had shaped the American engagement with jazz and the emerging political agendas of the civil rights movement in the late 1950s and 1960s did

[9] However, some of his compositions as well as his activities as a producer/arranger did carry political significance. Mulatu composed the piece "Yekatit" ("February"), which was first released in Addis Ababa during September, 1974, as track 9 on the recording *Yekatit-Ethio Jazz/ Mulatu Astatke featuring Fekade Made Meskel*." This song (also heard on *Mulatu Astatke. Ethio Jazz* Vol. 1, track 10) is noted to be Mulatu's "mandatory tribute to the burgeoning revolution" (Falceto 1997b:19), which had begun with student demonstrations the prior February and set into motion a political process that would eventually culminate in the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie. In 1987-1988, Mulatu served as a producer and arranger for the "People to People" tour, traveling with an Ethiopian government -sponsored troupe of musicians and dancers sent abroad to thank the world for generous support during the Ethiopian famine earlier that decade; although several musicians defected while in Washington, D.C. for performances, Mulatu and most of the troupe returned to Ethiopia. (Mulatu, Interview, Oct. 30, 2007)

not resonate with Mulatu. Although many American jazz musicians had sought inspiration on musical and political levels from Africa and its independence movements, Ethiopia's revolution was aimed at displacing a centuries-old monarchy and deeply embedded social hierarchy. Mulatu viewed his engagement with jazz as an aesthetic and professional commitment, not as a political cause. Mulatu credits his apolitical stance to his years in England, where "I've always been told to leave politics for politicians. So I learn nothing about politics. I'm a musician… So my interest is to develop my country's cultures and music and art. That's my way of doing things in this country here, because my responsibility is to build cultures. So you do your politics." (Interview, Oct. 2, 2009)

Mulatu's efforts to separate aesthetics from politics, itself an implicit political stance, proved strategic during the years of political conflict at home in Addis Ababa, during which he reports he told his critics:

> "I'm a jazz musician, my friend. I don't care much about lyrics. You can use lyrics in ten or fifteen different ways. One for politics, one for pleasure, one for this or that. So I'm a pleasure man, I just play my jazz, man." (Interview, Oct. 2, 2007)

Under substantial political pressure both during the Ethiopian revolution and under the subsequent government after the military regime was overthrown in 1991, Mulatu responded by keeping a high profile in artistic activities. He maintained strong connections with the Addis Ababa foreign community and embassies, traveling abroad frequently beginning in 1985 as a board member of the International Jazz Federation under the auspices of UNESCO. (Hages) His mobility enabled Mulatu to become a link from revolutionary Ethiopia to the world of music abroad as well as to nurture personal

ties to the growing Ethiopian American diaspora, which over time included several of his siblings and, intermittently from the late 1990s, his two children.

Mulatu's ability to travel provided a buffer against the creative restrictions and economic pressures that imperiled other Ethiopian musicians' careers and forced them to emigrate. At the same time, Mulatu's international network of connections made him one of the most active ambassadors for Ethiopian music internationally as well as one of its strongest advocates at home. Engaged in supporting and documenting the cultural music of different Ethiopian ethnic communities thorough a regular radio show, in 2000 Mulatu made efforts to institutionalize jazz pedagogy and performance in Addis Ababa by establishing the African Jazz Village (also known as the African Jazz Institute), which he oversaw until it was forced to close in 2004. An effort to re-open an Addis Ababa jazz club of the same name in partnership with his son during 2008, in order to provide a venue in which young jazz musicians could perform, failed, and the club closed in early 2009. (Shelemay, Fieldnotes, Addis Ababa, Dec. 2008 and personal contact, July 2009)

Except for his years in London, Boston, and New York detailed above, Mulatu maintained his primary residence in Ethiopia while traveling widely to perform. The long term impact of his career abroad was acknowledged by the Society for Ethiopians Established in the Diaspora (SEED), which honored Mulatu with their 2006 award for his "rich and positive contributions," "for being the pioneer of Ethio-jazz," "for bringing Ethiopia's music to the world stage," and for being "a role model for young artists." (Letter from SEED to Mulatu Astatke, June 6, 2006) Most recently, Mulatu spent a year in the United States as a 2007-2008 Fellow at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. The inclusion of Mulatu's music in the soundtrack of "Broken

Flowers" was both an outcome of his longtime mobility and served to circulate further his Ethio-jazz to a wider audience.[10]

III. "Yekermo Sew" and Mulatu's Signature Style

Mulatu's "Yekermo Sew" is one of four of Mulatu's compositions prominently used in "Broken Flowers."[11] "Yekermo Sew" takes its name from a play by the late Ethiopian poet and playwright Tsegay Gabre-Medhin (1936-2006), at whose invitation the piece was originally composed. Translated on *Éthiopiques* 4 as "A man of experience and wisdom," the title derives from a colloquial phrase in the national Ethiopian language, Amharic, with Orthodox Christian associations: "*Yekermo sew yɔ̀blan*" translates "May He (God) make us people of the next year!" a traditional new year's blessing. (Kane, Vol. 2: 1384) Mulatu says that he hoped to sustain and convey older traditions through this composition:

> I was really trying to depict the older people, this is what I was trying to get into, because this has this beautiful Ethiopian feeling to this music. This reflects… the older people, the last warriors, the fighters, and the earlier people, and how they

[10] In late Nov., 2007, as I flew from the mainland U.S. to Hawaii on United Airlines, I encountered Mulatu's "Yekermo Sew" as the first track on United's \on- board "World Music" channel.

[11] The others are "Yegelle Tezeta," "Gubelye," and "Ethanopium," all of which are included, along with "Yekermo Sew" on the Decca soundtrack album. (*Music from Broken Flowers*, 2005). All except for "Ethanopium" are performed by Mulatu Astatke.

would sit and listen to the *azmaris* [minstrels] for hours and hours. (Interview, Nov. 9, 2007)

Mulatu remembers little of the plot of the play for which he composed this music, but recalls that he was inspired by the title. "You know, traveling and playing… sometimes you forget things." (Ibid.)

Mulatu composed "Yekermo Sew" after his return to Ethiopia in the later 1960s, although he is uncertain of the exact date.[12] He drew on the Ethiopian mode *tizita* [C-D-E-G-A], a pentatonic scale closely associated with feelings of nostalgia and loss, but used *tizita* in its "minor" form [C-D-Eb-G-Ab] (Interview, Dec. 4, 2007). Although "Yekermo Sew" is based in the secular modal system of Ethiopian highland music, and reflects transformations channeled through the framework of Western music theory, Mulatu believes that the piece as a whole conveys a feeling associated also with the modes of the Ethiopian church, not just the secular music performed by professional minstrels after church ceremonies.

The use of pitch content drawn from traditional Ethiopian musical practice is only part of "Yekermo Sew's" musical vocabulary; at this point, we must factor in longstanding jazz practice of musical quotation as well as the impact of several trends in the American jazz scene within which Mulatu lived and worked in New York City.

[12] That "Yekermo Sew" was first released in Addis Ababa in 1969 on a 45 rpm disc places the composition of the work firmly in the late 1960s. Mulatu states that he composed "Yekermo Sew" in Ethiopia after his return from New York City. (Mulatu, Interview, November 9, 2007)

Perhaps most immediately discernable is an external inspiration for the head of "Yekermo Sew's" melody—a composition by Horace Silver.

A pianist of Cape Verdean descent, Silver settled in New York City in 1950 (Rosenthal:36) and performed with Miles Davis in the mid-1950s in recording sessions for Prestige Records (Ibid.:29). Mulatu says that he did not know Silver personally, nor does he remember seeing him perform live. However, Mulatu did hear Silver's music in recordings and perhaps in performances by others, and recalls that he felt a connection with Silver's use of "five tone scales," as well as the pentatonicism invoked by many other musicians engaged in the modal jazz scene of that period. Silver's use of innovative time signatures and varied Latin-inspired rhythms must have also appealed to Mulatu, who while in Great Britain and in New York had learned to play Latin percussion instruments, including the congas, and had often worked with Latin musicians.

Silver's "Song for My Father" was recorded in 1964 after Silver returned from a collaboration with Sergio Mendez in Brazil. (Rosenthal: 48) Mulatu therefore either learned Silver's composition from a long forgotten musical performance in New York or became familiar with the song through the recording.[13] In addition to subtly transforming the melody of Silver's composition in its phrasing and rhythm, Mulatu also adapted its ostinato figure, expanding it to reiterate the interval of an octave, thereby reducing its link to Western functional harmony. In terms of its form, the original version of "Yekermo Sew" leads off with the head based on Horace Silver's piece, followed by a bridge, after which the head is repeated. Solos follow, with the return of the head and bridge in

[13] Silver's dedication of the song to his father may be reflected as well in Mulatu's desire to convey the ethos of "older people," as reflected in the traditional title of Mulatu's composition.

between, with a final return of the head afterwards as the piece ends abruptly. The original recording of "Yekermo Sew" also captures in its instrumentation the technologies of the late 1960s, the period during which it was conceived and initially recorded. In the first solo on the keyboard, Mulatu plays a Fender Rhodes, an electronic piano that was introduced and became popular in that era (Bacon 2001a); its bell-like sound no doubt attracted vibraphonist Mulatu. The second solo is played on a Fuzz Box guitar, also an innovation of the 1960s with an effects pedal that modifies and distorts the sound (Bacon 2001b, 56-57).

The 1992 recording that accompanies this publication contrasts in its performing forces to the earlier and more widely circulated version of the piece. The ensemble here is much smaller and updated, including keyboard (Abegassu Shiota), bass guitar (Fasil Wuhib), percussion (Michael E. Friend), and vibraphone (Mulatu Astatke). Synthesized horn hits over the bass ostinato are heard in the extended introduction, and synthesized horn and flute timbres return in iterations of the chorus later in the piece, along with a solo by Mulatu on vibraphone.

The modal jazz style of Coltrane and other musicians he encountered in New York City during the 1960s must have been intensely stimulating for Mulatu, who already carried with him memories of Ethiopian secular and sacred modes. In "Yekermo Sew", multiple musical streams of musical inspiration thus converge: Silver's melodic influence as well as the wonderful rhythmic sense which was reminiscent of strong Ethiopian dance rhythms Mulatu had already incorporated into his own music; the impact of modal structures entering the jazz vocabulary, which would have triggered Mulatu's Ethiopian modal memories; and the use of repetitive vamps and pedal points (Monson

300) which to the Ethiopian ear must have been reminiscent of the repetitive rhythmic and melodic patterns that pervade most of Ethiopian music.

During an interview, Mulatu described "Yekermo Sew" in ways that reflects its checkered history. If it can be heard as set in minor Tizita mode, as noted above, it can also be described as a piece [in F minor] that is "very, very Ethiopian."[14] (Interview, Dec. 4, 2007) And if Mulatu has continued to travel, "Yekermo Sew" has surely traveled with him: Over the years, Mulatu has revised the piece repeatedly, as can be heard in the recording here, including adding a new bridge after the head, which is, in his words, "nice and stretched out." Mulatu continues: "I have another idea also for "[Ye]Kermo Sew" to change it as well. I haven't finished with it yet!" (Interview, Dec. 4, 2007) (**Figure 2**, Lead Sheet for revised "Yekermo Sew")

"Yekermo Sew" thus can be said to map through sound Mulatu's travels overtime as well as to embed aspects of his musical life in different locales. The piece incorporates sounds from his Ethiopian boyhood, draws on the breadth of his British music education, moves through his exposure to hard bop and modal jazz of the late 1950s and 1960s, comes to life at home in Ethiopia in the late sixties, and then continues to morph over the course of his subsequent travels. Mulatu's compositions in Ethio-jazz emerge from his desire "to extend and develop" Ethiopian music while being equally grounded in the jazz worlds that he encountered in London and New York City, and with which he has continued to interact until the present.

[14] In the 1992 recording, Mulatu and the other musicians take much more liberty with the harmonic content, frequently moving outside the mode, whether conceived as a [pentatonic] minor Tizita or as F minor.

Mulatu's own personal theory of creativity can clarify how he perceives these disparate musical worlds to come together in a congenial way. Mulatu believes that a creative person is one "who starts something." As the primary example of Ethiopian musical creativity, Mulatu names St. Yared, the fabled sixth- century founder of Ethiopian Church music whom he considers to be "the originator." Mulatu notes that "there are two ways [in which one] can create, distinguishing between the "first creativity" of musicians from isolated locales who invent traditions without outside influence, and a different form of creativity, within which he locates his own, which permits him to absorb musical experiences from a wide variety of sources at home and worldwide and then to combine them in new ways. Mulatu views his own experience drawing on the broader world of jazz as "definitely combining and giving a value to the 'first creativity'." As an example, Mulatu cites the distinctive harmonies he has invented based on the traditional Ethiopian modes, which are then used to accompany traditional rhythms. (Oct. 23, 2007) Similarly, Mulatu has taken the sounds of familiar Ethiopia instruments and plainchant, and transformed them within jazz.[15] So Mulatu credits his innovations in Ethio-jazz to what he learned abroad, but also to his own convictions

[15] Mulatu's music holds many examples of these creative processes. See, for example, his composition "Dawal," also reissued on *Éthiopiques* Vol. 4, which is modeled after the sound of the *dawal,* stone chimes sounded outside rural Ethiopian churches to call the faithful to prayer. In "Dawal" Mulatu captures the timbre of the *dawal* through vibraphone solos, set in a free rhythm. In contrast, his composition "Tsome Diguwa" ["Lent Time"] reflects the sound of liturgical chants and traditional Ethiopian instruments used during the Lenten season. (See Mulatu Astatke, *Ethio Jazz*, Vol. 1, 2006).

shaped during those years that part of his mission was to support and extend the cause of Ethiopian music and instruments. (Interview, Sept.25, 2007)

IV. Musical Mobility and the Broader World of Jazz

Mulatu Astatke's lively musical imagination and excellent performance skills were well timed to embrace the convergence of world music and jazz. He was doubly fortunate to be a composer/performer within a largely instrumental style unhampered by textual constraints that might have put him at risk in charged political settings. Significant as well was the cultural capital accrued by Mulatu as a jazz musician who entered the international jazz scene just as the era of the American civil rights movement and African independence coincided. (Monson 2007: 5)

But in the end, cultural mobility emerges not just as an easy metaphor for Mulatu's music's sound and structure, but as the decisive factor that produced Ethio-jazz. Without his extraordinary mobility and exposure to a wide range of musical sounds, Mulatu could never have conceived his traveling music. Movement is key to understanding the genesis of Mulatu's style and provides a pathway through which we can understand the way in which this music is heard by so many listeners, including Jim Jarmusch, as being emblematic of movement. The literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt has argued that:

> Mobility must be taken in a highly literal sense."… Only when conditions related to literal movement are firmly grasped will it be possible to understand the metaphorical movements: between center and periphery; faith and skepticism; order and chaos; exteriority and interiority. Almost every one of these

> metaphorical movements will be understood, on analysis, to involve some kinds of physical movements. (Greenblatt, 2008)

Mulatu's personal and musical agency were in fact wholly interdependent with his ability to move. Only his constant goings and comings, and processes of creative incorporation could have produced, to borrow a phrase, "so daring an intersection of multiple identities." (Greenblatt 15). The repetitive ostinatos of Mulatu's "Yekermo Sew," as well as its melodic and rhythmic content link places widely separated, bringing them together with a sense of movement integral to the music's creation—and its continued circulation.

The story of the genesis of Ethio-jazz unsettles the standard jazz narrative constructed as it was in transnational travel and intermittent dwelling abroad. While Mulatu's Ethio-jazz shares aesthetics with the worlds of hard bop and modal jazz, its composer does not share the same history of racial discrimination and occupies a very different sociological and political space. Here we can invoke a distinction made by Ingrid Monson in *Freedom Sounds*, where she offers an explanation for the racially charged debates that have characterized American jazz history: Sociological differences can exist even though musical aesthetics are shared, and one must acknowledge these differences and the contrasting discourses surrounding them to develop a more productive conversation. (Monson: 249) Within the American jazz world, such debates have tended to be reduced to rigid positions on racial essentialism. In this Ethiopian case study, the interaction of Ethio-jazz with aspects of the American jazz discourse produced musical similarities as well as cultural disconnects, with different issues at stake.

It is not surprising that Ethiopian musicians such as Mulatu Astatke, modern mobile minstrels, are left on the margins of the jazz discourse today. Their's is not a music of resistance, nor do their sounds give voice to a community historically persecuted, although by the late 1970s, they were surely a community at risk. Jazz for Mulatu Astatke was in its own way a means for pushing back against time-honored Ethiopian social constraints, a very personal rupture with his own society in which music making was regarded as dishonorable occupation. But speaking out through his music was an option only for a member of the Ethiopian elite— in the far reaches of the African Horn, mobility was the rarest privilege. Thus the genesis of Ethio- jazz is a tale that must be told top down, not bottom up. It weds the historically resistant African American jazz musical aesthetic to an Ethiopian milieu, but narrates quite a different story.

Knowledge of the genesis of Ethio-jazz has been muted in part because the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) has so dominated notions of Africa's relationship to global musical trends that important musical initiatives elsewhere on the continent and their deep but different connections abroad have often been overlooked. There is no question as well that Ethio-jazz remains very much identified with Mulatu Astatke himself, and that he has not spawned a group of followers needed to transmit the style within his country.[16] If it is likely the case that Mulatu's "unforgettable trademark style[has] earned the esteem of the elites without ever really touching the hearts of the masses " (Falceto 1997a: 21), Mulatu has sought to reach a broader swath of Ethiopians through his deep

[16] However, ensembles abroad have embraced Ethio-jazz with enthusiasm, such as a Somerville, Massachusetts based band, the Either/Orchestra. See *Either/Orchestra. Live in Addis*, *éthiopiques* 20. 2004. Paris: Buda Musique.

involvement in the study and documentation of some of his country's neglected ethnic musical styles.[17]

Ethio-jazz surely helps bring into focus the creativity of Africans with ties well beyond the Black Atlantic, pushing us to including the intra-Africa, Indian Ocean, and Mediterranean African diasporas in our readings of jazz history.[18] In some ways, the genesis of Ethiopian jazz resembles more closely jazz's entry into areas of the Caribbean and South America, where members of local elites engaged with jazz styles they encountered among foreigners in their homeland and in urban centers abroad, providing stimulation for their own new syntheses.[19] The history of Ethio-jazz is surely a very different tale than that of jazz in South Africa, where the world wide prominence of South African jazz musicians in the second half of the twentieth century was shaped in

[17] In the last decade, Mulatu has sought to draw attention at home and abroad to musicians from a number of isolated Ethiopian communities in the southern and western areas of the country, arguing that they have created without outside influence musical instruments and melodic structures that resemble innovations in jazz. He refers specifically to the timbre of indigenous instruments that resemble the sound of the bass saxophone and pitch content that resembles diminished scales. (Interview, October 23, 2007)

[18] See Zeleza 2005 [especially p. 38] and Alpers, 2000: 83-99.

[19] See, for instance, Gage Averill's description of the genesis of jazz in Haiti. Averill 1997: 36-39.

part by their widely recognized and courageous roles, often in exile, in spearheading the fight against apartheid in their country.

Acknowledging Ethio- jazz as traveling music is a first step toward recognizing the agency of the mobile Ethiopian in shaping his own expressive capabilities. Here the Ethiopian musician emerges as an individual who initiates new musical works and commands respect both within and outside of his own society. Mulatu Astatke's transnational musical career provides a rich case study of the moveable feast that characterizes world jazz at the turn of the twenty-first century and the distinctive musical outcomes of the encounter of inspiration with opportunity.

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Figures

Figure 1: Mulatu of Ethiopia. Cover photo on LP "Mulatu of Ethiopia", published in 1972 by Worthy Records in New York City. Ethiopian Airlines sponsored the 1972 album. The caption reads: Ethiopian Airlines. Going to great lengths to please.

Figure 2: Revised Lead Sheet for "[Ye]kermo Sew." Courtesy of Mulatu Astatke, 2007.