

# MOVING MEMORIES

*Jane Cornwell* speaks to Ethiopian-born American singer **Meklit Hadero** about returning to the songs of her homeland

**M**eklit Hadero would like to make something clear: she is not – and has never been – a spokesperson for Ethiopia. Sure, her new studio album, *A Piece of Infinity*, celebrates the rich musical traditions of her birthplace by reframing a clutch of traditional tunes – songs of love, longing, innocence and the Cosmos – with jazzy arrangements. Yet, despite her closeness to Ethiopian music and culture – she even sings in national languages Amharic, Kambaata and Oromo, as well as English – she has learned to question and evaluate her understanding of the East African nation.

"I have this experience of breaking through what my parents' experience of Ethiopian culture was and realising that the stories we had inherited were true, but only partially true," says the longtime San Francisco native, who was just two years old when she left Addis Ababa for the US with her parents, a Kembata father and Amhari mother, who were fleeing famine and civil war. She returned for the first time two decades later.

"When I visited in 2009 with the Arba Minch Collective [a multi-disciplinary group of Ethiopian diaspora artists committed to forging ties to their homeland], we travelled to southern Ethiopia for a festival, and were eating *ensete* [a starchy crop nicknamed 'the false banana'], whose fermented root is a staple of the region." It was an experience that made her question all her assumptions about Ethiopian culture. "Until then, growing up, I'd always thought Ethiopian food was *injera* [sour spongy flatbread] and *wat* [stew]."

"I had the same experience musically," she continues, over a Zoom call from her car, parked in a street somewhere in the Bay Area. "As I got to know the incredible polyphonic musical traditions of the Dorze people, so different to the music of Kambaata, also in southern Ethiopia – where my father is from – I realised I was just a fractal of this infinity, this place of 80 languages and 300 dialects. Of so many cultures and musical traditions. I was one star in a constellation."

Meklit has visited Ethiopia a total of eight times since 2009. Her breakout musical year was 2015, after the video for her song 'Kemekem (I Like Your Afro)' went viral, as did her TED talk on "the unexpected beauty of everyday sounds", making her something of a star in her parents' homeland, where she maintains a loyal and strong following. One time, she met a



Left: Meklit performing at Helsinki Festival in 2018

Peace Corps volunteer after a show in Washington, DC, who'd come to see her on the recommendation of an eighth-grader they'd met on assignment in rural western Ethiopia.

"When I started doing music, I never, ever thought that people in Ethiopia would get down with what I was doing. I speak Amharic with an accent!" She flashes a smile. "But I've also realised that traditional musicians there are so open. They don't have hard lines around things."





We discuss the songs that are part of the fabric of Ethiopian life, hummed while cooking, thinking or going about one's day. These are the songs that form the spine of *A Piece of Infinity*, her first album that is expressly based on traditional Ethiopian songs. 'Ambassel', the opening track, is a love song that takes inspiration from the eponymous mountain fortress town in her mother's Amhara region of northern Ethiopia, whose tune her mother still sings softly: "It felt very close to me," Meklit says. "I went with my gut on this one. Working with [multi-Grammy-winning] Dan Wilson, who produced my *Ethio Blue* EP last year and [2017's] *When the People Move, The Music Moves Too*, taught me to trust my instincts. To take a song, have a dialogue about it, make it better, play it live so that you really know. Then you record it."

Then there's 'Tizita', a beloved traditional song about longing and nostalgia that here includes NYC jazz stars Camille Thurman on flute and Brandee Younger on glittery, dreamy harp. For her version of this song – which, like 'Ambassel', is also the name of the scale used – she felt free to change the melody, to create her own version untied to an authentic vision of Ethiopian music. "The lyrics themselves are traditional lyrics, but I've shaped and changed pretty much everything else about it," she states. The video, also dance-based, features a couple with a swirl of flowers in place of heads: "I wanted to give the feeling of universality, of being in the mind, in the memory," Meklit says.

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She includes women's songs in the shape of 'Abebayehosh', a song that would traditionally be sung by young Ethiopian girls to usher in the Ethiopian New Year every September, and 'Dale Shura', a prayer sung by Oromo women to bring rain. On 'Lefequer Enegeza', she sets a poem by trailblazing female poet and actress Alemtsehay Wedajo to music. "She wrote these gorgeous Amharic lyrics, and I am so grateful that this living legend was open to collaboration," says Meklit.

Elsewhere, original songs bloom from stories. 'My Gold' is a poem for her young son. 'Stars in A Wide Field' is a musing on a Kambaata children's riddle, the translations of which, she says, blew her mind: "What is the mother's map that cannot be rolled up? The sky! What is the journey that never ends? Thought! There is an entire cosmology in these songs, a whole way of understanding the world that is so powerful. After I read them, I took out my *krar* [Ethiopia's fan-shaped lyre] and the whole thing just jumped out in a single evening."

Meklit's longtime bandmates, particularly bassist Sam Bevan and pianist Kibrom Birhane – a go-to for jazz stars including LA-based Kamasi Washington and Ethiopian legends such as Hailu Mergia – were crucial to the album's arrangements, composition and production process. However, the months she spent touring with the Nile Project (from 2014 to 2017, across Africa, the US and Europe) deepened both her understanding of Ethiopian traditional music and how to arrange for a large ensemble. ▶

She is referring to musicians such as Endris Hassen, an original member of the Nile Project – a multinational collective comprising 35 musicians from 11 countries along the Nile River, from Egypt to Ethiopia, Rwanda to Burundi – which Meklit co-founded in 2011 with Ethiopian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis. "Endris is a master musician who grew up as a shepherd, playing his *masenqo* [one-string fiddle] for the goats. If you think about it, [it's] not just for the goats. In a hilly landscape, music echoes; you can hear it throughout a valley, a soundtrack for people working on a farm. It's very beautiful."

"So, for me, it's like, what does it take to become a master? It takes time and intention and love. Not to say that Endris didn't have any teachers, but now he plays with symphony orchestras and globally renowned rock bands, and his training was with the goats." A pause. "Maybe the best music has its roots in these folk spaces."