



Meklit at Helsinki Festival

Then there's her voice, an instrument the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* described as "lilting, sensuous, capable of the leap from staccato jazz to honeyed songbird, conveying fragility and strength in a single line," and which was shaped by Ethiopian music, jazz and West Coast folk almost in equal measure.

Ethio-jazz – the pentatonic-leaning genre revolutionised by Mulatu Astatke, the Berkeley-graduating 'Daddy from Addy' who married traditional Ethiopian music with jazz – is another lens through which she delivers her sound: "I think of myself as part of a continuum," says Meklit, who was 12 when she sang Billie Holiday's 'God Bless the Child' in a performance at middle school. "In my youth, I was deeply inspired by the way Ethio-jazz allowed me to be my full diasporic self, be in relationship to Black music that comes from this place, the US, while still maintaining my relationship to my culture."

She began crafting her sound with nothing more than a voice and a guitar after being dazzled by San Francisco's thriving arts and singer-songwriter scene 20-odd years ago. "I loved the idea that, with simplicity, you can strum your truth," says Meklit, for whom truth and the collective are everything.

"I'm a cultural activist. I like to tell bigger stories with other artists than I can do alone. I have a history of bringing musicians together to explore these very large-scale, complicated questions where culture has an impact. I'm always involved in projects, initiatives and organisations that think about the intersection between social change and creative practice."

A Yale political science graduate, veteran of tertiary art residencies and, since 2011, a Senior TED Global Fellow, Meklit is more recently the co-founder and host of *Movement*, a high-rating podcast that has platformed diverse guest artists, including an Iranian classical

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composer – fleeing persecution in Iran – and a Chamorro dancer reclaiming the language of her ancestors. "We uplift the stories and songs of immigrant, migrant and refugee musicians. It's part world-building project, part musical discovery; the music that's coming out of these communities is so badass and genre-less and innovative. We don't shy away from the large-scale forces that are shaping our lives globally, and we bring in intimate human storytelling to say, let's just be people together."

But can music change perceptions? It is a big ask.

"There's plenty of research that says yes," affirms Meklit.

"The question is, what can a musician do? There's a lot of money being poured into anti-immigrant narratives in the United States. We need more narratives from immigrants telling our own stories on our own terms. Of course, a story might not stop ICE, for example, but it might inspire people in a neighbourhood to protect their neighbours. By telling human-scale stories, you inspire human-scale actions."

And maybe, just maybe, when someone asks where you are from, they might see beyond clichés, beyond place, to "older stories of hydrogen, helium and the stars."

Another smile. "Any one person can only hold a sliver of the truth." ♦

+ *A Piece of Infinity* is released by Smithsonian Folkways.
It will be reviewed in the next issue

Tessa Shimizu Peuri Anttila

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