**Eritrean Music and Me**

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Due to the daunting challenges Eritrea faces, Eritrean music is not getting the attention it deserves. Eritrea’s achievements are extensive in many fields. But most of these achievements did not or, could not receive international exposure because not much is publicized since Eritreans are busy focusing on the daily challenges and threats that they face regularly. As a result, not much attention has been devoted to expose the international community to Eritrea's cultural riches.

These challenges, to an extent, hindered writers from writing, artists and others from promoting their crafts. As the result, magnificent talents of Eritrean youth remain, simply Eritrean treasures. It limited international exposure to Eritrean arts, cultural diversities and miraculous achievements. Therefore, the world does not have understanding of the rich musical history and cultural heritages of Eritrea. Fortunately, that didn’t change the level of production, quality, quantity and commitment to the arts and humanities.

The enemies of Eritrea tried to suppress Eritrea’s achievements when they can and downplay it when they could not, by design. They targeted the youth and made every possible effort to divert their attention. They tried to dislodge them from their life and attempted to minimize their achievements by belittling everything Eritrean. Most importantly however, the negative PR campaigns directed at Eritrea are designed to drown any positive developments of the nation.

There are many examples of this. The sanction measures and, the current misinformation and demonization campaign about the health and life of His Excellency, President Isaias Afwerki stands as a stark example. During these demonization campaigns, there exists no opportunity for Eritreans to get their messages out. That is by design. This demonstrates the extent of the challenge that Eritreans face continuously.

Universally, music is the preeminent expression of love and romance. That too was a target because for a long time, Eritreans were told that they are incapable to express love and romance through music.

It all failed. The people of Eritrea remain seized on the task and contrary to the distractive efforts of the enemies, the brilliant creative-mind and the humble Eritrean nature keeps innovating without fanfare, successfully.

Music is a staple in Eritrea. It has served as glue that binds the spirit of Eritrea every step of the way. Eritrean music has also served as journal that chronicled the life of the nation to date. It is understatement to claim that music was significant to Eritrea because, Eritrean music has meant more. It helped Eritrea sail to become a nation, more than the guns that liberate her. In short, Eritrean music has served as evidence that, a nation is not defined solely based on its boundaries since Eritrean music served to unite Eritreans and, expressed their national ideals no matter where Eritreans lived and what the status of the nation was for decades! It allowed Eritreans to unite in purpose. It reinforced their nationalism. It allowed them to express their love for Eritrea. It motivated them. It has also served as the pulse of the nation in different stages expressing the state of the State. All one has to do is look back at the musical events that led Eritrean unions in Bologna, Italy in the eighties.

Early-on, Eritrean musicians understood the importance of music and deliberately used it to educate Eritreans about the struggle ahead. They knew what was required for success. Atewebrhan Seghid’s song “Aslamai Kistanai” is one song that comes to mind. It reinforced a foundation for a vision of peaceful co-existence amongst the various nationalities of Eritrea. Regardless of where they come from, or their religious beliefs, the message resonated. Memhir Alamin Abdeletif expressed it best when he sung his famous song, “Seb…N Kebdu T-Rai Aykonen zinebir,” teaching selflessness at a greater risk to his life. Musicians singing their hearts-out laid the vision for the future Eritrea like Yemane’s “Wedebat Adey.” Eritrean musicians were, and remain the heart and soul of Eritrea. They exemplify bravery, as they have been the faces and voices of courage and defiance at critical moments in the history of this young nation.

I grew up in a family that appreciates music. From the moment that I can remember my life, all kinds of music captivated my imagination. As a kid, my father used to take us to the villages often. In the villages, I witnessed and experienced the traditional Guayla. I saw what music meant to the families and the villages. I remember all the villagers young and old, enjoy Guayla without exception. As long as one can hang until dawn, you enjoyed Guayla to your heart’s content. During the day time, the singers were invited to people’s homes and I sat and enjoyed watching my father, our relatives and, his friends on their traditional outfits dancing on top of Seti (Grass) laughing, and joking.

In Asmara, I was lucky that my brothers used to take me to the theater for concerts. I went to Cinema Odeon regularly to see Eritrean artists display their artistic and musical talents in advanced and organized setting. What I witnessed then was almost at par with some of the global theatrical performances of the time. The performances included comedy skits between songs. The variety of the musicians that played then, represent the legends of today. I saw many of Eritrea’s musical legends perform memorable songs.

In those days, Asmara was abuzz with music from every direction. There was the Kagnew Station music that was distributed by Americans from within the base/station. They played American music of all genres exposing Asmarino’s to American music early on. In addition, Eritrea’s central geographic location provided clear radio signals from many directions in the region including Somali and, Monte Carlo amongst other outlets. Hence, Eritrea has a rich musical tradition and influences.

Eritrean music, has served the people of Eritrea very well. It has been everything we needed it to be. When Eritrea needs consoling, it is Merhawi. During weddings, it is Eselie. Music is always there. It has served the nation in war, peace and no-war-no-peace very well. Eritrean musicians are the pillars of the nation.

One of the most interesting aspects of music in Eritrea is the fact that it is an industry that flourished seamlessly. It is a viable industry that has worked independently. Like the agricultural, medical, education and other sectors, music has grown in organized fashion faster and with unparalleled diversity after independence unnoticed.

When considering Eritrean musical histories, there are numerous stages and factors to consider:

Firstly, the pre independence and colonial era: at this stage, musicians shaped the standard for performance, the musical tone, the level of emotional intensity that defined love for life and nation. They set the tone that defined the struggle in defiance. Shortly after Ethiopia’s illegal subjugation of Eritrea, singers were refusing to sing as Ethiopians. Haile Sellasie’s regime made every effort to ban the Police Orchestra of Asmara from singing Tigrigna songs which was a source of nationalistic fervor at the time.

Secondly, the days of the struggle for independence: in this period, Eritrean music was scattered. Few popular musicians remained in Ethiopia but the majority either joined the revolution or went to exile in different parts of the world. This period truly showed the grit of Eritrean musicians because they were out of their element, underfunded, ill equipped and without support mechanism. Those that joined the rebellion were in effect fighters that performed for their causes. It is in this period that a new approach to music was defined. In Eritrea, there was not a stage to perform on, there-existed very limited musical instrument and expertise. In addition, the security environment was not conducive for the growth of music industry. Through it all, the struggle was able to organize a musical department that aimed to reflect the diversities of the nationalities and, represented it by recruiting new breed of musicians irrespective of gender or background. This structure, largely, accorded the foundation that generated the abundant talent that Eritreans are enjoying to date.

The third stage represented the meshing of music of the struggle with musicians from all over. After independence, there was hunger to reignite the old glory-days of Eritrean music. And majority of the musicians have done so in the new Eritrea. It is also fascinating to witness how the old guard was able to merge with the organized structure that liberated Eritrea seamlessly. While some were a part of the armed struggle, others were in exile.

Many fit this example; however, Bereket Mengisteab exemplifies this dynamic better. He is amongst those that instilled nationalism with his popular songs like Meley during the colonial era, then joined the armed struggle, sung in exile and, he is amongst the first to return to independent Eritrea to mesh with what was the beginning of a new musical era in Eritrea. As a product of the struggle Bereket rejoined the new era seamlessly and provided the leadership and stability the industry needed. He added dignity to a proud industry that proved to be a pillar of a nation. It is indeed a major accomplishment for Eritrea to witness Jemal Romodan singing on the same stage as Bereket during Independence Day celebrations. Asgedom Woldemichael is another example amongst many.

My motivation in writing this piece is twofold. First, I would like to pass on my gratitude to all those that contributed to the musical industry tirelessly. When Eritrea was scattered all over, they distributed music that accorded all Eritreans dignity and a sense of identity. They encouraged Eritreans all over and, helped unite them at a moment of darkness and helplessness lifting us all. They gave us joy with songs that reflected the realities of the day.

Secondly, to remind people that the rich history described above is a history that needs to be written about, talked about and told to the next generation and to the world. There is a deliberate pressure applied to undermine Eritrea’s achievements. They are trying to stifle the proud history of Eritreans by keeping Eritreans under a constant state of conflict.  That is why, it is doubly important for those that love, understand, appreciate and, those that want music to see music flourish in Eritrea to start telling their stories today when it is fresh and, while most of the participants are alive. It is nice to see YouTube videos but that is not enough.

**Conclusion**

What we are witnessing today is a direct assault on the very fabric of the people, the cultures and the history Eritrea. These enemies are aiming to weaken the foundations that unite Eritreans like music and the cultural events we love. By choosing to engage their lies and deceitful messages we, in effect, are giving them a platform they are desperate to get. By engaging their lies, we are propping their message while killing ours and thus, allow them to win. That is sheer stupidity, un-Eritrean and, disservice to those that gave their lives and limbs.

Yesterday, we were told Eritrean struggle for freedom was quashed for good. In retrospect, that was a better lie, than the lies of today that are pure fabrications. However, Eritreans didn’t believe it then because the only way that could be true was if every one of us was wiped-out of the earth. We have to keep that in perspective and focus, always. No matter who dies or lives, Eritrea is always stable country because the stability of Eritrea is a product of Eritrean unity.

Hence, it up to all of us to ensure voices of our martyrs is heard loud around the world everyday not only in Martyrs Day. It is up to us to nurture their aim and purpose as they lived and died for everything Eritrean.

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