

The Upper Nile Ethiopian Ensemble

Ethiopian

Washington, DC

A large and vibrant Ethiopian community began to establish itself in the United States following the start of the Ethiopian revolution in 1974. Although hundreds of Ethiopian musicians are now actively performing in the U.S., little attention has been given to the burgeoning creativity in this community. One of the largest Ethiopian populations in the States is in Washington D.C. where the Ethiopian music scene is thriving. The nation's capital, flush with talent, hosts events in clubs and restaurants every night of the week where dancers shake shoulders, heave chests and snap their heads back in the customary *iskista* dance and singers perform quivering, call and response vocals over the tchik-tchik-ka rhythm—a fast, lopsided triplet beat played on traditional and modern instruments. The Upper Nile Ethiopian Ensemble is a true all-star line-up of Washington DC's finest Ethiopian musicians.

Within contemporary Ethiopian music, the line between traditional (bahalawi) and modern (zemenawi) musicians is hard to distinguish. Ethiopian popular music draws heavily from traditional sources and the musicians of this ensemble transition smoothly between the two repertoires. Fronting the group is the powerful singer Tsehay Amare. The niece of Alemayehu Ashete, the “Ethiopian Elvis,” Amare can be found splitting her time between singing behalawi music in restaurants and zemenawi music in local clubs.

A master of the Ethiopian krar (5 string-lyre), Minale Dagnaw was born in northwest Ethiopia, and began his music career singing and later playing kebero (drum). At 15, he began playing krar in a traditional music group. Following a tour of the United States in 1993, he settled in Washington, DC. Since that time, he has worked steadily, emerging as one of the foremost practitioners of the modern, picked krar sound, including select performances with Ethiopian jazz legend Mulatu Astatke.

Setegn Atenaw is one of the finest *masenko* (one-stringed bowed fiddle) players in the world. Born in Ethiopia in 1976, Setegn grew up in a family of *azmaris* (singer-musicians) in a small town south of Gondar. His first language was the special azmari argot “*yezra kwankwa*,” spoken by his father. Setegn worked as a shepherd and learned to play masenko from his father. From his family he learned a great deal of traditional azmari lore and knows a vast repertoire of traditional songs.

Ashenafi Mitiku, a master of the Ethiopian shoulder dance *iskista*, is one of the finest traditional dancers in the U.S.. Ashenafi grew up in rural Ethiopia working with his family in the fields, but went to Addis Ababa when he was 12 to escape his father's disapproval of his dancing. Now in DC, he has held a regular job dancing for the Monday and Wednesday evening cultural music performances at Dukem Restaurant since 2001.

The group is rounded out by drummer Solomon Bedany and dancer Wubayhu Wurwuro. Bedane, who is also a fine guitarist, will be playing primarily electronic drums at the festival due to the extreme difficulty of keeping traditional drums in tune in the American climate. Wubayhu, one of DC's most sought after female traditional dancers, is known for her knowledge of the dances of many of Ethiopia's nearly 80 ethnic groups.