



Background information

Born 27 September 1940
Waliso, Scioa Governorate, Italian East Africa
(now Waliso, Oromia Region, Ethiopia)

Origin Waliso, Oromia Region, Ethiopia

Died 19 April 2009 (aged 68)
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Genres

- Ethiopian music
- soul jazz
- swing
- funk

Instruments Vocals

Years active 1955–2009

Labels Ethio Grooves

Associated acts

- Walias Band
- Mulatu Astatke

Tilahun Gesesse was an Ethiopian superstar and legendary singer, nick named 'The Voice". Tilahun broke in the Ethiopian music scene in what is considered the Ethiopian golden age of music, the 1960s and 70s. His incredible voice, impeccable performance and gracious appearance made him the most popular singer in the country. He is one of the most recognized personality in the country, and the one who reached the maximum height of fame in the music industry. Early life

Tilahun was born on 29 September 1940 in Wolliso, Oromia region. His parents separated when he was very young. Tilahun was raised by his grandmother who took him in after both of his parents decided to leave Wolliso. . He attended Ras Gobena elementary school. Tilahun knew he wanted to be a singer at a very early age. When the Hager Fiker Theater musicians with Negatua Kelkaye and Eyoel Yohannes came to his school to perform, at the age of 12, Tilahun approached them to discuss his interest to become a singer. Eyoel's advice for the young Tilahun was for him to move to the capital Addis Ababa and try to join a theater house. Tilahun took the advice very seriously. At the age of 13, he ran away from home in the back of a loaded truck. Despite his family resistance for him to become a singer, and their commitment to make Tilahun focus on his education, he was determined to make it as a singer and a musician.

Musical Career

There are conflicting narrations for Tilahun's decision to move to the capital Addis Ababa. While some argue that he moved for the sole reason of becoming a musician, others write that he actually came to live with his mother, who was living in Addis Ababa.

On his arrival in Addis Ababa, the 14 year's old Tilahun first auditioned and joined Hager Fiker Theater. Tilahun met and befriended another legendary singer, Firew Hailu at the theater. Both of them were young and were living in the housing provided by the theater.

Impressed by their music arrangement, dressing style and the admiration they received, Tilahun then joined the Imperial Guard Orchestra. The Orchestra was thrilled to have Tilahun and he joined without officially leaving Hager Fiker Theater. In fact, records show that Tilahun was receiving salary from both places for a while, until his bosses' heard his voice on radio and realized he joined the Imperial Guard Orchestra. Officials from Hager Fiker was unhappy and wanted Tilahun back. For a while, there were a quarrel between the Orchestra and Hager Fiker. While Mekonen Habtewolde demanded

the Orchestra to give Tilahun Back, Chief of the Imperial Guard General Mengestu Neway ordered for his stay. Tilahun's rise starts at the Imperial Guard. His tenor singing was considered the best of Ethiopian pop at the time, and his fan base was bigger than any other singer in the country. In the eight years he spend with the Imperial Guard, people could not see the Orchestra separate to Tilahun. In fact, Tilahun and the Orchestra met at the right time and place. Both were on the rise in the Ethiopian music scene. The brilliant melody and arrangement of the Orchestra and Tilahun's voice created some of the master pieces of Ethiopian music.

In 1960, the Imperial Guard tried a failed coup on emperor Hailesellasie, while the king was on a visit in Brazil. Tilahun was arrested briefly with other Imperial Guard unit members and was accused of supporting the coup. The reason was one of his iconic songs recorded just before the coup, titled Alchalkum (I can't take it any more), written by Afework Yohannes. During the four days coup attempt, the song was played by the Imperial Guard Tekel radio to get the support of the public. He later was released.

After the coup, one of the decision by the emperor was to close the Imperial Guard Orchestra. Including Tilahun, the musicians went looking for jobs in other Theater houses.

Tilahun then joined Ras Band and the National Theater. His popularity was only growing at the Theater. As an employee of the theater house, Tilahun was expected to record songs on a regular bases. That allowed many of his hits to come out frequently, making Tilahun the biggest music star in the country. His popularity grew so fast that he was a regular at the National Palace performing for the emperor himself. Tilahun's popularity grew even bigger after the fall of the emperor. In the 1970s and 80s, Tilahun recorded some of his iconic works.

Tilahun also raised millions for famine victims during those era. He is known for his passionate love for his country, recording some of the top songs about nations love. Tilahun kept recording music until he got stabbed on the neck, by a family member. Though he survived the injury, many argue that was the end of his golden voice.

Award

- 2009, Life time achievement awards, Ethiopian Fine Arts and Mass Media Prize Trust
- Honorary Doctorate Degree, Addis Ababa University, in appreciation for his contribution to Ethiopian music.

Personal life

In the last years of his life Tilahun suffered from a poor health due to diabetics. On April 19, 2009, the same night he returned from a visit to the United States, Tilahun Gessesse lost consciousness in his home and died while being taken to a hospital. A state funeral was held in April 23, 2009. Hundreds of thousands of his fans, former Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and many other high level officials attended the funeral.

Tilahun is survived by his children.

Tilahun left behind a legacy and a body of work that keeps him relevant for generations to come.

Seble Teweldebirhan