

**EVERY WEEKEND ACROSS METRO ATLANTA, AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS
GATHER AROUND THEIR RADIOS IN SCENES THAT RECALL;
AN EARLIER TIME IN AMERICA. THEY'RE LISTENING TO . . .;**

News from home

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Body

Drive by Dunkin' Donuts on Buford Highway any Sunday and you'll see several men by a van with the doors open and the **radio** on. From noon to 1 p.m. , they sip coffee and **listen** to a **radio** broadcast of **news** and music of their native Eritrea, an East **African** country of 3.8 million people.

Fifteen miles away, at Hartsfield International Airport, Eritrean taxi drivers stand outside their cabs and **listen** to the same show. And dozens of **immigrant** families tune in from living rooms in DeKalb County. They hear announcers talk in a language more often spoken 7,400 miles away.

CONSTITUTION

It's a ritual that repeats itself **every** Saturday and Sunday among **African immigrants** in **metro Atlanta**. Many of them **listen** in groups to programs on WATB-AM (1420) in languages of East and West Africa, bringing to mind the 1930s and 1940s in **America**, when people crowded **around radios** to hear programs like "Little Orphan Annie" and the fireside chats of President Franklin Roosevelt.

The shows are a kind of social glue that binds together small communities. They deliver hard-to-find **news** from back home and provide a forum to let an **immigrant** tell his countrymen when his cousin gets married or his grandmother dies.

"You feel like you are back home when you hear people speaking your own language about your country," said Michael Zere, 31, who **listens** to the Voice of Eritrea in the Tigrinya language in his family's Clarkston apartment.

The **radio** shows are produced by volunteers who rent air **time** from WATB, near Decatur. They began last July after a new owner, Otto Miller, converted a gospel station that relied on listener contributions to one that rents air **time**. The station charges \$ 40 for 15 minutes, \$ 75 for 30 minutes or \$ 150 for an hour to groups that otherwise would lack a voice.

About 14,000 Africans live in **metro Atlanta**, according to Georgia State University's Center for Applied Research in Anthropology. The majority are from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Somalia, Liberia and Nigeria. Natives of all but the last two air programs on WATB.

Somalis were first on the air, last summer. Now two Somali groups produce different shows, one on Saturdays and another Sundays. Eritreans broadcast from noon to 1 p.m. Sundays. Then comes a show for those from Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Senegal. The first of two Ethiopian shows begins at 3 p.m.

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Many listeners find a connection to their community through the programs, said Benjamin Vannoy Jr., WATB station manager. When African broadcasters "ask for phone calls in their language, believe you me, the phone rings off the hook," he said.

Even when people don't call, it's clear that they're listening.

Zere's family first glued itself to a radio in Sudan after fleeing the war between Ethiopia and Eritrean rebels in 1976. Family members were desperate for information about relatives they left behind.

"That's how we got connected with home," said Tesfalem Zere, Michael's brother. "This one feels the same way."

On recent broadcasts, his family has heard updates on peace negotiations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, traditional music and trivia questions designed to help them adjust to American life without forgetting their roots.

Among recent questions posed by Eden Fesshazion, a policy analyst for the Georgia Senate, who immigrated from Eritrea in 1989:

How long is I-285? Where is the source of Eritrea's Mareb River? Who is the speaker of the Georgia House of Representatives? How long is Eritrea's Red Sea coastline?

Fesshazion gives prizes to listeners who mail in the correct answers. Sometimes winners get a compact disc donated by Eritrean musicians; at other times it's dinner for two at an Eritrean restaurant.

The first of five African shows began Nov. 14 with Eritreans taking their places behind microphones and control panels. After a dose of traditional Eritrean music, an announcer told his listeners that Eritreans have great potential, even though the country's population is small compared with other countries.

Then Gemal Abubaker, president of Georgia's Eritrean Community Association, talked about the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. He read a report written by an Ethiopian intellectual critical of the Ethiopian government's attitude toward peace talks.

"The war has very little to do with disputes associated with any border," Abubaker said. "The utter incompetence of those who rule over Ethiopia today is clearly seen by their anachronistic military thinking and strategy, the foolishness of which has astounded the world."

A few minutes later, Fesshazion asked the weekly trivia questions:

How much blood is in the human body? What's the name of a large river in the United States that flows from north to south?

Her voice crackled out of taxi radios at the airport and the van at Dunkin' Donuts. Tesfalem Zere's family listened to the war news with a personal interest: The fighting has killed four relatives, and 15 more are at the front.

Before the radio shows, African immigrants got news from home by reading outdated newspapers mailed from Africa or by making expensive international phone calls. Tesfalem Zere, 25, said he finds Eritrean news on the Internet but that older immigrants, such as his parents, prefer the radio.

He said they like it because it links them emotionally, if only for one hour a week, to the country they left behind.

"It gives us the connection that we need."

Graphic

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Photo

Catching up on current events: On a recent Sunday, Michael Zere (left), Helen Zere (center) and Kidan Woldebager listen to news from Eritrea via WATB-AM (1420) in their Clarkston apartment. / BEN BAXTER / Special

Photo

How long is I-285? Eritrean immigrant Eden Fesshazion reads trivia questions; listeners who answer correctly can win prizes. / JEAN SHIFRIN / Staff

Photo

Music and more: Thomas Solomon (clockwise from left), Eden Fesshazion, Angelo Gebrehiwet and Gemal Abubaker share Eritrean culture over the airwaves from the studios of WATB-AM. / WILLIAM BERRY / Staff

Classification

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Geographic: ATLANTA, GA, USA (90%); GEORGIA, USA (93%); ERITREA (94%); SOMALIA (93%); EASTERN AFRICA (92%); ETHIOPIA (90%); AFRICA (90%); GHANA (79%); NIGERIA (79%); GAMBIA (79%); SENEGAL (79%); COTE D'IVOIRE (79%); SUDAN (79%); GUINEA (79%); LIBERIA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%); WESTERN AFRICA (79%)

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