



**GIO**

**New Voice from an Ancient**

**By Dere**

**S**triding down a Manhattan sidewalk, statuesque, with a mane of curled hair and a regal gaze, Gigi is on one hand as unfathomable as Nefertiti, as unknowable as "She." On the other, the giggling laughter that permeates her conversation like a song belies her approachable personality. But her music tells a more complete story of this complex artist who many are seeing as the new Queen of Ethiopian music, with a character closer to the street than the throne of Ras Tafari. Whether on the banks of the Blue Nile or the avenues of New York, her courage, vulnerability and strength would seem to mirror the trials of her birth land.

Ejigayehu "Gigi" Shibabaw, for that is her name, sings mostly in Amharic and Agew, an ancient root language from the northern states of Ethiopia, and her poetry and songs reflect a heritage-soaked upbringing in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Genna (the Ethiopian Christmas), and the childhood memories of the beauty of the Ethiopian civilization and countryside. What she has done is set it all within the musical arena of Bill Laswell's dubwise production and the unavoidable leanings of accompanying musicians Wayne Shorter, Pharaoh Sanders, Henry Threadgill, Karsh Kale, Nicky Skopelitis and Aiyb Dieng towards Weather Report and funk, with just a twist of tablas on the side. Complex indeed, but not unusual anymore in this polyglot society of the 21st century. However, Ethiopian tradition is stronger than most, and leaves its mark indelibly and very definitely.

Ethiopia has the world's oldest constitution, almost 2,000 years old. It is remote, has several distinct languages and is mostly between six and 10 thousand feet above sea level. At the Horn of Africa, it is also at a vital crossroads between the Mother Continent and the Middle East, with all the itinerant trade in music and culture. No wonder that the sounds of Ethiopia have always been particular and distinctive, partly due to the elliptical rhythms and myriad song styles (including a five-note scale) that give it such a recognizable and plaintive sound. It is full of soul, but it is not the blues, even though it has cross-fertilized with both blues and jazz, most notably during the '60s and '70s which are known euphemistically as "the Golden Age" of Ethiopian music. During the reign of Haile Selassie, even in this period of modernism popular music was never really separate from ancient roots and culture, and Ethiopians have always been enthusiastic buyers of both pop and traditional music, with many artists performing both. These Western influences had first been appropriated when Ethiopian soldiers had served in the Korean war—most musicians had day jobs in the army and police bands, just about the only source of instruments. In the late '70s the Mengistu regime imposed a curfew, shutting down all nightlife, and most of the music scene with it.

Gigi was growing up at this time, first in the capital Addis Ababa, and then, still as a young girl, in a small village in the country. "To be honest that village was started by my family," reminisces Gigi, "They were living in Addis Ababa before I was born and they where trying to cross the border into Sudan. For some reason they decided to stay there, in the middle of nowhere. So they brought more people in who started to work for them, and build their own houses and so on. So now it is a big village."

But still a far cry from Manhattan, and so was the music around her. "There were always people around the house, apart from us kids beating on water containers for drums. There was always a lot of singing, especially at night when everyone would gather around. There was a lot of church—there was a priest in the house teaching my brother how to become a priest; this was the Ethiopian Orthodox Church."

After a few years her parents moved her back to the capital, which, like any metropolis of two million people, was alive with many different kinds of music. Gigi was listening to a major star who she would eventually serve as a backup singer, Aster Aweke.

"Actually I first heard Aster in the country because my mother liked her a lot, but I seriously started listening to her in Addis Ababa. She had a lot of records out at the time and well, she's the Queen—she was a huge influence. She came back to Ethiopia after leaving because of the military junta and I actually got to sing backup for her."

A stay in Nairobi, Kenya, some 800 miles to the south, followed, where she tried to make a record but she had to return to Ethiopia before that would happen. There she was also introduced to the Ethiopian National Theater which she joined. At a party she met the French producer of a puppet production of *King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba: An Ethiopian Opera*. "We did a lot of traditional songs and some originals and it was very beautiful."

In turn this led her first to West Africa and then to Paris where she was asked to join the world music festival Imagineer. "I wasn't really doing traditional Ethiopian music, and in fact I had to learn a lot and sing more in Amharic than I was. I was more into the pop side like Aster and Mahmoud Ahmed. It was all Ethiopian music to me though and all I wanted to do was sound like Aster Aweke!" Gigi laughs. "But I took it seriously, and studied a lot."

*Continued on page 34*

**GI**  
**Land**

**ek Rath**

# GIGI

New Voice from an Ancient Land

Continued from page 33

Winning the crowd over with her show she returned to Ethiopia once again, this time to get a visa to come to America. Oakland, California had a sizable Ethiopian community and siren call of opportunity was irresistible.

A record, *One Ethiopia*, was released and caught the attention of Chris Blackwell, and *Gigi* is the direct result. Produced by Bill Laswell, *Gigi* was recorded while Laswell was working with Herbie Hancock on *Future 2 Future* and *Gigi* has a guest spot on that album too. Not only that, she had the amazing good fortune to be able to use the same musicians, and that's why *Gigi* has a virtual who's who roster of players. With such a lineup it's no surprise that the groove is at times reminiscent of Weather Report, but *Gigi* keeps the focus firmly Ethiopian. Despite the obscurity of some of the Ethiopian techniques, styles and phrasing, and idiosyncratic Ethiopian rhythms the learning curve between the cultures was surprisingly easy for everyone.

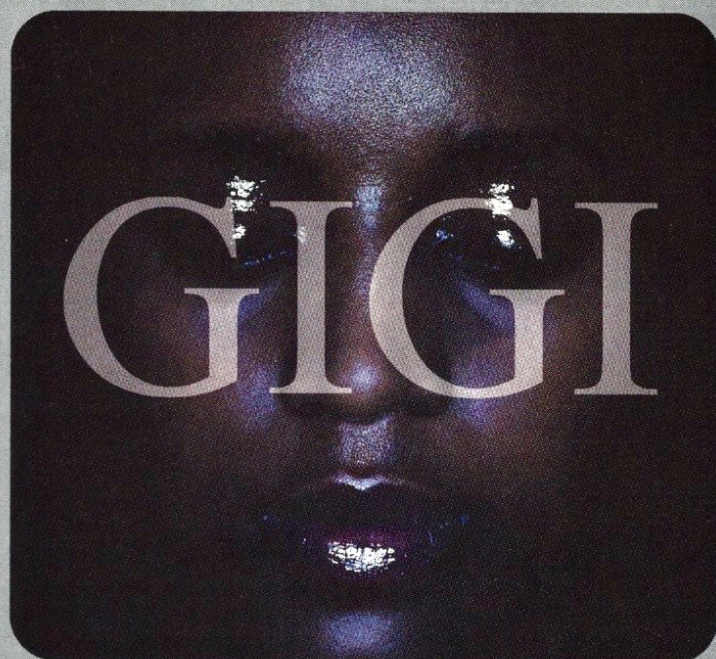
"Well, of course for me I had heard jazz in Ethiopia and it sounds just the same there as here. I was already fusing it in my music so it's not something I invented—it's just a continuation. When you're dealing with really professional musicians, whether jazz or Ethiopian, they are always improvising around the melody. So it's not a problem. You listen to the music, you learn the chords, and even if the melody is unfamiliar you give it respect in your interpretation. A lot of Ethiopian music is very old, and a lot of it comes out of the Ethiopian Church, but a lot of writers borrow from elsewhere. South Africa, China, Italy, Japan—if they like a melody they will use it. So this mixture is what makes our music different.

"I use four or five vocal techniques. Behind the pop music side there are so many traditions and tribes and every tribe has its own music. Probably the base is the church music, plus Amharic, the main language, came from there. Go to the south and you'll find different notes, harmonies and instrumentation. I was brought up as a Christian, so what I do is rooted in that, but there's also things like *tezeta* and *bati* and many others that don't even have names!" *Gigi* laughs that laugh again. "You can go elsewhere and hear a lot of Arabic influences."

You'd think that with so many regional sounds, several different scale systems dating back to the 6th century (many of which can be microtonal, modal or simply not conforming to "European" understandings), it would lead to an alien and indecipherable aural experience. It's a tribute to the ability of singers like Aster and *Gigi* that the full soulful experience of their ideas comes over loud and clear to Western ears, even if it takes a couple of listens for some people to get used to the trills and cascades that mark so many Ethiopian vocal styles. *Gigi* in particular seems to sit astride the East/West/ancient/modern gulf with ease.

"In all seriousness I wasn't writing these songs trying to consciously do that. I think it shows you something of my life—I'm a mix of everything" she laughs. "You can't hold me responsible because I wouldn't know how to do anything else! Even though the production might sound very contemporary, very jazzy, there are a lot of elements in there. There's a lot of African and West African sensibilities as well as Ethiopian, but you hear that in Addis Ababa. It's not something that I do purposefully, Ethiopian music is so mixed and I am just expressing a modern version.

"Actually I was expecting something even more progressive than what we came out with—you know, more drum and bass or whatever but Bill [Laswell] says 'no...let's keep it this way' and that's OK because I love my music and my culture. I'm just writing what's in my heart and how I live my whole life. Whatever it is I like about Ethiopia, about world music, what's happening around me—the sound just comes to me, that's how I write my music." ★



## GIGI

(Palm CD2068-2, 2001)

This is a very enjoyable release, but I should confess that for some time I resisted hearing it. The packaging and promotional campaign hinted a bit too heavily of crossover hype, with the pitch of "new world pop music" adding to my skepticism. So it's nice to report that my initial bias was largely wrong, and that this is a very worthwhile international debut from a very talented singer and composer.

Ejigayehu "Gigi" Shibabaw, 27, raised rurally in Ethiopia but living in the U.S. for the past few years, got her musical start singing Ethiopian Church songs, in spite of prohibitions on women doing so publicly. She traveled extensively as a backup vocalist with Aster Aweke, the first Ethiopian woman singer to have some crossover exposure, until being "discovered," like many before her, by producer Chris Blackwell, who does have good taste in such things. Those who have heard Aweke's releases will recognize the distinctive sound of the Amharic language and Ethiopian melodies, retained here even though the production is as modern as tomorrow.

*Gigi*'s voice is distinctive, higher-pitched than Aweke's, and here showcased in a lush, busy forest of ambient funk/jazz/"world" elements. Those who have heard producer/bassist Bill Laswell's signature sound—could there be anyone who hasn't at this point?—will find that the dominant flavor here. Laswell has, as is his wont, assembled an all-star lineup including Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Pharoah Sanders and a cast of dozens, including, yes, some Ethiopians—mostly percussionists and backing vocalists. *Gigi*'s own vocals are multi-tracked and layered over the mostly mid-tempo beats and bass lines, with plenty of keyboard effects and horns darting in and out. The horn charts are inventive and unobtrusive—as dense as the whole instrumentation is, it's all background setting for *Gigi*'s songs, which wind along throughout each song with few interruptions. The demand on her to sing virtually interrupted must have been fairly intense, but she's up to it.

However—and here's my one reservation—I wonder what wonders could have been worked with a less-structured, calculated setting. *Gigi* released two hard-to-find albums prior to this, and as she admits to Laswell having toned down her traditional Ethiopian singing, particularly the vibrato which predominates in many Ethiopian songs, I can't help but be curious about what she sounds like in a more native element. One person who listened to this cd with me remarked, only half-joking, "She sounds kinda like an African Enya" (which could be a knock or praise, depending on one's own tastes). And some of the stellar guest stars here seem disappointingly underused, the saxists in particular. Shorter and Sanders are already legends, and I'd listen to anything Sanders plays on, regardless of setting—even with Enya, for that matter. Yet I only picked up hints of their signature sounds, mostly in the background, until the concluding, beautiful song "Adwa," which is almost a duet between *Gigi* and Sanders' sax. The unequalled soul and power of the hornman's playing on this plaintive cry of Ethiopian pride hints at what might be created if the singer was allowed to cut loose a bit and improvise with such masters, both within the kind of solemn, prayerful setting of this song and in some of the funkier grooves of the preceding cuts. Maybe next time. Until then, this will do just fine.

—Steve Heilig