

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION



Meklit

When the People Move, the Music Moves Too

Six Degrees Records

Release Date: 06/16/2017

There are many well-appointed rooms in the mansion that is Meklit, and her breathtaking new album sounds at home in every one. The Ethiopian-born Oakland-based artist has belted “Cold Sweat” with James Brown saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis, co-founded the visionary pan-African Nile Project ensemble, and lectures widely about liminal identities as a TED Senior Fellow. Along the way she’s released a series of disparate recordings documenting her evolution as a songwriter, vocalist and bandleader. *When the People Move, the Music Moves Too*, slated for May 5, 2017 release on Six Degrees Records, reveals her startlingly beautiful new sound that seamlessly merges East Africa and the African diaspora via an intimate, rhythmically charged body of songs recorded in Addis Ababa, Los Angeles, New Orleans and San Francisco.

A collaboration with Grammy Award-winning songwriter and producer Dan Wilson (Adele, Dixie Chicks, Taylor Swift), the album is built on Meklit’s jazz-steeped working-band featuring bassist Sam Bevan, drummer Colin Douglas, and Marco Peris Coppola on tupan drum. Meklit accompanies her translucent, soul-sated vocals on guitar and the six-string krar, an Ethiopian lyre, while Howard Wiley provides pleasingly pungent counterpoint on tenor and baritone saxophones.

She’s joined by a far-flung array of masters, including Andrew Bird on violin and whistling, the Preservation Hall Jazz Band horns, plus a triumvirate of traditional Ethiopian musicians, and top-shelf players from LA and the Bay Area. All of these deep musical currents flow into Meklit’s shimmering, dance-inducing sound, which turns the San Francisco Bay Area into a jazz outpost of Ethio-Crescent City soul. As the album’s title suggests, Meklit makes music about movement, about bodies transporting culture through space and time, and the power of sound to set people and social movements in motion.

“This is what happens when an Ethiopian family comes as refugees to the United States, and makes social and cultural contributions in all kinds of ways,” says Meklit. “It’s impossible not to think about where American culture is going. Who are we? How can we have a more inclusive society? This is Ethiopian-American music, and it’s what I’ve been reaching toward for a decade.”

The album kicks off with “This Was Made Here,” a percussively poetic exploration of displacement and longing for home that builds to a lithe solo by Tassew Wondem on the Ethiopian reed flute, or washint. While Ethiopian cadences wend through the entire album, the influences move to the foreground on the traditional Amharic poetry of “Yerakeh Yeresal” and the quietly mesmerizing “Yesterday is a Tizita.” Suffused with a sense of delicious ache best described by the Portuguese term “saudade,” the song flows from Meklit’s cascading lines on krar to Tassew Wondem’s ethereal washint to Randal Fisher’s red-clay tenor.

“I wanted that kind of conversation,” Meklit says. “Tassew, Endris and Messele are some of my favorite musicians on the planet and they are innovators in the way they think. Sometimes people put traditional music in a box, that this is the past. But that’s not fair or true, they’re expansive, right in there, mixing it up.”

If “This Was Made Here” sets the scene for *When the People Move*, the galloping “I Want to Sing for Them All” is Meklit’s manifesto, the piece in which she lays claim to every artist and sound that has crossed her meandering path. Dan Wilson brought the Preservation Hall horns into her orbit, and they provide a tidal surge of brass on “You Are My Luck,” a piece propelled by the tupan of Marco Peris Coppola (who also leads the great Balkan brass ensemble Inspector Gadje).

“New Orleans is the birth place of jazz and it’s a city of hybridity and cultural collision. Being there, you feel the crossroads,” Meklit says. “Jazz as a cultural innovation sprang from the forced migration and enslavement of African peoples and you can’t talk about American culture without acknowledging that. I’m particularly interested in where African and African-American musics meet. I crafted the songs to express an expansive understanding of the American “we” that reflects present-time movements of people too, specifically the Ethiopian diaspora. I wanted to celebrate that community, and dance to it, and let everybody into it.

When the People Move, the Music Moves Too is the result of a fateful encounter Meklit experienced in Addis Ababa with the legendary vibraphonist/composer Mulatu Astatke, who helped spark Ethiopia’s 1960s musical renaissance. She was deeply engaged with his

music at the time, but he pushed her to think about how to bring her own experiences into her songs.

“He was very pointed with me, saying several times ‘You keep innovating!’” she recalls. “He took me to task and he tasked me. It took me a while to digest that. It’s a big thing to have someone like that say that to you. I sat with it for a couple of years.”

Meklit and her music have embodied multiplicity since she first started performing at San Francisco’s Red Poppy Art House in the mid-aughts. Born in Ethiopia, she moved with her family to Iowa at the age of two, and spent much of her adolescence in Brooklyn, soaking up the sounds of hip hop on the street. After studying political science at Yale she spent a couple of years in Seattle and then moved to San Francisco, looking to immerse herself in the city’s thriving arts scene.

As Co-Director at the Red Poppy she quickly found a creative community and started gaining attention in 2006 with the stylistically polyglot band Nefasha Ayer (which means “the wind that travels” in the Ethiopian Semitic language Amharic).

Since the release of her acclaimed 2010 debut album *On A Day Like This...* (Porto Franco Records), Meklit has become an international force. As TED Global and Senior Fellow, she launched the Arba Minch Collective, a group of expat Ethiopian artists devoted to nurturing ties to their homeland by collaborating with traditional and contemporary artists back home. She also delved into American soul music with rising Oakland singer/songwriter Quinn DeVeaux on 2012’s *Meklit & Quinn* (Porto Franco Records), putting an indelible stamp on songs by Lou Reed, Sam Cooke, Arcade Fire, Stevie Wonder, and Talking Heads. Her soul queen coronation took place on stage at Yoshi’s, where she made a memorable appearance as part of saxophonist Pee Wee Ellis’s show “Still Black, Still Proud: An African Tribute to James Brown.”

Meklit’s Six Degrees debut, 2014’s *We Are Alive*, catapulted Meklit into global prominence as a singer/songwriter, garnering rapturous reviews and an uproariously entertaining video “Kemekem (I Like Your Afro).” At the same time she was co-founding the visionary Nile Project with Egyptian ethnomusicologist Mina Girgis. With a collective ensemble bringing together over 30 East African artists who hail from the 11 countries traversed by the Nile, the organization has evolved into a creative force introducing new ideas for preserving and protecting the life-giving river and the peoples who depend on it. She’s on hiatus from the Collective these days, but her experiences collaborating with fellow East African musicians made a profound impact on her sound.

“I choose to have a more percussive approach to the drum kit,” Meklit says. “I’m always thinking about America and Ethiopia, about how the hybridization is going to work in both places. Through the Nile Project I became obsessed with the power of multiple percussionists. In my band, I got addicted to having two drummers. It’s key to making folks dance.”

The lapidary orchestrations were created by Meklit herself, with the help of her bassist Sam Bevan. But Meklit is quick to credit Dan Wilson’s lithe musical mind with a major role in shaping the ultimate sound of the record, in addition to his contribution of co-writing two songs. A prolific songwriter, arranger and producer, Wilson has worked with a mind-boggling array of artists, and he seemed to know exactly which player to place where to accentuate Meklit’s sound. He brought in Ethio-Cali’s tenor saxophonist Randall Fisher, who plays a perfectly calibrated Ethio-jazz intro on “You Got Me.” And Ethiopian-born, LA-based keyboardist Kibrome Birhane’s spare piano work levitates “Yesterday is a Tizita.” Meklit describes how Wilson’s songwriting precision, and razor sharp, generous feedback helped to weave a remarkable clarity into the music, enhancing Meklit’s already vivid hues. Rather than adding pieces to an already intricate design, he helps the elements coalesce into incandescent sound that captures a capaciously creative artist in all her glory.

“In the past what’s happened is that every song or album has taken more weight from one set of influences,” Meklit says. “On *We Are Alive* one song is more singer/songwriter, one is more jazz, and one is more Ethiopian. *Meklit and Quinn* is about singer/songwriters. The Nile Project is more East African. But on this album it’s all there. I finally understood how to bring every influence into every song.”

/////

Justin Schmidt
Missing Piece Group
[C]: (201) 218-4362
justin@missingpiecegroup.com

Rocco Tyndale
Six Degrees Records
T: +1 415-626-6334 ext. 114
rocco@sixdegreesrecords.com