

Who is Tesfaye Lemma?

Tesfaye Lemma is a composer, choreographer, conductor, and cultural expert. His artistic endeavors are known throughout Ethiopia and within the Ethiopian population of the United States, primarily within the older generations.

Perhaps Lemma's most notable profession was his role as director of Orchestra Ethiopia, an orchestra of up to 30 traditional instrumentalists, vocalists, and dancers from many different Ethiopian regions and ethnic groups. It was the first ensemble of its type, as these diverse instruments and ethnic groups previously had never played together. Lemma served as its third director from 1966-1975. In addition to directing, Lemma composed and arranged music for the ensemble.

Under Lemma's direction, and with the help of a Peace Corps volunteer, Charles Sutton, Jr., the group toured the United States, performing in twenty cities under the name "The Blue Nile Group." Orchestra Ethiopia also released two LP recordings, one in 1969 and the other in 1973. The ensemble disbanded in 1975 because of the Derg revolution in Ethiopia.

In the 1980's, Lemma came to the United States as a refugee. In the 1990's he created the Ethiopian-American Cultural Center, the Nile Ethiopian Ensemble and the Tesfa Museum, all to relate Ethiopian art, music, and culture to Americans. In 1998, Lemma entered a nursing home for serious medical care and was unable to continue these cultural efforts.

Lemma was awarded the Ethiopian Millennium Award in 2007. The award, given by the Ethiopian Yellow Pages, honors individuals with significant contribution to musical art profession and musical art growth in Ethiopia.

In his own right, Lemma is an ethnomusicologist, studying social and cultural aspects of music and dance in local and global contexts. He is currently collaborating with his close friend, LaDena Schnapper, to create a book on Ethiopian music.

link to video on Millennium Award: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHXRFP2oDIo>

link to Orchestra Ethiopia music (archival recordings released in 2007):
<http://www.deezer.com/en/music/orchestra-ethiopia#music/orchestra-ethiopia>