

Mp3 Temesgen - Begena Bedtimes



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The wisdom and knowledge of centuries of culture are communicated by the nimble fingers and resonant voice of Temesgen who sings deeply spiritual songs that have evolved over the ages to shine with pristine beauty. 14 MP3 Songs WORLD: African- East, SPIRITUAL: Praise Worship Show all album songs: Begena Bedtimes Songs Details: Hussein brings cosmic twang from Addis Ababa to Lansing

Written by Lawrence Cosentino for Lansing's City Pulse Wednesday, 11 April 2007 Pinching tiny leather strips and moving them up or down a straws breadth, Temesgen Hussein changes the way the world vibrates. Its a big responsibility, and the Ethiopian-born musician bears it with grave delight. I can move these all night long, he says softly. You can always find a better place, but not the best place. The straps, barely an eighth of an inch wide, add a cosmic box-spring twang to the begena, a 10-stringed instrument used to play sacred music in Ethiopia for at least half a millennium. Bread of life: Ethiopian-born Temesgen Hussein plays devotional and secular Ethiopian music at Altus restaurant in East Lansing on Saturday. (Lawrence Cosentino/City Pulse) Without the scraps of leather, carefully wedged between strings and soundbox, the begena would be a pleasant but anemic-sounding antique lyre with a few extra right angles. As it is, Hussein's 3-year-old son, Arian, calls his dad's ancient axe the boom-boom, and hes not exaggerating. Imagine the electric guitar intro of every James Bond movie ever made, played not quite simultaneously, on a mountaintop more than a mile away. Such is the distant-sounding jangle set in motion when the begenas vibrations are just right. On the first Saturday of each month, Hussein sets up solitary shop and plays this rare instrument for patrons of Altus Ethiopian restaurant. Devotional and philosophical songs, all centuries old, buzz through a full house of diners Saturday night, penetrating yet respecting the hum of happy conversation. Somewhere in Hussein's insistent thrumming lurks a dark thread of melody, easily heard when he sings along, much less obvious when he is not. A dark lace of

decorative notes drapes the naked song, and that's the part of Hussein's art that intrigues him most. The fingers go through the strings very fast and the melodic notes are hidden in all the fingers running through the strings, Hussein explains. The melody is da, da, da, da, but you hear drrdra, drrdrdra. What I like is adding enough ornamentation so it sounds like water flowing, and the melodic notes are just in there. The traditional melodies Hussein plays are written down, not as musical notes, but as numbers that only tell the player which string to pluck. The lack of specificity opens more opportunities for self-expression. There is no telling how long you stay for a note, he says. No eighth notes, quarter notes, stuff like that. Hussein and other members of the world's dwindling band of begena players believe their instrument to be the Biblical harp of King David. Latter-day enthusiasts like Hussein, a computer assisted design consultant, hope to keep this ancient sound in the air for another millennium or two. Hussein is thinking of starting a begena school, with online sound files replacing the human teachers of old. A lesser cousin to the begena, the banjo-like krar, is also in Hussein's arsenal. Unlike the begena, with its Biblical pedigree, the krar often expresses less lofty emotions and states of mind—romantic love, for instance. With his scholar's face, crisp white tunic and quiet carriage, Hussein injects dignity into a room just by walking into it. As a musician, he neither confronts nor panders to his audience. One of his begena songs, Dust to Dust, bears a message that seems already embedded in his face. The song says that death takes you; it will take me; it will take the soldier, the merchant, Hussein says. Like Hussein, the song has a leveling effect—reassuring to the right-minded, a reality check for the arrogant. People get different messages from that, Hussein says. As a young man growing up in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, Hussein saw a begena player one summer day on TV and was fascinated. He showed up at Addis Ababa's Yared School of Music and learned the fundamentals from his teacher, Alemayehu Fanta, in two months. Hussein learned so quickly his teacher kept asking him if he was sure he hadn't taken any lessons. I thought he was just encouraging me, Hussein says, but later, when I told him I didn't have a begena of my own, he gave me his. The slightly battered instrument, a hand-carved, three-sided wooden frame anchored by a gourd covered with animal skin, is the same instrument Hussein plays at Altus. A small cross, carved into the begena's bottom, bears witness to Ethiopia's culture of faith, unique among African states. Ethiopia is among the world's oldest Christian nations. Many of the traditional songs Hussein performs are devotional. After centuries of winnowing, Hussein laughs, the songs are greatest hits of greatest hits, but they are definitely not the same versions performed by the original artists. Hussein came to Lansing in

1992, sponsored by an uncle, to study architectural design at Lansing Community College. He lives with his wife, Carol, and Ariaah in a cozy, toy-littered condo near the Lake Lansing Meijer. The Big Gulp culture is a far cry from Ethiopia fabled as a cradle of civilization, if not mankind itself but Hussein is a fan of opportunity and political stability. Nobody leaves their home country lightly, but theres always been civil war during my life, he says. If Addis Ababa were like Lansing, I would go back today. Besides, when I lived in Addis, it was modernized, and we didnt have the resources to see many of the tourist areas, he says. People who come from other countries see more of Ethiopia than we did. I would like to go back and see these old places, which Ive seen only in pictures and on the Internet, like everybody else. In the mid-90s, Hussein hooked up with local friends to form a reggae band, Mau Mau. The members were from places as far-flung as India and the Sudan, but they traded in the worlds truest forms of currency: the music of Bob Marley. In recent years, Hussein hooked up with another friend, a recording engineer with a studio in Canada, to produce four CDs: a disc of reggae collaborations, King Davids Harp for unaccompanied begena, and separate discs of vocal and instrumental krar (Ethio-banjo) compositions. Hussein has also recorded a disc of haunting begena vocals called Begena Bedtime, a lullaby disc like no other. The CD was inspired by the boom-booms salutary effect on the perpetually sweet and inquisitive Ariaah. When Ariaah was born, we never had any sleeping problems with him, Hussein says. Friends and acquaintances, Hussein says with a smile, say they cant make it past the second track before nodding off. Husseins genial yet dead-level personality he seems to suspend each word and gesture on a plumb line running down to the earths core make him ideally suited to give his listeners warm baths in icy revelations.

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