# Tamagne's Biography

Contributed by
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Tamagne Beyene was born to Woizero Mamite Bitew and Grazmach Beyene Wondifraw in Chilga, Northern Gondar, Ethiopia. Then we drew a blank. Even his age proved to be a moving target. Tamagne claims that numerous times in his attempt to break onto the stage he was told he was “far too young” to perform, for “professional” reasons he had made it a point to never divulge his age. True many years have passed since this was the case, but as a matter of principle, his age remains a closely held secret, and those in the know have been sworn to secrecy. What is no secret is the huge comedic talent that is Tamagne Beyene.

As a youngster, Tamagne would spend hours glued to the radio and claims that there was not a popular song that he did not know the lyrics to, quickly realizing that that he had a special talent for impersonation and mimicry. He would mimic the singers of the day, memorize and recite the evening news keeping everyone around him in stitches. At first entertaining his family and friends, his schoolmates then his boys scout troupe. Tamagne went on and formed a children’s musical troupe featuring himself as a vocalist. Through this Gayent Children’s group, this talented child star would come to the attention of the Gondar Traditional Group.

While with Gondar Traditional Group, Tamagne soon realized that his forte was connecting to the audience and making people laugh. He stopped billing himself as a singer and went on to hone his skills as master of ceremonies/emcee and stand-up comic. He would host the festivities, memorize and reenact the day’s news, and also impersonate any singer.

As he toured with the Gondar Traditional Group, news of his talent traveled across the country. In 1982, he was selected to take part in his first tour in Asmara among Ethiopia’s elite performers. Despite several attempts of pleading to get a chance on the stage, he was denied because he was considered “too young” or “was not ready yet”. When he was finally given the chance to introduce one signer, there was no turning back. He captivated the crowd so much that the lead MC could not follow the act. He handed emcee position to Tamagne for the rest of the show.

Tamagne’s next stop: Addis. His popularity gained serious traction in the capital that several folks in the capital requested for his transfer. Despite several lobbying efforts with the governor of Gondar, the transfer requests were denied again and again. However, Tamagne’s persistence paid off finally and he became a member of the National Theatre Arts’ Troupe. WAIT! One more snag; his salary had to be approved for his new position. In the meantime, Tamagne was getting paid $127 Birr per month and residing in a room upstairs at the National Theatre (directly above the main stage), until the bureaucratic hurdles were complete. This, mind you, after residing in the governor’s palace in Gondar prior to his arrival in Addis (the governor had arranged for Tamagne to reside in the palace to ward off those that were trying to get him transferred in Addis).

After settling in at the National Theatre, Tamagne’s real limelight shone at the live TV show Easter performance in 1983 from the National Theatre. Tamagne was more than an emcee, he connected with both the Live and TV audiences in ways no other comedian or MC has done before in Ethiopia. His spontaneous acts covered topics of current events, world politics, relationship issues, mimicry…etc. From this moment on, Tamagne’s career took off like a rocket. He was being featured on TV on shows such as “Teyente Tebebat” and also working as a commercial spokesperson.

In 1987, Tamagne won a coveted place on the People-to-People tour, despite the objections of few critics. This was an international goodwill tour of Ethiopian traditional artists to thank the world for the aid during the famine that ravaged the country. During this tour, several key members defected. One of those who defected was the group’s drummer right after a show at the Kennedy Center. When there was talk of canceling the next evening’s show, Tamagne wouldn’t have any of that talk. He volunteered to be a replacement drummer and after training for few hours he filled in magnificently and carried the tour through out North America and Europe. Upon his return to Ethiopia, his critics personally congratulated him and acknowledged their mistakes to this multi-talented star.

Tamagne’s comedy continued to captivate everyone and now it was taking a new sense of civic duty and responsibility. At the outset of the TPLF’s taking control over the country, Tamagne organized shows meant to show unity among all Ethiopians. The messages of his shows were taken in the wrong context by the incoming government. Therefore, the new government decided to put Tamagne on the watch list.

“... a show that carried the public to the next

piece. The performer, Master of Ceremony,

stand-up comedian, all-in-one was no

other than Tamagne Beyene who

carried the show throughout the night.”

- The Kennedy Center, April 14 1995

Although Tamagne continued touring and performing, his artistic expression was limited by the controls placed with the new administration. In 1996, Tamagne was arrested for a speech he made at the Maskal Square during the Centennial celebration of the Battle of Adwa. Shortly thereafter, he left Ethiopia and moved to the U.S. He hasn’t been on stage formally since he left Ethiopia. However, Tamagne plays an active role in Ethiopian goodwill including art, music, politics and many charitable deeds.

Tamagne currently resides in Alexandria, VA with his wife, Fantish Bekele and 3 sons, Bekalu , Hawaria and  Frazer.