



# ETHIOPIA

## HABTEMARIAM

### PERPETUATING A RICH LEGACY

**W**ith Atlanta talent running the charts, racking up astronomical streams and otherwise ruling the current music landscape, it's only fitting that the leader of the storied **Motown** label is an ATL native. **Ethiopia Habtemariam** brings the authenticity and flavor of her hometown to the role, tempered by a global, future-forward outlook.

With an impressive resume of creative signings on both the

label and publishing sides—and an abiding commitment to inclusion, equality and mentoring—she has emerged as one of the most impressive execs of her generation.

Among the talent she's been connected to as a creative executive: **Justin Bieber, J. Cole, Chris Brown, Ne-Yo, Ester Dean, Keri Hilson, Hit-Boy, The Smeezingtons** and, most recently, the re-emergence of Motown with hip-hop's dominant label, **Quality Control**, home to **Migos, Lil Baby, Lil**



David Massey, Habtemariam and Ezekiel Lewis; with inspiration Sylvia Rhone

Yachty, *City Girls* and more. The success of Motown's rebirth, in fact, has extended to the opening of the company's first-ever London office.

Habtemariam has also taken a leading role in the industry response to systemic racism as the co-head of UMG's **Task Force for Meaningful Change**. In that capacity, she's proven to be an effective and compassionate voice for justice and community empowerment.

**R**aised in Atlanta but born in Berkeley, Calif., the first-generation Ethiopian American took advantage of an inspiring freshman-year career day at her high school; at age 14, she was able to shadow high school alumna **Shanti Das**—then **LaFace Records'** Head of Promotion—and realized she had a passion for the music biz. Seeing a true believer, Das approached Habtemariam's immigrant folks about allowing her to intern after school. "She came to my house and met my parents," Ethiopia recalled. "They were like, 'All right, as long as you keep your grades up, you can go do this shadow exercise at the office.'"

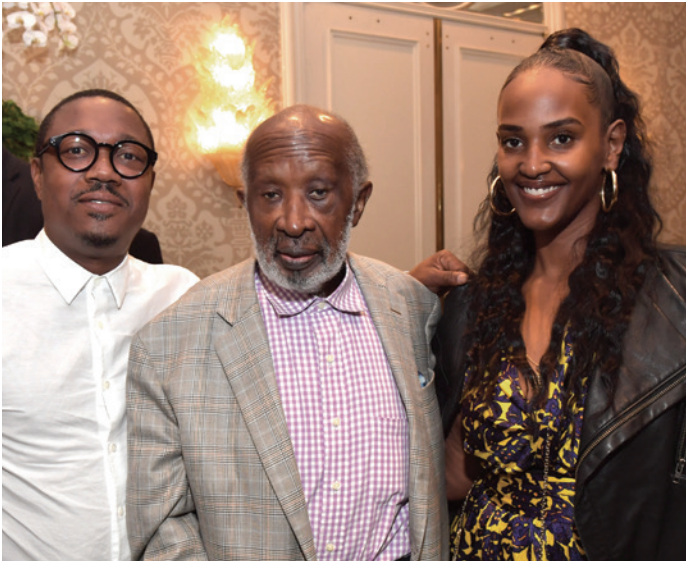
Das' decision to mentor and empower this precocious adolescent was a life-changing opportunity. Throughout high school, after classes and over the summers, Ethiopia absorbed all she could in LaFace's Promotion and Production departments. At 16, she landed a paid internship at **Elektra's** Atlanta office via the **Yes to Jobs** biz program. While there, she wrote a fan letter to the trailblazing **Sylvia**

**Rhone**, then Chairman/CEO of **Elektra Entertainment Group**. "I wanted to introduce myself because it was incredible to hear that the label's Chairman was a Black woman. I'd never heard of anything like that before," Habtemariam recalled to *Billboard*. Rhone, true to form, wrote back with plenty of encouragement.

After high school, Ethiopia turned her LaFace internship into a paid gig, forgoing college. When **LaRonda Sutton**—the GM of sister company **Hitco Publishing**—moved to L.A. to work at **Edmonds Publishing**, she helped Habtemariam get her first full-time job in the biz, as a Creative Manager. She moved to the West Coast in 2001 to work with the pubco's founders, **Kenny "Babyface" Edmonds** and his wife, **Tracey**. "I was basically a song-plugger," she told *Marie Claire*.

She quickly rose to Senior Director of Creative at Edmonds before landing at **UMPG** as East Coast Director of Urban Creative Affairs, hired by early mentor **Tom Sturges** (then Head of Creative). During her tenure there, Habtemariam oversaw songwriters including Hit-Boy and Keri Hilson and brought in superstars **Ludacris** and **Chris Brown**.

By 2006, she had been upped to VP of Urban Music. Fast forward to 2010, when an old Atlanta connection led her to a generational talent. "I knew **Scoter Braun** through Atlanta," Habtemariam explained to *Billboard*. "He went to **Emory** and was part of the music community there. I signed **Asher Roth** with Scooter, so we'd had a relationship since then. When he discovered Justin Bieber, I was one of



With Marc Byers and Clarence Avant (left); with Tiwa and Steve Barnett

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the people he called. He had Bieber sing over the phone to me. It was a cover—either an **Usher** or **Boyz II Men** record—and then I looked at his videos. I just remember he could really sing, and he was so young!

“**Island Def Jam** signed Bieber and were kind of breaking him, but it hadn’t happened at radio yet. He came to us looking to do a publishing deal, and I remember having to convince the head of the company because they did not see that kind of pop music taking off. I fought for months to get it across the line to do the deal.” UMPG inked Bieber in 2010.

**T**he following year, Ethiopia was offered the (dual) opportunity of a lifetime: **Barry Weiss** appointed her SVP of Motown—marking her first position on the recorded-music side—while she was upped to EVP/Head of Urban at UMPG.

It was, by her own reckoning, a bit of a whirlwind. “I’m between New York and L.A.,” she related in 2012. “I like to be as close to the recording process as I can and a lot of that happens in L.A., and also between Atlanta and Miami. I can’t front; it’s been difficult to find my rhythm. But I’ve found it now. It’s literally been hiring the staff, signing new artists, making records—all at the same time. I know the label will be established and defined by the new acts we break, so we’re paying close attention to that. And while we’re making these records, we’re also

doing artist development: vocal training, choreography, media training. Figuring out exactly who the artist is through their sound, look and image. We’re doing all of that just like the old Motown—but doing it in our new way.” An example of that new way: One of her first big moves at Motown was signing hitmaking artist/songwriter Ne-Yo as both artist and SVP of A&R.

Following a massive reorganization of UMG by Chairman **Lucian Grainge** in 2014, Motown was re-established as a standalone label and moved from IDJ to **Steve Barnett’s Capitol Music Group**. With Motown ensconced in its new West Coast home in the Capitol Tower, Ethiopia was named the historic label’s President.

“I was having a tough time at first,” Habtemariam told **Music Business Worldwide**. “**Clarence Avant**, who I’ve been blessed to know, [has] been like a second father to me. He took me to lunch and said, ‘A legacy like Motown will always be tough. Don’t compare yourself to the past. They tell you about all the great shit, but they don’t tell you about the records that *weren’t* hits.’”

“Things really changed for the better when we relaunched Motown as a flagship label [at CMG],” she added. “I can’t say enough about Steve’s support and commitment to Motown as a thriving and important frontline label. It’s made such a difference, not only to Motown, but to CMG’s overall commitment to Black music, which

hasn't existed at this level for decades.”

That commitment to Black music, along with the boom of the streaming era, played right into Barnett and Habtemariam's shared vision for the rebirth of Motown.

**A**s Spotify grew and streaming took hold, Ethiopia moved shrewdly to invest in hip-hop. In 2015, amid talks with Atlanta's Quality Control about a possible pub deal, Habtemariam gave label heads Coach K and P the full-court press on a joint venture.

“At the time she was doing publishing, and she called about the publishing side of our business,” Coach K recalled to *HITS*. “Then she's like, ‘Yo, I got this idea. I want to bring you in to meet with our Chairman.’ So me and P flew out to L.A. and went to Steve Barnett's house. One conversation, and we shook on the deal. We haven't looked back since then.”

Added P, “I wanna give Ethiopia a lot of praise for reaching out, because we didn't come to her; she came to us. She believed in it and connected us with Steve.”

Ethiopia explained the landscape of rap culture with streaming at the time of the QC-Motown deal to *HITS*: “We developed a partnership with Quality Control in 2015, when streaming hadn't really kicked in. I saw that Black music was prominent in the mixtape circuit, and knew our music was big around the world but was not monetized properly. Streaming really came and changed

the game. When QC discovered Yachty, who was birthed out of SoundCloud, it became our mission to deliver his music to the world and take it to another level—and that's what we did. The success of my relationship with Coach K and P helped foster growth and innovation for the Motown brand.”

The partnership would prove essential to Motown's renaissance. The iconic label was once again tied to a city at the heart of Black music: Atlanta. QC would eventually bring its superstar rap group *Migos* to Motown while developing young acts *Lil Yachty*,



Above, with Michelle Jubelirer; below, with Lil Yachty

## “I'M TAKING GREAT PRIDE IN LEADING MOTOWN AT THIS PARTICULAR TIME, AS IT REMINDS ME OF OUR HISTORY; HOW MOTOWN STARTED BLAZING THIS TRAIL IN THE 1960S AND HAS CONTINUED TO DO SO IN EVERY DECADE SINCE.”

City Girls and a new star, Lil Baby.

Just as Hitsville, USA had carried the sounds of Detroit to the world, Lil Baby, Migos and QC brought Atlanta to the mainstream. By 2018, Motown/QC was firing on all cylinders. Migos' highly anticipated debut for the label, *Culture II*, didn't disappoint. It opened at #1 at the top of the year and was certified double platinum by year's end. It spawned four hit singles, including triple-platinum “Motorsport” f/ **Cardi B** and **Nicki Minaj** and double-platinum “Walk It Talk It” f/ **Drake**. And then came Lil Baby, whose ascent culminated in 2020, when he released what became the year's biggest album, *My Turn*, along with one of the most important songs of the year, the protest anthem “The Bigger Picture.”

“There are a lot of lessons to be learned from the past when it comes to knowing what can be achieved,” the current Motown President told MBW. “Look at how these young Black artists from Detroit created music that transcended so many barriers—racial, social, economic—and united people around the world while becoming superstars in the process.”

Along with QC's JV, Habtemariam's Motown has developed a roster of next-wave R&B talent, including **BJ the Chicago Kid** and **Grammy** nominee **Tiana Major9**, while maintaining its status as a key exponent of Black culture with projects like the *Queen and Slim* soundtrack and the Motown documentary *Hitsville: The Making of Motown*—which included Barnett, Habtemariam and CMG COO **Michelle Jubelirer** as Executive Producers.

Ethiopia's position represents a foundational change in the entertainment industry as well as the music biz. Her presidency and Sylvia Rhone's Chairman title at **Epic** make them the highest-ranking Black female executives in recorded music. And as society faced a civic reckoning head-on in 2020, Ethiopia is at the forefront of the diversity and inclusion movements.

She has also been scrupulous about paying forward the support she's enjoyed from her role models in the biz. Just as she was energized by Rhone's response to the note she wrote at 16, she was similarly responsive to a fan letter she received after ascending to the Motown presidency. This missive, too, came from a 16-year-old girl with dreams of industry greatness. “I was in awe of how much you are a boss,” she wrote of meeting Habtemariam at her high school as part of the **Bonus Tracks** industry outreach program. “It was exciting to be in the presence of a BLACK WOMAN of your status. Coming from where I come from, I rarely get to see that.”

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**M**entorship, she elaborated to *HITS*, has to be approached with long-term vision. “How do you make sure, as A&Rs grow in their careers, that their *executive* growth is happening at the same time? It’s vital to make sure that, in addition to

making great records, they’re also learning the business side of things—and as they’re promoted to VPs, SVPs, EVPs, their business acumen is also improving,” she pointed out. “You need that executive leadership dynamic happening. At every level you need mentorship, guidance and so forth. I don’t think the music business has had much of that kind of development, though it’s standard practice in some other industries.”

Her seminal position as Co-Chair, alongside Def Jam CEO/UMG EVP **Jeff Harleston** of the newly founded UMG **Task Force for Meaningful Change** cements her status as one of the most influential executives in entertainment today.

She acknowledged to *HITS* that the horrors of police violence and other manifestations of systemic racism were “traumatizing” and that her team’s safety and wellness weighed heavily as she addressed her duties on the Task Force. “I’m a Black woman experiencing it myself, but I was also extremely concerned about the Black employees at our company and the trauma of everything that’s happening, including the pandemic,” she confided. “My immediate reaction was: How do we provide support for them as they’re living through this? These young, Black men and women are seeing those images and some of them are living by themselves—in Hollywood, in the midst of everything. I was really concerned about that. And for everyone, just as human beings, living through and seeing all of it, seeing police brutality, the reality of what’s happening.”

But 2020, for all of its trials and tribulations, was also a time of triumph for Motown, which added to its achievements its first-ever outpost in the U.K., headed by **Rob Pascoe** as Managing Director. It was yet another of the “entrepreneurial partnerships that have greatly extended our reach.”

A 2019 statement resonates loudly in society’s current climate: “I’m taking great pride in leading Motown at this particular time, as it reminds me of our history, how Motown started blazing this trail in the 1960s and has continued to do so in every decade since.” She added, “Growing up in Atlanta, I was able to see a lot of successful Black people, so I never questioned the potential to achieve my dreams. There were so many great role models to inspire me, and I feel very fortunate to have grown up there.

“I love being a woman. I love being a Black woman. That’s a big part of who I am, and I love that my personal life and career experiences inform my abilities and success in this business.” ■



Above, with *Quality Control's* P; below, with *Jacqueline Saturn*