

## Lionel Loueke – Gentle Giant

Snap a photograph of guitarist, singer and composer Lionel Loueke and you'll capture a portrait of the changing face of global popular music. An astounding musician of complex inspirations, mentorship and technical discipline, Loueke dashes genre boundaries by creating songs with a musical sophistication that also taps a well-spring of emotion from his homeland rhythms and harmonic elements from around the world.

Lionel has been quietly cultivating a remarkable industry reputation from a variety of enviable associations. For the last two years he has toured as a featured sideman for Herbie Hancock, also arranging a song on the pianist's latest album *Possibilities*: Sting's new version of his own composition "Sister Moon." He has graced two CDs by trumpeter Terence Blanchard as well as the Grammy-winning *Land of the Sun* album by bassist Charlie Haden. Lionel has recorded an album as leader of the dynamic guitar, bass and drums trio GILFEMA, a cutting edge band of world jazz fusion. He has been championed by saxophonist Wayne Shorter, living royalty of the jazz composer's circle who zoned in on Lionel's talent the first time he witnessed it at the Thelonious Monk Institute. Most critically, Lionel is part of a progressive new music label, ObliqSound, which is preparing to release his deeply personal debut solo CD.

Lionel Loueke has studied music in the Ivory Coast, Paris, Los Angeles and Boston's renowned Berklee School of Music. However, in conceptualizing this album, the Benin, West Africa native focuses his attention on his birthplace with a burning desire to document and personalize - The Heartbeat of Home. It is a concept that has weighed heavily on his mind for some time. "The music of my country as I know it is disappearing," he says in a voice only slightly above a whisper. "What I am trying to do is combine that rhythmic music with the harmonies I learned in Europe and the United States. This music will represent me in all dimensions - my heart and all of my experiences beyond the music." The fading of Lionel's musical roots at home is not a result of oppression, merely change. Lionel takes great joy in his regular visits to visit his family in Benin. "I used to go every two years," he shares, "but now I go once a year. It's definitely changing for the better. Benin is a beautiful country...one of the most peaceful in Africa. There is no civil war. There are more bands, more singers...but the traditional rhythms are disappearing. There is no library there saving them."

Lionel is a musician, not an archivist. Yet his love for his culture led him to approach his album in a special way. "I went home and recorded percussion tracks with musicians and singers from Benin," he reveals. "Each song will have an intro of the traditional version of the rhythm. Then the next track will reflect the rhythm from my conception." The compositions range in mood from "Abominwe" (a joyous dance often done at the beach) to "Moesha I" which he composed with his 2 year-old daughter Moesha in mind. "It's always hard when I have to go on the road," Lionel laments. "The song says that her eyes make me happy but also make me want to cry whenever I have to leave her behind." This song features harmonica player Gregoire Maret, providing another unique "voice" for Lionel to engage in some breathtaking interplay. For these composed pieces, Lionel turned to his longstanding band mates from Gilfema: bassist

**New York:** ObliqSound, Inc. 373 Broadway Suite F11, New York, New York 10013 T +1.212.274.8640 F +1.212.274.8641  
**Hamburg:** ObliqSound GmbH Struenseestrasse 37, D-22767 Hamburg, Germany T +49.40.32.50.79.51 F +49.40.32.50.79.52  
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Massimo Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth. With his growing renown, Lionel could easily have called in an all-star group, but his loyalty to the incomparably talented friends prevailed. “It means a lot to me to have them next to me on this project,” he says. “They know me and my rhythms very well.” A stellar example of this is the album’s title and closing track, “Virgin Forest,” which Lionel sings in his native Fon language as a haunting duet with Gretchen Parlato. The song, performed in the 9/8 time signature, was inspired by the Pygmy Forest. “In the lyrics, I imagine what it would be like if no human ever set foot in the forest,” Lionel explains. “It would be the best thing that could happen for the animals. No tree would be cut and they would have their own life without being caught, caged or killed. The sound I was going for is the sound of the forest if you lived in a village nearby.”

The other component of Lionel’s album is one-on-one improvisation, which he realized in sessions with pianist Herbie Hancock and percussionist Cyro Baptista, respectively. “These pieces are very organic and represent another aspect of music I appreciate,” Lionel states: “How I feel ‘in the moment.’ When I thought of what a magician Herbie is, I knew putting him on the spot would create new musical territory for both us. It was amazing how we just kept going and going...it could go on every night as far as I’m concerned! It was the same with Cyro. He is from Brazil which is not far from Africa musically. He would start a groove and I would play on top of it or vice versa. He was singing and I was singing. We understood each other very well.”

Both Lionel and his project benefit greatly from the involvement of two other esteemed gentlemen. The album’s producer is Robert Sadin, a distinguished conductor, arranger and musician whose past collaborators include Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Wynton Marsalis, Grover Washington Jr. and Kathleen Battle. Sadin has been working closely with Lionel for several years which affords him keen insight into how best to present his artistry. And then there is Michele Locatelli, co-founder ObliqSound who may be Loueke’s most passionate champion. Locatelli states, “From the moment I met him, Lionel showed the quality I like most: the ability of making music that has a reference to an honest background yet goes beyond stylistic requirements. Virgin Forest is the quintessential ObliqSound album – a crossover album that can be easily appreciated by anyone who is interested in good, engaging music. The album is as focused on his singing as his guitar playing. Lionel is not only an innovative jazz performer. His charisma and music personality have a universal value. Lionel Loueke will soon be celebrated by a very wide audience as an outstanding artist that defies categorization.”

That would suit Lionel just fine. Asked what picture he hopes his music paints in the mind of the listener, Lionel mused, “Freedom. Maybe you are not free in whatever you do in life, but you are free in your choice of music. If it makes you feel good, that’s all that matters. And from the music, we can learn a lot about other aspects of life.”

- A. Scott Galloway for ObliqSound