



# press release

## LIONEL LOUEKE

### Karibu

Released: March 24<sup>th</sup> 2008

*"The three of them are taking the guitar trio to a new place, with a suppleness of exchange and rhythmic feel that's quite unlike that of their contemporary competitors. Loueke's ringing guitar sound is undistorted; Nemeth's percussion parts are polyrhythmic and transparent, while Biolceti's bass contributes melodic counterpoint to Loueke's light-as-a-feather lead lines".* **The Guardian**

**Karibu**, the stunning major label debut from guitarist and vocalist **Lionel Loueke**, takes its title from a Swahili word meaning "welcome." It's a fitting name, as the opening title track invites the listener into the musical world of one of the most distinctive new voices in Jazz. Featuring Loueke's long-standing trio of bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth, **Karibu** is also graced by rare guest appearances by two legends: pianist Herbie Hancock and saxophonist Wayne Shorter. In fact, the last time Hancock and Shorter were sidemen on a Blue Note session was for trumpeter Lee Morgan's album The Procrastinator in 1967. When asked why he chose to participate on Loueke's session, Shorter's answer was right to the point: "There's only one of him."

It's clear from the opening sounds of "Karibu"—an odd-metered guitar groove that Loueke sings in unison while simultaneously providing clicking mouth percussion and layering on syncopated guitar chords—that this is an artist uninterested in retreading the ground of where Jazz has been. Loueke has used the many remarkable musical experiences of his 34 years to create his own unique sound as a guitarist, composer, and bandleader. His journey has taken him through hardship, across three continents, brought him under the mentorship of music legends, and landed him at the most famous Jazz record label in the world.

*"Mr. Loueke is a gentle virtuoso. As a singer, he has a husky, sincere baritone and a melting falsetto that he uses to scat-sing along with his guitar solos. He's also a full-fledged jazz guitarist, and he uses both electronics—guitar synthesizer, looping devices—and African roots. In one piece, unassisted by any technology beyond microphone and amplifier, he sang, made percussive tongue clicks and played syncopated guitar chords and leads. He multiplied himself, one way or another, in nearly every song."* **New York Times**

That gentle virtuosity and awe-inspiring technique shine through on **Karibu**, Loueke's nine-track debut for Blue Note Records, which showcases Loueke's guitar prowess, and skill as a composer, and the deft interplay of his trio, a simpatico unit that has been together for eight years. The album, which was produced by Eli Wolf, includes seven original Loueke compositions as well as gorgeous reinterpretations of the Hoagy Carmichael/Johnny Mercer standard "Skylark" and John Coltrane's signature ballad "Naima."

**Lionel Loueke will be available for interview on March 11<sup>th</sup> in London.** Please contact: Kerstan Mackness on 077756 55573 e-mail [kerstan@riotsquadpublicity.com](mailto:kerstan@riotsquadpublicity.com)



## About the music:

"Karibu" presents several aspects of Loueke's style, from his use of mouth percussion to his singing, which weaves in and out of his guitar lines, at times in unison, but also occasionally offering counterpoint. Also representative is the playfully repetitive groove that is passed between the guitar and bass, which belies the complex meter of the tune. "My music is very easy and is very complicated," explains Loueke. "Most of my stuff is in odd meters: 17, 13, 15, 9, 7. But the idea behind it is I don't want to play 17/4 that sounds like 17/4. I want to play a 17/4 that sounds almost like 4/4, so the non-musician can still feel it. That's what it's about for me. I'm not going for the intellectual craziness, music is not about that. It's about the emotion it has. That's what we're trying to play."

"Zala" is named for Nemeth's hometown in Hungary. It was inspired by the warm, festive welcome the trio received from the drummer's family during a visit on a European tour. "They're close in terms of family," says Loueke. "They support each other, it's always a party, there's kids running, so that tune is about that. It has a craziness and it has a beauty."

"Benny's Tune," written for Loueke's wife, is surely on its way to becoming a new standard having become a fixture of Blanchard's set list (it also appears on [Flow](#)). The tune's gorgeous descending melody line alternates and contrasts with a skittering groove to great effect. "Agbannon Blues" is a blues in 13/4. "'Agbannon' has a meaning in Fon [the African dialect spoken in Benin], it's a heavy carrier, like a lady carrying a big basket on her head," explains Loueke. "You hear it, the groove is very laid back, heavy, funky."

The remarkable self-assuredness of the trio pieces could almost seem to overshadow the well-integrated contributions of the album's two very special guests, Hancock and Shorter, each of whom participate on two tracks. The mere presence of these two legends on [Karibu](#) speaks volumes about their admiration of Loueke and his musicianship. In fact, the last time Hancock and Shorter were sidemen on a Blue Note session was for trumpeter Lee Morgan's album [The Procrastinator](#) in 1967. When asked why he chose to participate on Loueke's session, Shorter's answer was right to the point: "There's only one of him."

Shorter's soprano saxophone is equally as incisive on Loueke's austere arrangement of Coltrane's "Naima," soaring over top of the intricate rhythmic bed laid down by the Loueke, Biolcati and Nemeth, while Loueke plays every inch of his guitar, even using it as a percussion instrument throughout. Loueke wrote "Seven Teens" while out on tour with Hancock, dedicating the tune to the band's sound technician who used the phrase to test the microphones before each concert. Written in 17/4, "Seven Teens" features an explosive solo from Hancock.

"Light-Dark" is the album's longest track, a 10-minute exploration that features both Hancock and Shorter (again on soprano), and captures group interaction at its best. As the title suggests, the piece is marked by a shift in harmonies that move from light to dark. "I learned that type of writing with Wayne Shorter. Wayne often had his pentatonic melody, very simple, but then you hear the harmony in back."

The joyous album closer, "Nonvignon," leaves us on a celebratory note, with a danceable African groove underneath Loueke's buoyant vocals, which are in Fon and roughly translate to: "Let's be brother and sister / Because if we're not / We're throwing away the gift God gave us." Perhaps the defining quality of [Karibu](#) is that from the first note to the last the listener can hear Loueke's spirit filling every moment of the music. Playful and full of imagination, his is a generous spirit that welcomes you into his world. *Karibu*.

## Biography

Loueke's story begins in Benin, a small country in West Africa, where he was born to parents that he describes as "intellectual," adding that "music was part of everyday life, but not in the family." Fortunately an older brother played guitar and was part of a band that played Afro-Pop music in the style of Fela Kuti and King Sunny Ade. "I remember when I was 11 or 12 I was going to see my brother perform. I would be listening from 10pm to 3am in the morning, just looking at him playing, listening to the music."

Finally when Loueke was 17 years old, his brother let him pick up his guitar, and he quickly realized that he had a great facility for the instrument. Besides the Afro-Pop music that he heard his brother performing, Loueke also began to be enamored with the traditional African music of Benin, as well as Nigeria, Congo, Zaire, Mali and Senegal. However, it was an encounter with Jazz music that would set Loueke on a different course. A friend of his brother's came to visit from Paris, bringing with him a CD of guitarist George Benson. "I listened to that and it was unreal for me. I had to transcribe every single line trying to play like him. Then I tried to check out what happened before him, Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass."

Loueke finally decided to pursue music more seriously and left Benin to attend the National Institute of Art in the Ivory Coast. Short of money, Loueke stumbled fortuitously into his first professional gig. He explains: "I was a student, and I couldn't pay my rent so they kicked me out, and I needed to get a gig so bad. So there was a club, and I tried so many times to get a gig there. So one night I just went to the club because I was desperate. I didn't have anything. I needed money to survive. The band took a break, during the break I went on stage, I picked up the guy's guitar and I start playing. They came to me and tried to grab back the instrument. And the manager said 'No, let him play.' So after I played the manager said 'Man, you want a gig?!' [laughs] That was my first gig, and I carried that gig for two years!"

In 1994, Loueke left Africa and moved to Paris to pursue Jazz studies, enrolling at the American School of Modern Music, a small conservatory run by several alumni of the Berklee College of Music in Boston. After graduation, Loueke was awarded a scholarship to attend Berklee, and so he left Paris and moved to the United States. It was at Berklee that he first met Massimo Biolcati and Ferenc Nemeth, the musicians who would become his core band. Through jam sessions, the trio developed an immediate rapport, in part fueled by internationalism. Biolcati is of Italian decent, but grew up in Sweden, while Nemeth was born and raised in Hungary. Both had extensively studied African music and were drawn to Loueke who was just beginning to fuse a Jazz technique with his African roots.

After graduating from Berklee, Loueke was accepted to the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz in Los Angeles along with Biolcati and Nemeth. The Monk Institute is a selective program that allows students to study and perform with some of the finest Jazz musicians in the world, including three legends that would nurture Loueke's burgeoning talent and become his greatest mentors: Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Terence Blanchard. "I flipped," says Hancock, recalling the moment he first heard Loueke's audition tape. "I'd never heard any guitar player play anything close to what I was hearing from him. There was no territory that was forbidden, and he was fearless!"

Before even graduating from the Monk Institute, Loueke began touring in Blanchard's sextet, a highly-creative band that recorded two albums for Blue Note (Bounce and Flow) and allowed Loueke to begin expressing his own voice as a soloist and composer. Since leaving Blanchard's band he has been hired by Hancock and become a prominent member of the pianist's current quartet, touring extensively and recording on Hancock's Grammy-nominated album, River: The Joni Letters (Verve). Loueke has also recorded two albums under his name for independent labels, In A Trance (Space Time) and Virgin Forest (ObliqSound), as well as the collective Gilfema (ObliqSound) with Biolcati and Nemeth.

