



Lionel Loueke On Herbie Hancock, Don Was, and His New Album (from *DownBeat.com*, Jan.5, 2015)

By Allen Morrison

When *DownBeat* caught up with guitarist and occasional singer Lionel Loueke in November, he was appearing on the *Queen Mary 2* with both the Blue Note 75th Anniversary Band and his own trio, as part of the Cunard/Blue Note “Jazz at Sea” festival. His show-stopping performance of bassist Derrick Hodge’s jazz anthem “Message of Hope,” featuring Loueke’s ethereal vocals enhanced by judicious use of a harmonizing effects box, was one of the most talked-about performances of the weeklong transatlantic crossing.

Loueke, 42, is one of jazz’s true world citizens, creating blazingly original music out of the rhythms of African traditional music and western jazz harmony. After starting by playing bass in Afro-pop bands in his native Benin, he discovered jazz at the age of 19. His musical studies took him to Ivory Coast and Paris, then on scholarship to Berklee School of Music in Boston, from which he graduated. Auditioning for advanced study at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz Performance in L.A., his idiosyncratic technique and brilliant musical concepts attracted the attention of judges Terrence Blanchard, Wayne Shorter and Herbie Hancock, leading to tours with Blanchard and a longtime association with Hancock. Since then he has released eight albums as a leader, including four on Blue Note, and has appeared on recordings with Hancock, Blanchard, Jack DeJohnette, Charlie Haden, Joe Lovano, Luciana Souza, Angélique

Kidjo, and Gretchen Parlato. His latest album, *Gaia*, produced by Blue Note President Don Was, was released in late 2015.

Lanky and soft-spoken, Loueke speaks excellent English, accented by his native Fon and French. Here are highlights of our conversation:

What were you listening to in Benin that inspired you to embark on your journey as a jazz musician?

When I was 19 or 20, a friend of my brother brought us a vinyl copy of George Benson's *Weekend in L.A.* album. I recorded it on a cassette player, then used dead batteries to slow down the tapes so that I could get the notes he was playing. At that point I didn't understand anything about harmony; I was just using my ears to transcribe. Later I did the same thing with Wes Montgomery and Joe Pass.

***Gaia* is your first album in three years. It was recorded live in the studio before a small audience. Why did you go that route?**

I feel like I'm more of a live musician than a studio musician; that's the way I like to play. I don't like to think about that red (studio) light. That's what we were looking for with *Gaia*. We had no isolation between the instruments, just like in a live context... My first Afro-pop band fired me because I wasn't playing the same line over and over. I like to be in the moment. Like all the guys (in the Blue Note all-star band), I'm not afraid to make a mistake.

What did you like about working with Don Was on the album?

Having Don sitting next to me while I was playing, with his amazing positive energy... I learned a lot about how to produce records by having Don produce me.

***Gaia* is more rock-oriented than anything you have done before. What's behind that?**

Gaia is the mother of earth in Greek mythology. My concept is that Gaia is angry, and she *should* be angry with what we have done with the beautiful earth that she has given us. There are no lyrics or singing, because of the (often) distorted sound I used on my instrument - a lot of angry, red colors. I couldn't hear my voice on top of that. At the same time there are some blue colors, too, on a few ballads where I'm playing nylon-stringed guitar - like a song about asking Gaia for forgiveness.

You recently played a major role in Luciana Souza's *Speaking In Tongues* album, which combined her wordless vocals with your guitar and Gregoire Maret's

harmonica, along with the rhythm section of Biolcati on bass and Kendrick Scott on drums.

The atmosphere was perfect. Luciana and (producer) Larry Klein really gave us plenty of room to express ourselves, which is pretty rare when you're recording a CD with a singer, where usually you play a supporting role. Her voice was just one of the instruments. The CD shows clearly that it was all about the sound of the group.

People on the ship this week were talking about your vocals, sometimes doubling what you're playing on guitar, and using the harmonizer to starkly beautiful effect on "Message of Hope." Have you recorded that?

Yes, a recording is coming. We recorded with the 75th Anniversary Band a few months ago in L.A. The CD is already mixed.

What would you say have been the highlights of your career so far?

The highlight is Herbie. It's been about 11 years since I joined his band - lucky me. He's my mentor, for sure. To play with Herbie and have the opportunity to meet so many great musicians through him - Sting, Carlos Santana, Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette, Joe Lovano. What I learned from Herbie is to be a better human being. If I'm better, the music will be better."

Coming all the way from Africa and signing with Blue Note was also a career highlight for me. I was still a student at the Monk Institute and playing with Terrence when I met (former Blue Note President) Bruce Lundvall. I got off the stage and he gave me his business card and asked me to send him some of my music. I was so excited, and I sent him some music, but I didn't hear from him for a year. Then, after I moved to New York, he invited me to come in for an audition with my trio. When we finished, I remember Bruce saying, "Can we print out the contract and have him sign before he leaves the building, please?" (laughs)

Tell me about the box you use to get that ghostly choir effect on your vocals.

I've been using a "Voice Live" by TC Electronics for ten years. What I like about it is that it's a diatonic harmonizer, but it's still random in the organization of the voices. In other words, there is no automatic parallel movement when I change notes. I get a different chord voicing based on how loud or soft I sing. It makes it interesting for me. Even if I have an idea of how it will sound, it's still surprising... I love it because, I need to be surprised when I'm playing.