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## Lionel Loueke Biography

Lionel 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-winning 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.

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In a review of Loueke's solo performance at the 2007 Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival's Somethin' Else Jazz Club, Jon Pareles of *The New York Times* described his singular sound:

*"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."*

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Please visit [www.lionelloueke.com](http://www.lionelloueke.com).