

# The New York Times

February 08, 2010

## Critics' Choice/New CDs

### Lionel Loueke



*"Mwaliko"* (Blue Note)

The guitarist Lionel Loueke grew up in Benin, absorbing the guitar traditions of Mali and Nigeria as well as samba and jazz. He sings in a gentle baritone; he also clicks and whistles and makes his guitar speak in a similar way: in taps and scratches, damped single-notes as if struck on a thumb piano, and chords with ringing Impressionist harmony.

Over the past five years or so a consensus of high expectations has descended on him. And he has moved carefully through that minefield, touring with Herbie Hancock, playing steadily in the cooperative jazz trio Gilfema and trying out concepts on his own records: West African rhythms brought into new context on *"Virgin Forest"* (ObliqSound), his first solo record, and current small-group jazz on *"Karibu"* (Blue Note), his second.

Those expectations are presumably so great that for *"Mwaliko,"* his third, he has either been encouraged or importuned to make the kind of album reserved, not too long ago, for great musicians in their 60s or 70s who had

run dry of record-making ideas: the "... and friends" record.

*"Mwaliko"* is both simple and strangely inflated. Even with only two musicians on a track, it can attain a grating kind of sacred feeling, with some distracting new digital processors for his acoustic guitar and some degrees of studio-echo nonsense. (Hands up, now: Unless there's some kind of gothic inspiration or the recording actually happened in a cathedral or cistern, who really likes to hear excessively reverb-ed musicians?) His other records communicate that you're listening to an unusually gifted player. This one, discomfitingly, tells you that you're listening to a genius.

It features several partnerships. There are duets with the singer Angelique Kidjo and the vocalist-bassist Esperanza Spalding: Ms. Kidjo's tracks, one of them a traditional Beninese song, amount to bright, sturdy folk-art, and Ms. Spalding's, with her thin voice and quick bass improvisations, feel intricate and fiddly. There are two functional trio tracks with the other members of Gilfema, the bassist Massimo Biolcati and the drummer Ferenc Nemeth; two unnecessarily virtuosic encounters with the electric bassist Richard Bona; and only one truly great stretch, a five-minute duet with the drummer Marcus Gilmore on a version of Wayne Shorter's *"Nefertiti."* Subtle and focused, they lower themselves into the song, into its circular structure and lurching rests; Mr. Loueke uses the range of his technique, and in the onrush of ideas, there's something startling at about every other beat.

BEN RATLIFF

# The Boston Globe

February 15, 2010

JAZZ

**LIONEL LOUEKE MWALIKO**  
BLUE NOTE



## Whether in a duo or trio, he clicks

**G**uitarist Lionel Loueke, a transplant from Bénin in West Africa who is a rising star on the New York jazz scene, offers an unusual program on his second album for Blue Note. It's part invitational, with seven duets that pair Loueke with singer Angélique Kidjo, bassists Esperanza Spalding and Richard Bona, and drummer Marcus Gilmore. Three other songs feature Loueke's trio with bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth.

The collection is more coherent than one might think, thanks to Loueke's technique and ability to switch from the ruminative groove of "Nefertiti" (with Gilmore) to the open-space "Griot" (with the trio) or the lean, deconstructive take of a

Bénin traditional song (with Kidjo). Loueke's trademark clicking vocals and the pedal effects on his nylon-stringed acoustic guitar give the duets body, while his comfort across post-bop, fusion, and African music sets up fascinating encounters.

On the quiet gem "Wishes," Loueke and Cameroon-born Bona work in a vein that's part chamber, part Americana; later, on "Hide Life," the two deliver West African highlife complete with vocal harmonies and an exchange of greetings in French that underscores the record's unforced cosmopolitan feel.

(Out now)

SIDDHARTHA MITTER

**ESSENTIAL** "Wishes"



## JAZZ REVIEW

# Loueke's music sways to an African beat

Ancient rhythms brought into future

By **Howard Reich**

TRIBUNE CRITIC

Uncounted guitarists have played the stage of the Jazz Showcase through the years, but none with quite the musical DNA of Lionel Loueke.

The guitarist stands at the juncture of several cultures, his work embracing the folkloric music of his native Benin, the music of his native Benin, the mesmerizing chants of West African antiquity and the impulses of thoroughly contemporary American jazz.

Loueke coursed through all these influences, and others, Thursday night at the Jazz Showcase, a room where bebop and its offshoots typically dominate. But not this time.

Making his Jazz Showcase debut, Loueke played an opening-night set that forced listeners to stretch past preconceptions, even if his low-key approach early in the evening did not necessarily help them to do so. Once Loueke achieved a little rhythmic momentum and sonic heft, however, he reminded his audience why he's one of the more talked-about guitarists in jazz (particularly for his work alongside more celebrated figures, such as pianist Herbie Hancock).

As if he were trying to put Western ears at ease, Loueke opened with an extremely well-worn American pop tune, "All or Nothing at All," but played with an unmistakably African sensibility. The even-keel dynamic levels, meticulously plucked notes and gently undulating rhythms certainly had little in common with the most famous version of the tune, recorded by Frank Sinatra early in his career.

In this opening work, Loueke and his long-running trio established the cross-cultural tone for the music yet to come, a hybrid that proved more successful in some passages than in others. At his best, though, Loueke produced otherworldly vocals and ethereal guitar accompaniments that defied categorization.

Some of his most enticing work unfolded in "Griot," taken from his new CD "Mwaliko" (on Blue Note). By tapping on his guitar and limiting his choice of pitches, Loueke evoked the sound of ancient, handmade African instruments. Yet by singing incantatory phrases amplified and distorted via synthesizer, Loueke pushed this music headlong into the future. Whole epochs of the human experience converged in this work, with bassist Massimo

Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth providing a gentle rhythmic undertow.

But a little of this ultra-delicate playing goes a long way, and in some instances Loueke and the trio performed with such gentility and introspection as to diminish the impact of otherwise startlingly original music.

As the set progressed, however, Loueke and friends upped the energy and ratcheted up the energy level a bit, and the more sound they produced, the more effective they became.

Toward the end of the evening, Loueke offered an extended solo of remarkable complexity and tonal beauty, unspooling haunting phrases with his voice, percussive clicking effects with his tongue and multiple melodic lines on guitar. Here was Loueke's art at its most persuasive.

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## Lionel Loueke Trio

**When:** 8 and 10 p.m. Saturday; 4, 8 and 10 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Court

**Price:** \$20; 312-360-0234



- Stewart Oksenhorn/The Aspen Times

## CD reviews: New sounds, stories from Africa

[STEWART OKSENHORN](#)  
THE ASPEN TIMES  
ASPEN, CO COLORADO,

### **Lionel Loueke, “Mwaliko,” produced by Loueke (Blue Note)**

Lionel Loueke, a 30-something guitarist from the West African country of Benin, crosses American jazz and African rhythms and sounds on his second album for Blue Note. It is an ear-catching blend, sophisticated but rootsy. Loueke's musical personality is soft-spoken; there is a hushed nature that runs throughout “Mwaliko,” especially on the solo guitar piece “Intro to L.L.,” and the early part of “L.L.,” which features the rhythm section of bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth, whom Loueke met while a student at Boston's Berklee College of Music. “Mwaliko” gets a dynamic quality from three guest vocalists – Loueke's countrymate Angélique Kidjo; Richard Bona, from Cameroon; and American Esperanza Spalding – as well as the occasional forays into more explosive forms of jazz. Not for nothing was Loueke featured in Herbie Hancock's band.

### **Bassekou Kouyate & Ngoni Ba, “I Speak Fula”; produced by Lucy Doran and Jerry Boys (Sub Pop!/Next Ambiance)**

Bassekou Kouyate descends from a line of griots – musicians who carry on the Malian tradition of telling ancient stories through song. The title refers to a traditional ethnic group spread across West Africa, and the language they speak. But there is nothing musty-sounding about the album; instead, it sounds as if it is built on the significance of a centuries-old history. Kouyate plays the ngoni, an ancestor of the banjo, and his picking is fabulous; check out the solo on “Musow – For Our Women.” Kouyate is joined by some of the best-known West African musicians, including Toumani Diabate and Vieux Farka Touré, as well as Amy Sacko, Kouyate's wife, as the primary vocalist.

Bassekou Kouyate and members of Ngoni Ba are featured in the Béla Fleck Africa Project concert Friday at Aspen's Wheeler Opera House.

### **Fela Kuti, “The Best of the Black President” (Knitting Factory)**

Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the Nigerian musician and political agitator, is big news these days, 13 years after his death. “FELA!” the musical is a smash on Broadway. Now Knitting Factory Records is in the process of re-releasing all 45 of the singer-saxophonist's album, beginning with this greatest-hits package that includes two CDs and a DVD that features concert footage from the Berlin Jazz Festival, a segment from the film “Music is the Weapon,” and an interview with Bill T. Jones, choreographer and director of “FELA!” It's notably generous treatment of the catalogue given the state of album sales, but Fela's music – a mix of American groove-jazz and Nigerian highlife – was a force in Africa during his lifetime, and deserves to be heard.

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### **Cesaria Evora, “Nha Sentimento,” produced by José da Silva (Lusafrica)**

Cesaria Evora, a singer from the island nation of Cape Verde, has been likened to Billie Holiday. But Evora is proving to

have a far stronger constitution and survival instinct than Holiday, who died at the age of 44, in decrepit shape, from the effects of booze and drugs. The 68-year-old Evora suffered a stroke in 2008, but comes back with this pleasing effort, her deep, almost masculine voice in strong shape. Cape Verde is off the coast of Senegal, but was a Portuguese colony, and the influence shows. “Nha Sentimento” has much in common with sounds from Brazil (another Portuguese-speaking former colony), even though the album was recorded in Cairo, with Egyptian musicians.

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# The Detroit News AND Free Press

February 14, 2010

## LIONEL LOUEKE'S "MWALIKO"

(★★, Blue Note) finds the Benin-born guitar wizard and vocalist teaming up with a rotating cast for duets and trios. The results are uneven. Loueke naturally traverses a lot of idioms, from world-music fusions to jazz and Afro-pop, and the promising opening track with vocalist Angélique Kidjo (also from Benin) distills them beautifully into Kidjo's soaringly clear vocals, the head-bobbing groove and Loueke's inventive guitar work.

But the hook-ups with bassist-vocalist Esperanza Spalding, bassist-vocalist Richard Bona, bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth sound overly precious, over-produced or just plain slack. A brief sprint of swinging improvisation on "Griot" is an exception, and so is a duet with drummer Marcus Gilmore on Wayne Shorter's iconic "Nefertiti," where the guitarist invents his own counterpoint and bass lines that wrap slyly around Shorter's memorable theme and Gilmore's insinuating beat.

■ CONTACT MARK STRYKER: 313-222-6459  
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Guitarist Lionel Loueke teams with diverse musicians on his new CD.

## auditions



Lionel Loueke

36 february 2010 jazziz

### Lionel Loueke

*Mwaliko*  
(Blue Note)

On his sophomore release, Benin-bred singer/guitarist Lionel Loueke masterfully conjures moods and creates alluring soundscapes through a series of stirring duets with vocalist Angelique



Kidjo, bassist/vocalist Esperanza Spalding, bassist/vocalist Richard Bona and drumming sensation Marcus Gilmore. *Mwaliko*, which is Swahili for "invitation," also includes three new tracks featuring Loueke's longtime trio Gifema, with bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth. Subtle, yet sinuous and lush, the disc is rooted in the guitarist's organic commingling of acoustic and electric sounds and his unique vocal inflections and pairings. Early in his career Loueke made a connection between jazz soloing and the improvised vocalizations of West African griots—a link he continues to explore.

*Mwaliko* opens strong with Loueke's syncopated riffing and percussive clicking punctuations giving way to Kidjo's cascading vocals on "Ami O," a Cameroonian standard that both artists grew up listening to. "Griot" begins with deep bass rumbles and Loueke's silky baritone, then morphs into a jazz groove that gives a nod to a handful of Loueke's influences: Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Terence Blanchard and Pat Metheny. Spalding puts her stamp on Loueke's "Twins," which appeared in a more orchestrated form on the album *Gifema + 2*. In this decidedly more whimsical version, Loueke and Spalding's frolicking vocals contrast elegantly, and are accentuated by a stripped down, playful conversation between Loueke's guitar and Spalding's acoustic bass.

Bona's lilting, ethereal voice on "Wishes" floats over guitar and fretless bass, creating an otherworldly effect. A cover of Wayne Shorter's "Nefertiti" features Loueke's supple guitar lines and showcases Gilmore's cool jazz chops on the trap set. On the traditional Beninese song "Vi Ma Yon," Loueke's guitar is almost percussive; his nimble-fingered looping echoes such indigenous instruments such as the *kalimba*, *kora* and *djembe*.

While Loueke wrote seven of the 12 songs on *Mwaliko*, he made sure to include a piece written by each of his trio mates. Biolcati's "Shazoo" is a polyrhythmic fusion of straight-ahead jazz and African influences. Loueke's own "Dangbe" offers an intricate morsel of sound that segues into the album's melodic closer, a second duet with Bona titled "Hide Life." The song is beautifully harmonized with the kind of tight rhythmic structure that makes Loueke's music such a revelation.

—Lissette Corsa

# Exclusive First Listen: Lionel Loueke

## Hear 'Mwaliko' In Its Entirety A Week Before Its Release

by Patrick Jarenwattanon

### Hear Lionel Loueke's 'Mwaliko'

[49 min 17 sec]

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### Listen To Individual Tracks From The Album



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Jimmy Katz

The title of Lionel Loueke's new album, *Mwaliko*, is Swahili for "invitation."

February 1, 2010 - [Lionel Loueke](#) is a jazz guitarist and vocalist. But if you've never heard him, his music sounds nothing like the work of the crooning strummer that description conjures.

His is a dialect that speaks for the diversity and globalization that is 21st-century jazz. Its raw sound was forged in years of tweaking a low-tuned, nylon-string electric guitar; its vocabulary owes as much to jazz as it does to the traditional music of West Africa, where he was born and lived for 21 years. And then there's Loueke's singing style: plain and deep, soft and gentle. That is, when he actually *sings*, as his vocal art also incorporates mouth noises: pops, clicks, wet smacks, wordless solo-doubling and

spasmodic speaking-in-tongues exhortations. All done in perfect time, of course.

It's a style capable of ravishing things, especially in spare settings. Loueke seems to know this: His new album, *Mwaliko*, is a record of duos and trios. The duos are all-star collaborations, albeit the sorts that actually match musical personalities. Singer [Angelique Kidjo](#) and Loueke's mothers know each other from back in Benin; they take on a West African anthem in "Ami O," as well as another traditional song called "Vi Ma Yon." Bassist and singer [Richard Bona](#) is from Cameroon; he harmonizes with Loueke in "Wishes" and "Hide Life," the latter of which is a play (on words and in music) on West African high life music. The exuberant, chirpy [Esperanza Spalding](#) is a perfect foil on acoustic bass and voice in the Loueke tunes "Twins" and "Flying." And drummer Marcus Gilmore is a natural sparring partner in "Nefertiti," a rhythmic duel disguised under Wayne Shorter's classic melody.

*Mwaliko*, Loueke's fourth album as a leader (and second for Blue Note Records) was originally scheduled to be a duet album. But that shortchanged the rapport Loueke has built with his jazz trio, an active unit since all three members met years ago at Berklee College of Music. Loueke's compositions emerge from trio workouts, and both bassist Massimo Biolcati and drummer Ferenc Nemeth contribute tunes to the album. (In fact, when it's not operating as the Lionel Loueke trio, it's made two recordings under the more democratic name Gilfema.) So it's fitting that three trio cuts made the final track list, too.

Especially when the trio revs up to full steam, there's no mistaking *Mwaliko* as pulsing, modern jazz. But its language feels practiced, like a garment broken in over years; at its best, it strips exotic sounds of their alienating weirdness to reveal something intimate and fascinating underneath. Try it on for yourself: You can hear the whole album below for the week leading up to *Mwaliko*'s release on Feb. 9. And please let us know what you think of the album in the comments section below.

#### EXCLUSIVE FIRST LISTEN: LIONEL LOUEKE



**Ami O (feat. Angelique Kidjo)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

*Album:* Mwaliko

*Song:* Ami O

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**Griot (Lionel Loueke Trio)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

*Album:* Mwaliko

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**Twins (feat. Esperanza Spalding)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

*Album:* Mwaliko

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**Wishes (feat. Richard Bona)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

*Album:* Mwaliko

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**Flying (feat. Esperanza Spalding)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

*Album:* Mwaliko

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**Intro to L.L.** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

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**L.L. (Lionel Loueke Trio)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

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**Nefertiti (feat. Marcus Gilmore)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

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**Vi Ma Yon (feat. Angelique Kidjo)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

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**Shazoo (Lionel Loueke Trio)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

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**Dangbe** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

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**Hide Life (feat. Richard Bona)** *Artist:* Lionel Loueke

Album: Mwaliko

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