



## Lionel Loueke - Close Your Eyes

### **Musicians:**

Lionel Loueke - Guitar & Vocals

Reuben Rogers - Acoustic Bass

Eric Harland - Drums

Lionel is maybe my favorite example of a musician whose prodigious technique serves to augment rather than obscure his voice. Want to play the notoriously tricky Coltrane tune Countdown, at 260 BPM? No problem. How about we try it in 13/8? Sure, simple as breathing. But that's not the impressive part. The trick is how to play "Countdown" in 13/8 at 260 BPM and sound exactly like yourself. I'm getting sidetracked already as "Countdown" isn't even on the record (though you can hear/watch it being recorded on this page). The point is that there are so few musicians alive today, or of any era, who have an authentic, individual, unmistakable voice. This is Lionel Loueke's first ever record of standards. Lionel sounds only like Lionel, even when he's playing some of the most represented jazz of all time. It's refreshing to find that, yes, there is something completely new to be heard in "Footprints," "Solar," "Body and Soul" and "Blue Monk."

Lionel actually recorded this record on a one-day break between a tour with Chick Corea and a tour with Herbie Hancock. Everyone wants to play with Lionel. There is something in the warmth of Lionel's tone on guitar and his vocals that is so inviting. Listen to the way that Lionel opens the record with "Footprints" and then turns around to run a duo version of "It Might As Well Be Spring" with Reuben and then a duo version of "Moon River" with Eric Harland. Check out that big round sound of Eric Harland on "Moon River." What a masterclass in touch and restraint. Reuben on "It Might As Well Be Spring" is so supportive and loose, letting Lionel lean ALL the way back. It's almost like Lionel is taking the listener in to a cocktail party and introducing him around to all the players before re-starting a lively conversation with the trio in "Solar."

I love the versatility and edge that this band can tap into. On Side B, when the band hits "Blue Monk," there's almost more BB King in it than Monk. Give attention to when Eric clocks that cymbal crash in the first chorus of Lionel's solo, almost like he's saying "deal with this," and of course, Lionel does. "Body and Soul" is the other end of that coin. Running the form straight down: a quick intro, a loose take on the melody, and an improvised cadenza from Lionel to end it -- everything that could be said is already there in the focus and clarity of the interpretation. Then "Close Your Eyes" is where the band

completely stretches out. As Lionel said at the time, “There’s magic in this one.”

The record closes with Lionel’s solo version of “Naima.” At the session, Lionel said it’s like “Naima visits Africa.” Certainly, Lionel, like all artists, is an amalgamation of all his experiences and his influences. His West African Benin background informs his interpretations in a way that feels so organic and clear. It’s almost as if he can accordion his whole past and musical background on top of itself to dizzying affect. He is live-tracking those vocals even when his singing is in a separate time signature and style than his guitar playing. All these connections and hard-earned skill are overlaid on top of each other and express themselves effortlessly. There is a synthesis of all these influences and a welcoming way he can make it all available to the casual listener that is all his own. Maybe he takes Naima to Africa, but the world is coming to Lionel.

- Elan Mehler