

Gretchen Parlato & Lionel Loueke

Lean In

Release Date: May 2023

Biography

Reflecting on the great musical duos of our time and what it is that makes them essential, it would seem plausible that there would be at least a short list of common foundational factors necessary for success. For eminent artists, vocalist-arranger Gretchen Parlato and guitarist-vocalist Lionel Loueke, their formula is anchored in what could initially seem to be contrasting components — intrinsic rootedness paired with freedom, spontaneity, and impulse. The development of an earthy connection lays the groundwork for the confidence and trust required for experimentation and ascension. Of their affecting, palpable synergy, Loueke has endearingly adopted the term “Musical Soulmate.”

“It’s somebody who finishes your musical sentences, so to speak ... someone whom I completely trust and admire,” says Parlato elaborating on the sentiment. “We are challenging each other at the same time,” adds Loueke. “I just go wherever she is and vice versa. So, there’s no comfort zone. We get into the Unknown Zone.”

However, it is the uncharted territory that Parlato and Loueke would have to traverse off of the bandstand that has produced their first formal duo recording project. Conceptualized, written, and recorded while in the grips of a global pandemic, ***Lean In*** bears the various loads of the last three years: a worldwide public health crisis, the traumatic losses of black life, police brutality, devastating wildfires across the world, an economic recession, a tense election punctuated by insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, and a myriad of civil and human rights hanging in the balance.

With the standstill providing unexpected free time for new ways to connect to her craft, Parlato took a songwriting class over Zoom, facilitated by musician and close friend Becca Stevens, hence birthing the title track and concept of the project.

“The lyrics tell a story of a thought process during the shutdown of the pandemic. Beginning with closing in and isolating, moving to a realization of who we are and what we have within us.” says Parlato. Offering our gifts isn’t only for our own benefit but for all those around us. The learning is a process, not giving up or letting ourselves down. *Lean In* encourages the idea of leaning into ourselves, each other, and our world, with love, compassion and understanding.”

Lean In is an offering conceived through the lens of two friends and collaborators who were decidedly vulnerable about an unforeseeable journey that would challenge all of us, both individually and collectively, in unprecedented ways. The result is a palpably soul-stirring set that fully captures the allure, charisma, and ingenuity of deeply feeling artists and the range of their perspectives that have developed during the most trying of times. Now labelmates, and exactly 20 years after each of their moves to New York City, Parlato and Loueke created the album that fans of their live sets have been anticipating for some time. A practicing Buddhist, Loueke says everything is unfolding just as it should.

The two met in 2001 while studying at The Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at the University of California, Los Angeles. “We started playing together more and more,” says Loueke. “It was obvious for me that we were definitely connected.” In 2003, both musicians cut their teeth on New York City’s jazz circuit, often playing duo concerts, or inviting one another as guests within larger ensembles. Over the next three years, they both would emerge as major artists on the rise, with Loueke working with luminaries like Terence Blanchard and Herbie Hancock; and Parlato winning first place in the 2004 Thelonious Monk International Jazz Vocals Competition, gaining the attention and mentorship of Wayne Shorter and others.

In 2005, they put their special artistic chemistry on record for the first time for Parlato’s eponymous debut, which also featured two of Loueke’s compositions. Her sophomore project, *In a Dream*, features Loueke on a dazzling duo interpretation of the Stevie Wonder composition, “I Can’t Help It.” Similarly, Parlato is heavily featured on Loueke’s recordings, *Virgin Forest* (2006) and *Heritage* (2012). Throughout their reciprocating appearances on their highly praised outputs, their signatures offered listeners a fresh and unmistakable sound. Both share a pan-genre approach to their artistry with global influences as the cornerstone of their expression.

For Parlato it started with a deep dive into the canon of ’60s and ’70s Brazilian music and studying West African percussion with Leon Mobley at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, and the music and dance of Ghana with Kobla Ladzekpo while at UCLA. Loueke’s musical origins are rooted in the rich cultural history and traditional sounds of Benin, West Africa — and later, blues and other sounds of the African cultural diaspora — while the harmonic possibilities of the guitar through players like George Benson would help catalyze Loueke’s path to the West. It is his intense musical studies in Ivory Coast, Paris, Boston, and then Los Angeles that would bring these two kindred spirits together.

Lean In evolved between Luxemburg and Los Angeles, where the two respectively reside, as the two artists traded song ideas over the internet. Within four months of the process, Parlato and Loueke were in a Los Angeles studio, rounding out the band with two of the most versatile musicians of their respective instruments, bassist Burniss Travis and drummer Mark Guiliana. Performed in English, Portuguese, and Fon (the indigenous language of Benin), the songs formulate brilliant soundscapes from pop and R&B classics to Afrobeat and Brazilian tunes and originals, that, once amalgamized, defy categorization.

The album opener, “**Akwê**,” begins with Loueke and Parlato singing a joyful, syncopated melody in unison before Loueke laces the melody with familiar progressions heard in traditional West African music and pairs this with his stunning mouth percussion. The lyrics translate, in part, to “Money can help us, but it does not resolve everything. Find your happiness, passion, and purpose, and follow your dreams to find true contentment.” — an early established sentiment of the album that captures the wisdom acquired over the last three years.

Parlato’s sublime rework of the 1984 hit “**I Miss You**” from the all-women ’80s funk band Klymaxx follows. A childhood favorite of Parlato, the song was entirely unfamiliar to Loueke, who builds a rhapsodic harmonic structure and an achingly beautiful, chromatically descending line to the chorus. The result is a much more tender take on the original power ballad, its

sentiment garnering new meaning as circumstances of the pandemic indefinitely distanced families, friends, and loved ones.

Originally written by Parlato for a project commissioned by The Jazz Gallery as part of their Fellowship Program in 2019, the lyrics for **“If I Knew”** play with various oppositions of concept over a deliciously funk-ed-out Afrobeat dance track, adding the invigorating sounds of Travis and Guiliana into the fold.

A trio of entrancing interludes, **“Okagbé,” “Mi Wa Sé,”** and **“Dou Wé,”** weave through the set as swirling soundscapes, the latter two based on instrumental improvisations by Loueke, Travis, and Guiliana. With melodies by Parlato and lyrics by Loueke, they serve as literal invitations. The first to listen, the second to dance. **“Mi Wa Sé”** features Parlato and Guiliana’s young son, Marley, on lead vocals.

At the heart of the album sits **“Astronauta,”** written by composers Carlos Pingarilho and Marcos Vasconcellos. One of the earliest Brazilian pieces Parlato learned, it receives an exquisite treatment from Parlato and Loueke, whose ethereal vocal solo serves as a major highlight in this pensive rendition.

A fan favorite, **“Nonvignon”** is perhaps most emblematic of the connection between Loueke and Parlato, as it represents their earliest revelation of the joy and magic they could co-create. After their 2003 relocation to New York City, the two began casually recording songs to play duo in a friend’s home studio, with Loueke’s composition being one of the earliest. Translating to “Good Brother,” **“Nonvignon”** is the African name bestowed upon him, and it holds within it a noble message. “We are one family,” says Loueke. “We have the mind, we have the heart, and the imagination, and we have to use this gift to love [and protect] each other.”

Cowritten by Parlato, Loueke, and Guiliana, and built around Guiliana’s progressive percussion loop, **“Lean In”** reflects their creative methodology during the pandemic. Parlato added her voice before sending the demo to Loueke, which produces a gorgeous arrangement. “The order in which you hear each of us come in, is essentially how the piece was composed,” explains Parlato. “Mark created a percussion track, I wrote melody and lyric over it, and Lionel added harmony and his vocal. It was a true three-way collaboration.”

“Painful Joy” is a beautiful, haunting piece that features Parlato and Loueke singing an enchanting melody in unison, with the harmony moving through minor thirds. The song is inspired by life’s contradictions in navigating the pain of human loss and the ways it insisted we find inspiration. “It forced us to take a break and let the Earth breathe a little more,” observes Loueke. “I started hearing birds that I never heard before in my neighborhood because we were in lockdown.” There is a mournfulness that shifts with a minor to major transition and the addition of warm handclaps, offering a hope through the pain. “We are leaving the planet to the next generation . . . it’s up to each of us to do our part.”

The album closes with **“Walking After You,”** the Dave Grohl composition from the The Foo Fighters 1997 release, *The Colour and the Shape*. After over two decades with The Foo Fighters, drummer Taylor Hawkins passed away in March of 2022. “When we recorded the song, Taylor

was still with us,” reflects Parlato. “He only passed a few weeks later, so initially it wasn’t intended as a tribute to him. But the song has now taken on a more profound significance.”

The song features Guiliana, who can empathize deeply with the loss of Hawkins, both as a fan and also as the final drummer for late icon David Bowie. Guiliana joins on the refrain, steering the song to celestial heights, with a soft, driving march that is a direct rhythmic homage to the original. Their son Marley, who tenderly repeats “I’m on your back,” in unison with Loueke, intermingles with Parlato’s delicate adlibs in an emotional finale. “It was as if to say, ‘We’re going to honor your legacy,’” Parlato shares. “Especially hearing Marley sing this refrain, to me it represents our young generation standing on the shoulders of giants, being inspired to forge an artistic path all their own.”

As with all of life, the meaning in our work, our thoughts and ideas can and do shift with time and perspective. With *Lean In*, Loueke and Parlato celebrate, contemplate, mourn, and rejoice the events of their 20-year journey as friends and collaborators who remain in awe of one another, through the tenets of their message, their playfulness, their enchanting sound, and rhythmic complexity laced with wit and dexterity — imbuing the songs with a timeless relevance for all who listen for years to come.