



Critically Acclaimed Vocalist Somi to Release *Petite Afrique*, Inspired by the Fate of African Immigrants in Harlem

Available March 31 on Okeh Records

Featuring Special Guest Aloe Blacc

Pulsing with Harlem's rhythms and sonic ambiance, **Somi's *Petite Afrique*** is an homage to her New York City upper Manhattan neighborhood, and one of the Meccas of the African diaspora. In the village of Harlem, along west 116th Street from Malcolm X Boulevard to Frederick Douglass Boulevard, African immigrants build American lives. Populated predominantly by a Francophone, West African and Muslim community, this is a strip of Harlem that locals call "Little Africa" or "Petite Afrique:" a thriving corridor of hair shops and shea butters, bistros and self-taught tailors. Many of these working class residents -- immigrants-cum-citizens -- are now taxi drivers zipping other New Yorkers through the city they've called home since the 1980s.

Petite Afrique, Somi's sophomore effort for Okeh/Sony Music Masterworks, is a daring, relevant, refashioning of what "jazz" and "African music" mean. The album is a timely song cycle about the dignity of immigrants in the United States. Equally anthropologist and writer, Somi's songs both celebrate Harlem's black experience and lament gentrification's slow erasure of the vibrant African immigrant population from the historic neighborhood.

On her new album, Somi and her core bandmates -- guitarist **Liberty Ellman**, drummer **Nate Smith**, pianist **Toru Dodo**, and bassist **Michael Olatuja** -- perform with new emotional openness, sharp political insight, and infectious groove throughout. A powerful horn ensemble featuring tenor saxophonist **Marcus Strickland**, alto man **Jaleel Shaw**, and acclaimed trumpeter **Etienne Charles** also appear on several tracks.

Charles also serves as associate producer on ***Petite Afrique***, arranging the horn and string sections. Producer **Keith Witty** calibrates and binds all these musicians together into a finely textured, genre-bending sonic collage. Having also co-produced her last studio album, Witty and Somi continue to establish the standard for artfully interweaving modern jazz and African pop sensibilities. Somi's commitment to storytelling is clear as she intersperses poetry and "backseat field audio" drawn mostly from several interviews she conducted with African taxi drivers who have lived in the neighborhood for over four decades.

The album opens with "Alien," Somi's provocative improvisation on Sting's "Englishman in New York." Here, she flips Sting's playful critique of Britishness in America into a brooding blues about Africans alienated from American life. "This album is, in many ways, a love letter to my parents and the generous community of immigrants that raised me," Somi explains. "Once Harlem started to change, I realized just how much the African community there made the anonymity of New York City feel more like home."

Somi's room-making blend of politics and voice is apparent on stunning, anthemic tracks like "Black Enough" and "The Gentry." On both recordings, Charles' assertive horn arrangements are emphatic exclamation marks to Somi's fiery lyrics. "Black Enough" is a layered exploration of blackness and the identity politics that has, at times, pulled black people in the United States apart. Somi was inspired to write the song while reading Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing*. "It was the first time I'd seen an African literary voice explicitly acknowledge the sameness of African and African-American histories," says Somi. "It felt like a much needed 'owning' of trauma and oppression. The Black Lives Matter movement was already in the public consciousness, but I wanted to write something that reminded us that we fail ourselves individually when we fail to acknowledge our shared struggles."

A real-life legal battle between new Harlem residents and a 60-year-old drum circle tradition in Marcus Garvey Park inspired "The Gentry," which features **Aloe Blacc's** earthy guest vocal. Here, Somi uses deft lyrical play to talk explicitly about how gentrification is erasing black culture from the Harlem scene. With the horn section underwriting Somi's searing call and response -- "I want it black / I want it back" -- one might recall Abbey Lincoln's ardent performance in Max Roach's "Freedom Now Suite." It's also not hard to hear the references to the musical groups that Fela Kuti and James Brown once fronted, masters of Nigerian and American political dance music, respectively.

The musicianship on *Petite Afrique* continues to be overwhelming in its beauty and feel. Listen to Ellman's ability to make his guitar sound like a kora on "Like Dakar." As Somi compares Harlem to Dakar and Abidjan with lithe vocal phrasing, Ellman's lines blend with the horn section's dulcet phrases to propel the track.

Even on Somi's songs about love like "They're Like Ghosts," the down-tempo groove instigates movement and commits to the narrative at hand. "It's a song about the longing for and romanticization of people or things we once loved. The lover, in this case, is really a metaphor for the lands that still haunt us as immigrants and the forgetfulness of why we left that comes with time," Somi shares.

"Holy Room," an R&B-vibed praise song for love's spiritual force, layers a lover's desire with the muezzin's call to prayer as Somi sings "Allahu Akbar," letting her dynamic vocals ride the sensual groove. "It is meant to be an explicit response to the rampant and deeply disturbing Islamophobia that pervades Western society currently. The choice to sing the phrase "Allahu Akbar" is my attempt to remedy perceptions of terror that are unfairly associated with the millions of peaceful, God-fearing Muslims in the world. After all, when the phrase is translated from Arabic to English it simply means, 'God is great.' What better way to counter and defuse hateful messages than with a love song?" Ultimately this song reveals the artist's deep sense of humanity and the power of *Petite Afrique*; Somi is at the height of her vocal powers and writing prowess.

The political messages of this album are timelier than she could have ever imagined when she began writing it early last year. This music is singular, gorgeous, urgent and profound.

About Somi:

Born in Illinois, the daughter of immigrants from Uganda and Rwanda, Somi's American experience has always been infused with the African diaspora's richest political and artistic traditions. And now *Petite Afrique* combines the two facets of her life magically. A longtime Harlem resident, Somi is also a true Africanist: she spent part of her youth in Africa with her parents and now, with her band, tours the continent extensively. Famously, Somi's dazzling 2014 album, *The Lagos Music Salon*, which debuted at the top of US Jazz charts, was born from an 18-month "sabbatical" in Lagos, Nigeria.

Founder of New Africa Live, a nonprofit championing her fellow African artists, Somi realized some years ago that she was explicitly segmenting her work for the communities she came from and the work that she did as an artist. "I realized," Somi details, "that I could still curate a sense of community in the same, and possibly larger, ways through my music." Now a TED Senior Fellow, her career a refined merger of singing and activism, Somi has entered a fascinating new phase herself: "New Africa Live was about making room for our voices that might otherwise go unheard. Hopefully, *Petite Afrique* starts larger conversations about immigration and xenophobia and Blackness."

Somi · *Petite Afrique*
OKeh Records · Release Date: March 31, 2017

For more information on **Somi**, please visit: SomiMusic.com

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For more information, please contact:

DL Media · 610-667-0501

Matthew Jurasek · matthew@dlmediamusic.com

Don Lucoff · don@dlmediamusic.com

Sony Masterworks/OKeh

Angela Barkan · Angela.Barkan@sonymusic.com · 212-833-8575

Larissa Slezak · Larissa.Slezak@sonymusic.com · 212-833-6075