

PRESS KIT



FILM TEAM

Writer / Director	Michael Obert
Producers	Alexandre Tondowski and Ira Tondowski
DoP	Siri Klug
Editor	Wiebke Grundler
Sound	Timo Selengia
Sound design	Marian Mentrup
Production	Tondowski Films and Friends GmbH & Co KG
Co-Production	ma.ja.de. Filmproduktion GmbH, Heino Deckert Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Jutta Krug
Supported by	Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Total running time	96 min
Image	Color / 1:1,85
Format	Digital Cinema / High Definition
Screening format	DCP (25fps)
Sound	Surround
Original language	Yaka, English
Subtitles	English



Michael Obert



Alexandre Tondowski

PRESS QUOTES

ERIC KOHN – INDIEWIRE

"GORGEOUS."

NEIL YOUNG – THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

"A DELICATELY SEDUCTIVE FLOW OF SCENES."

MARK ADAMS – SCREEN INTERNATIONAL

"A CHARMING AND BEAUTIFULLY FILMED STORY."

"SONG FROM THE FOREST SUCCEEDS IN BEING A STRIKING AND GENTLY HAUNTING FILM."

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

„Song From The Forest is a film about love – the love of music, of nature, of the world; the love between a father and his son.“

„Song From The Forest is also a film about the state of the world and about some of the big issues at the beginning of the 21. century – home, identity, alienation, intercultural relations, globalization.“

Michael Obert

PRESS NOTES**LOUIS SARNO**

"FROM THE SHALLOW WATER PROTRUDED AN ELEPHANT'S COLLAR BONE THAT I USED AS A PLACE TO PUT MY TOOTH BRUSH AND SOAP. A FEW METERS FURTHER, UNDERNEATH A CLUSTER OF WATER PLANTS LAY THE SKULL. SOMETIMES I HAD THE FEELING OF BEING THE MOST PRIVILEGED MAN ON EARTH."



SHORT SYNOPSIS

Song From The Forest documents the life of the US citizen Louis Sarno who has lived with the Bayaka pygmies in the Central African jungle for the past 25 years. When Louis leaves with his son by his Bayaka wife Samedi for a journey to New York City, his seemingly utopian world goes off kilter. In a moving epic, Michael Obert sensitively draws the portrait of an exceptional person between two cultures, between giant forest trees and skyscrapers.

SYNOPSIS

LOUIS SARNO

"IN MY MEMORY, I RETAINED SUCH A DREAM-LIKE IMPRESSION OF MY STAY IN NEW YORK THAT I SOMETIMES WONDERED IF I HAD REALLY BEEN THERE."

As a young man, US-born Louis Sarno heard a song on the radio that never let him out of its grasp. He followed the mysterious sounds back to the Central African rainforest, found his music with the Bayaka pygmies – and never came back. Today, 25 years later, Louis is a full member of this community of hunters and gatherers.

Louis has a son with a Bayaka woman, 13-year-old Samedi. As a baby, Samedi became seriously sick. As he lay dying, Louis held him the whole night and promised him: "If you survive, one day I will show you the world from which I came." Now it is time to keep his promise, and so Louis travels with his son from the African rainforest to a different jungle made of concrete, glass and asphalt – to New York City.

Soon after their arrival, there is a first surprise: Samedi, who had never left the rainforest and does not speak a word of English is far more comfortable with the US than Louis. The rapprochement with the world that his father wanted to forget and that his son now wants to conquer is slow, quiet and not free from setbacks. Joined by the contrast between the rainforest and the urban US, the unequal couple grows ever closer on the road.

Song From The Forest narrates their victories, but also their defeats in a modern epic in which the shared journey of father and son steers towards a surprising reversal of roles and gives the viewer an intimation that the African rainforest and urban America, these apparently separated worlds, are not all that separate after all.

MUSIC

Song From The Forest combines the traditional music of the Bayaka with renaissance chants from the 16th century. William Byrd's Mass for Four Voices, sung by the Oxford Camerata, is one of Louis Sarno's favourite classical works and forms the backbone of the film with its five-part structure from Kyrie to Agnus Dei.

Torn from his familiar surroundings, Louis Sarno's fragile world is off balance in the US. The music of the Bayaka, existing only in his memory and the recordings he made becomes his inner voice and gives its pulse to the film. This traditional African music produces a tense contrast to the images from the contemporary US and evokes memories of the forest.

PROTAGONISTS

LOUIS SARNO

Louis Sarno, born 1954 in New Jersey, enjoys a world-wide reputation as a musicologist. His vast life's work includes more than 1.000 hours of recordings of unique songs and musical pieces that often have already disappeared in this form among the Bayaka.

In college, he studied English and Literature and shared his passion for experimental music with his roommate Jim Jarmusch, whose later films *Dead Man* (1995) and *Ghost Dog* (1999) are partly inspired by Sarno's exceptional life journey.

Listening to the radio on a winter's night in the middle of the 80s, Sarno came across a kind of music he had never heard before: "Those strange harmonies gave me goose bumps. They had a hypnotic effect on me--pure magic." The music he heard on the radio captivated him. He did some research, found out that it was Pygmy music and, armed with only a tape recorder and the 500 dollars he had to his name, he boarded a plane to Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. He only had enough money for a one-way ticket.

Louis found his music in the rainforests of the Congo River Basin, with the Bayaka. That was in 1985. Today, a quarter century later, he is still living among the pygmies: "The longest time of my life I have spent among the Bayaka", Sarno says today. „They are my family, the rainforest is my home.“

SAMEDI MATHURIN BOKUMBE

Samedi is 13 years old and has never left the rainforest prior to his departure to the US. Like most Bayaka children, he does not go to school and can neither read nor write. Louis never taught his son any English, and neither does he speak French, the main administrative language of the Central African Republic.



GOMÁ

Soon after his arrival at the Bayaka, Louis fell in love with Gomá.

Louis married her, a tiny woman with a mischievous smile and facial tattoos. Later, Gomá chose a different partner. Together, Louis and Gomá raise their son Samedi.

THE BAYAKA

The Aka or Bayaka are one of the world's most ancient people.

The cultural essence of these hunters and gatherers is to be found in their centuries-old polyphonic chants.

To navigate the labyrinth of the jungle, the Bayaka listen to streams and torrents, to the creaking of the trees, to birdsong, to the wind. The forest has sharpened their hearing. Each sound has an unmistakable meaning. The music of the Bayaka is a direct expression of this acoustic way of making sense of the world.

The Bayaka's existence is undissolvably interwoven with the rainforest. But over the last decades, three quarters of the forests in the Congo River Basin were cut down. Today, the Bayaka are fighting for survival.

In 2003, the music of the Bayaka was added to UNESCO's list of the world cultural heritage.

THE BAYAKA PROJECT

Parallel to the release of the film, the team behind **Song From The Forest** have initiated the Bayaka Project.

The project's aim is to support Louis Sarno and his community in their fight for survival and to contribute to a better availability of food, medicine and education as well as to the tutelage of their musical heritage. Additionally, the project supports the self-organization and cultural self-determination of the Bayaka through their claim to indigenous rights. (www.song-from-the-forest.com/bayakaproject)



THE FILM TEAM

MICHAEL OBERT (WRITER AND DIRECTOR)

Michael Obert, born in 1966 in Breisach on the Rhine, is an award-winning German book author and journalist writing mostly about Africa and the Middle East. His literary journalism appears among others in Sueddeutsche Zeitung Magazin, DIE ZEIT and ZEIT Magazin, GEO, Vogue, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and many other prestigious periodicals in Germany, Switzerland and Austria, as well as in Sunday Times Magazine, GQ France, The Journal (New York), Dagens Næringsliv (Oslo) and Himal Southasian (Katmandu).

Michael Obert became known to a large public through his bestseller *Regenzauber* about his seven month journey from the Niger's source to its delta. As a writer, Obert has been compared with the likes of Bruce Chatwin, Jon Krakauer and Ryszard Kapuściński. His journalistic and literary work has been honored with many awards, most recently the German Reporter Prize 2012 and the Otto Brenner Award 2013.

For more than 20 years, Obert has traveled some of the most remote parts of the world, forgotten paradises as well as regions in crisis or war. Obert currently lives in Berlin. **Song From The Forest** is his first film.

(www.obert.de)

ALEX TONDOWSKI (PRODUCER)

Alex started out as a stage actor in the 1980s in Paris, London and New York. Following his childhood dream of Hollywood, he continued his acting career as a screen actor in Los Angeles and played in many television series, commercials, and films until his desire to return to Europe was too strong to resist. Shortly after his arrival in Berlin he founded Tondowski Films with his wife out of their desire to support and enable directors' visions and bring them to realisation. „The story of Louis and his son is one that you dream of having the opportunity to make“.

IRA TONDOWSKI (PRODUCER)

Ira Tondowski was born in 1975 in East-Berlin. She studied script writing at the renowned Film Academy Baden-Württemberg. Her critically acclaimed debut script *Nordwind* received the Boje Buck Literature Award. Driven by the passion to bring exciting, visionary films to the big screen, she and her husband Alex Tondowski founded the production firm Tondowski Films. „Working with Michael and Alex on **Song From The Forest** was crazy, funny, honest, devastating, life changing. That is wonderful.“

WIEBKE GRUNDLER (EDITOR)

Wiebke Grundler has worked as a film editor since 2002 on productions for arte, 3sat, ZDF, among others. She graduated in 2011 from the HFF Potsdam-Babelsberg. **Song From The Forest** is her fourth feature film.

SIRI KLUG (DOP)

Siri Klug has stood behind the camera for numerous German and international productions. She learned her trade among others from Michael Ballhaus (*Gangs of New York*). „My aim is not only to find the best frame but to bring the viewer closer to what we are all looking for: Sensitivity and passion.“

TIMO SELENGIA (LOCATION SOUND)

Timo Selengia, born in 1971 in Hamburg, has worked as a sound engineer for film and TV productions since 1998. While his focus is on documentaries and journalistic forms, his portfolio also includes short and feature films.

INTERVIEW

WITH MICHAEL OBERT

How did you first meet Louis Sarno?

In the fall of 2009, I was traveling in the Congo River Basin and rather accidentally heard about a white man who supposedly had been living with the Bayaka pygmies for decades. I went to look for him. A few days later, I stood in a clearing, when Bayaka came running at me from all directions, screaming. Suddenly, the noise ceased, and a tall figure detached itself from the undergrowth: a white man, two heads taller than everybody else, a pygmy baby on both of his arms: Louis Sarno.

How did things continue between you and Louis Sarno?

We went hunting with nets in the rainforest for a few days and then we took our leave on the jungle clearing. Half a year later, I received an email from the African jungle, sent from a research station for forest elephants and gorillas and sent by Louis Sarno. It was only two lines: "My mother sent a plane ticket. Meet in New York?", and his time of arrival.

You caught a flight and met Louis Sarno in the US.

I accompanied him for two weeks through his old world and later wrote a title story for German weekly ZEIT Magazin about it.

You shot SONG FROM THE FOREST in ten weeks in a row. Especially the shoot in the African rainforest must have been gruelling.

Normally, one would need a year or two to carefully prepare the logistics for such a project. In our case, we had a few months between the idea for the film and the start of the shoot. My producers Alex and Ira Tondowski did an amazing job. And then there we were with 600 kilograms of equipment in the middle of the Congo River Basin. Without the help of the Bayaka we could never have made this film; they were incredible, they really wanted to give us something.

Music is an independent protagonist of SONG FROM THE FOREST. Where did the interesting mixture between renaissance chants and the music of the Bayaka come from?

Music plays a leading role in Louis Sarno's life, as well as in the lives of the Bayaka. In the film, we worked with Louis Sarno's life work, with his internationally famous recordings: More than 1000 hours of magical chants and fascinating instrumental pieces that are archived in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University. When Louis and Samedi leave the African rainforest for the US, they are torn out of their familiar environment. The Bayaka music becomes Louis' inner voice, the soundtrack to his life.

And the renaissance chants?

The Mass for four Voices by William Byrd is sung by the Oxford Camerata.

The night after my first encounter with Louis I slept on the beaten mud floor of his hut. At some point, I woke up with goose bumps: Louis sat at his worm-eaten table, cloaked in the Rembrandt light of his storm lantern, enveloped by the sounds of the forest, and listened to just this 16th century mass. That floored me. For me, the whole of Louis' story is present in this music, its beauty, but also its darker sides, its melancholy and its tragedy.

Then, when we had the idea to do this film, the Kyrie from Byrd's mass immediately came back to me, even earlier than the first image. In the editing, we replaced the concept of "dramaturgy" with "liturgy". The film celebrates a mass, to the love of music and to nature, to the love for life – a love that is worth high stakes.

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