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Michael Olatunji Musician, Composer, Student [ARTICLE]

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Michael Olatunji . . . Musician, Composer, Student

Michael Babatunde Olatunji, the Nigeria-born musician who will be appearing in Bailey Hall this Saturday evening for the benefit of the Cornell Nigerian Project, occasionally gives the impression of being two different men at one and the same time.

Seeing him on stage, dressed in native robes and looming over a gigantic drum, five feet high itself, he seems somehow to represent the whole of a powerful and still somewhat mysterious African culture. This Olatunji is the performer, the singer, dancer and drummer who has been electrifying audiences here in America ever since 1950.

The other Michael Olatunji wears a suit and tie, speaks flawless English, and is currently working on his Ph.D. in public administration at Columbia University. He is a cultured and highly educated man who can speak as knowingly about American jazz as he can about the fight for freedom in his own country and his dream of a United States of Africa. He is, in short, a trained musician who has preserved through his own artistry a cross-section of his own cultural heritage.

Born in Ajido-Badagry, Nigeria, as a child he was in constant contact with the music of native performers from areas throughout Africa. He developed an appreciation for Western music through



MICHAEL OLATUNJI
African Musician

or tossing a vaguely basketball-shaped object filled with pebbles from hand to hand like a hot potato. His whole body moves with the beat, as if in an unconscious dance.

Olatunji has been involved with other forms of music than his native African rhythms. He wrote, along with Max Roach, the now famous "We Insist!: The Freedom Now Suite," and has performed it with Roach both in person and

hearing Baptist hymns and listening to BBC broadcasts. With these different sources of music striking his ears, he decided at an early age that a merger of the two musical idioms could, and should, be effected.

"We used drums in church during services. We played all the hymns—'Onward Christian Soldiers,' 'Rock of Ages'—but with an African orientation," he explained.

Despite his background, Olatunji never expected to become a musician. When he came to America after studying at the Baptist Academy in Lagos (the capital city of Nigeria) he attended Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he made his first public appearance at the request of his fellow students.

Tunji plays almost every native African rhythm instrument, and a few that he has invented. He may be seen beating an hypnotic poly-rhythm from a five-foot-high drum,

on record. The suite shows his passionate hopes for the freedom of the black man in Africa and throughout the world.

Through music, this young Nigerian hopes to interest Americans in African culture, and to awaken in the Africans a pride in their heritage.

—Mike Goodwin

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