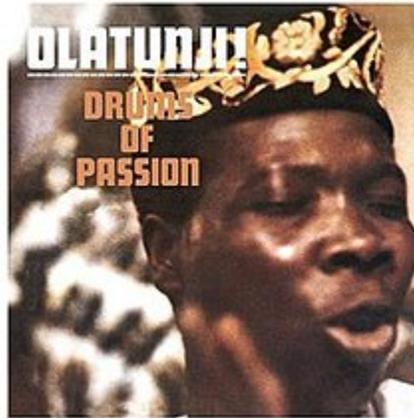


“Drums of Passion”--Michael Babatunde Olatunji (1959)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



The nation of Nigeria is made up of 36 states. In the far southeastern corner of Nigeria is the State of Lagos. There, near the fishing village of Ajido, not far from Badagry, is where Babatunde Olatunji was born on April 27, 1927.

From a young age, Olatunji was groomed to be a chieftain; his father, who died just before Olatunji was born, was a fisherman but was set to eventually obtain the rank of Chieftain and, at birth, Olatunji was viewed as his reincarnation. But, by his teen years Olatunji dreamed instead of becoming a diplomat. As an adolescent, he moved to Nigeria's federal capital and attended the United African Methodist Church. There, he also joined the United African Methodist Church as a chorister and accompanist.

Then, at age 23, after reading an article in "Reader's Digest" about an available Rotary International Foundation scholarship, Olatunji applied for it and won. In 1950, he departed Africa for the United States. (Eventually as well, he'd adopt the Americanized first name of "Michael" as so many people had trouble pronouncing his first name.) Olatunji began his studies at Atlanta's Morehouse College and, though he never officially sang in the school's glee club, he became friendly with the club's director Dr. Wendell P. Whalum. Together, he and Whalum developed a treatment for the glee choir of the Nigerian Christmas carol "Bethlehemu."

Olatunji had long been interested in music. His childhood had been filled with singing and drumming. And, as a self-described "inquisitive" boy, he said, "Every weekend, I would go to village festivals. I was always behind the masters drummers, watching them play." When he arrived in the US, he discovered the American genres of blues and jazz. Not long after his arrival in the States, Olatunji formed his own small percussion group to earn money to continue his education. His first concert was in 1953. He said of it, "That was the first African dance concert and it was very successful. The white people came from downtown Atlanta to see it."

Still, despite his strong musical leanings, Olatunji still planned to become a diplomat and, after earning his political science degree from Morehouse, he transferred to New York University to study Public Administration and International Relations. In 1957, he was elected president of the All-African Students' Union and, that year, returned to Africa to attend the historic All African People's Conference in Accra, Ghana.

Upon his return, Olatunji, having rediscovered the power and poetry of his native continent's music, decided that that, instead of diplomacy, music would be the path he would be pursuing. Additionally, he was anxious to correct most of Americans'—both black and white--sloppy understanding of Africa. He said once, "They had no concept of Africa. They asked all kinds of questions: 'Do lions really roam the streets?' 'Do people sleep in trees?' They even asked me if Africans had tails! Ignorance is bliss, but it is a dangerous bliss."

Olatunji's ascent to musical fame in America was relatively swift as he brought to American audiences genuine African music--and not some exoticized, sanitized corporate version of it.

Of course, Olatunji also knew that his music was about more than just entertainment; his percussion had a purpose. So along with his regular concerts, Olatunji also regularly drummed at Civil Rights rallies held by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and, later, at events featuring Malcolm X.

In 1957, Olatunji, joined by a 66-piece band, played a series high-profile shows at New York's Radio City Music Hall. In attendance was Al HaM, an executive from Columbia Records who quickly signed to the label the star on stage.

Olatunji's first album "Drums of Passion" was released, on Columbia, two years later.

Eight cuts make up the "Drums" disc, all of them rendered by Olatunji and, nearly, a cast of thousands. Though 15 musicians are credited (including Helen Haynes, Ida Beebee Capps, Dolores Oyenka Parker, Louise Young, Baba Hawthorne Bey, Montigo Joe and Tarive Duval, among others) for the album, Olatunji's recording process was, proudly, an open space where friends/fellow musicians could freely wander in, take part on a track and then depart, usually without any formal liner note acknowledgement.

Decades later Pitchfork would say of this inclusive approach:

It is this communal input that gives "Drums of Passion" its infectious vitality and relentlessly entertaining energy. The elated female and male chants on "Odun De! Odun De! (Happy New Year)" glide over a knot of polyrhythms, while the call and response vocals on "Baba Jinde (Flirtation Dance)" are injected with so many whoops and jeers that the song ends up sounding like a pack of copulating hyenas, pinned down by a surge of ecstatic Afro-Cuban rhythms.

The album's selections are, not surprisingly, driven by the drums, with standout tracks being "Baba Jinde," "Oyin Momo Ado" and the aforementioned "Odun de! Odun de!"

Decades later, the website All About Jazz said of the album:

"Drums Of Passion" is an amazing and revolutionary album.... The drumming, though not exceptionally fast or complicated, is hypnotic. Even more amazing is the fact that Olatunji was able to re-arrange the drumming celebratory themes of his people and infuse them with American blues and jazz themes. Each track features the call and response theme (both vocal and rhythmic) that is the signature of the African musical experience. This theme is evident in "Drums Of Passion" and it could well be considered a cornerstone of modern jazz, R&B, hip-hop and rap.

A grand number of other musicians, especially drummers, in various genres, have been inspired by Olatunji's work. Mo Tucker, later of the Velvet Underground, was deeply affected by the original "Drums" album and was even able to see and meet Olatunji long before she joined the Velvets. In an interview, she related:

You remember Murray the K? He was the biggest DJ in New York. He used to open and close his show with this African music and it was always the same song. Every time I'd catch it, I'd say "oh man, this is great!" But he never said who it was. It was really frustrating. One night he mentioned it for some reason—"that was Olatunji 'Drums of Passion.'" So I ran out and got it the next day. I LOVE that stuff.

It's funny because in '62, I was in the high school library when an announcement came over. "Anyone who would like to sell candy to help pay for an African drummer named Olatunji to come to assembly to play, please go to office." So I RAN to the office for that! So, in our silly little Levittown [Long Island] school, we got Olatunji and his full troop with ten or twelve musicians and ten or twelve dancers. It was just stunning. I've loved him for a long time. I asked the teacher for the next class after the assembly if I could get a pass so I could find him and get his autograph. She did let me go and I got an autographed picture which I still have on my bulletin board here.

The album "Drums of Passion" is generally recognized as one of America's first introductions to "world music." Upon its release, "Drums of Passion" was embraced by critics, audiences and fellow musicians. It sold over a million copies and made it to #13 on the "Billboard" chart. John Coltrane, Quincy Jones, Stevie Wonder, Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Randy Weston are just some of the musicians who, upon hearing the work, became devoted fans of Olatunji and soon were inviting him to sit in on their recording sessions. Later, Olatunji would have a long, fruitful working relationship/rapport with drummer Mickey Hart.

True to his avowed purpose, even before the album was released, Olatunji and his drums toured elementary schools in New York City, educating the young about African music and the continent from which it came. Later, he spread out to schools in Connecticut and New Jersey. These educational sessions for Olatunji were interspersed with tours and TV appearances. During the 1960s, Olatunji would appear on "The Tonight Show," "Ed Sullivan," "Mike Douglas" and the "Bell Telephone Hour." In 1961, he played at the inaugural of John F. Kennedy.

In 1961, Olatunji and his cadre of musicians returned to the Columbia studios for his next release, "Zungo!" It was followed by the other Columbia albums, "Flaming Drums" in 1962 and "High Life!" in 1963. After "High Life!," Olatunji and Columbia parted ways and Olatunji's next album, "Drums! Drums! Drums," done in 1964, was recorded for the Roulette label. In 1966, on Columbia, he release "More Drums of Passion." After that, Olatunji would not release any new music for almost a decade.

Which is not to say that Olatunji was idle during this time—far from it. In 1965, with the assistance of John Coltrane, Olatunji founded the Olatunji Center for African Culture in Harlem. It would exist for the next 20 years and offer classes in African dance, music, folklore and history for only \$2 per class. Concurrently, Olatunji also taught at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Roxbury, Massachusetts. Later, Olatunji regularly taught classes at Kent State University in Ohio and at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY, and the Esalen Institute in California.

Though Olatunji released the LP "Soul Makossa" in 1973, he would only be able to return to regular recording in the 1980s. Along with the LP "Dance to the Beat of My Drum" in 1986 and other subsequent works, Olatunji was a frequent collaborator and honored guest. In 1985, Olatunji opened for the Grateful Dead. He was also a member of the Grammy Award-winning percussion supergroup Planet Drum in the 1990s. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Olatunji also toured extensively, playing more than 2,000 shows both in the US and overseas.

In 2001, Olatunji was inducted into the Percussion Hall of Fame and, in 2002, his memoir, "The Beat of My Drum," which contained a foreword by Joan Baez, was released. Long suffering from ill health, including diabetes, Olatunji passed away in April of 2003.