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## Michael Olatuja debuts *Speak*, out on Backdrop July 28

British/Nigerian bassist presents uplifting musical vision as composer and producer

NEW YORK - *Speak*, the title of bassist Michael Olatuja's debut album, holds deep personal meaning for its creator, exemplifying in a single word the album's underlying themes of hope, encouragement, inspiration and positivity. The album, which will be released on July 28 on Backdrop, ObliqSound's imprint focusing on modern electronic and groove-based music, tells the story of the British/Nigerian artist's musical and personal journey. "The language of music is one that we all speak," Olatuja explains. "It unites diverse cultures."

The ten songs on *Speak* find Olatuja stepping out of his role as sideman and finally presenting his personal vision as producer and composer. With musical influences and guests from around the world, the album touches on each spot Olatuja has hit around the globe, including his childhood in London and Lagos, Nigeria, and his professional years in London and New York. *Speak* is clearly the album Olatuja has been working toward his entire career and points to a strong future.

Chances are you've already heard Olatuja's extraordinarily creative musicianship. His work has enlivened the performances of Terence Blanchard, Patti Austin, Lisa Stansfield, Stevie Wonder, Chaka Khan, the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, Gretchen Parlato and many others.

Olatuja, 28, began crafting the music that would become *Speak* as long ago as 2003. From the genesis of the project he knew what he wanted to accomplish. From there, the music took shape organically as the pieces fell into place, Olatuja calling upon a large cast of musicians to assist him in realizing the self-produced project, including several singers who alternate on lead vocals: Eska Mtungwazi, Andrew Roachford, Terri Walker, Onaje Jefferson, Michael's wife Alicia Olatuja and the late neo-soul artist Lynden David Hall.

On *Speak*, Olatuja finds commonalities among the various genres that have shaped his artistry, beginning with the indigenous, traditional sounds that formed his roots during his youth in Nigeria. "I grew up in a church that sang Yoruba Christian songs and played Yoruba style music," he recalls. "I honed my skills playing in many Yoruba music bands. So when it came to songwriting this influence came out naturally."

At age 11, Olatuja picked up a bass guitar for the first time, and within five years, he was playing professionally, absorbing everything he heard along the way, including soul, jazz, R&B, gospel and more. Influences such as guitarist George Benson and jazz bassists John Patitucci and Richard Bona, who Olatuja calls his "teacher and mentor," helped shape his musical world. Additional schooling in both the U.K. at Middlesex University and in the U.S. at Manhattan School of Music sharpened Olatuja's chops and allowed him to mix it up with world-class artists who quickly came to appreciate his gifts.

His 2004 move to New York gave him the impetus he needed to put it all together. "As a writer, New York encouraged me to be original, because there are so many artists out there," he says. "Jazz encouraged the freedom to improvise, soul encouraged me to do it from the heart, R&B encouraged an undeniable deep groove and world music encouraged me not to forget my roots. Gospel gives it all a sense of purpose; it inspires and uplifts."

All of those musical characteristics are well represented and interwoven ingeniously on *Speak*. Olatuja incorporates such hallmarks of traditional African music as the talking drum and hand drums (conga and djembe), call-and-response vocals and the Yoruba language, while working comfortably with musical vocabularies more familiar to Western ears: neo-soul balladry, hip-hop, modern jazz and deep groove.

The opening track, "Ma Foya" (Yoruba for "don't fear"), is built upon a propulsive West African hi-life rhythmic pattern and classic Philly soul vocals. It features a lead vocal by Lynden David Hall, who intones, "Don't be afraid in times of trouble/it's all in the way you rise above," over a battery of grooving hand drums, massed background vocals and guitar. "Ma Foya" will be released later in 2009 as a single with remixes.

On the silky ballad "Unconditional," Olatuja boldly plucks his bass strings in tandem with smooth guitar licks and evocative keyboard lines as wife Alicia (who co-wrote the song) pays tribute to the value of a lover who remains true and steadfast. "Yi Yipada," Olatuja says, reminds us that "change is the only permanent thing in life." One of the most exhilarating tracks on the album, "Yi Yipada" is highlighted by a deep, odd-metered bassline, intricate keyboard work and precision drumming all in tight interplay with Mtungwazi's scatted vocal improvisation.

Lyricaly, the music on *Speak* is also infused with Olatuja's strong Christian roots. On the lightly funky "Hold On," over a soulful organ, Hall sings Olatuja's words: "If you're one of those who think there's nowhere left to fall, perhaps you should remember to get up and walk tall." The ballad "Altar Call" speaks about someone who realizes that God is calling them to a better life, to have the freedom to choose what is right.

"Walk With Me," a traditional gospel number—and the only tune on *Speak* not written or co-written by Olatuja—glides along on a  $\frac{3}{4}$  syncopated bass ostinato, reminiscent of McCoy Tyner and Kenny Kirkland, and develops into a  $\frac{3}{4}$  straight-ahead groove, leading to an exploratory, nuanced conversation between all the instrumentalists.

The nine-minute "Mama Ola," which features saxophonist Jean Toussaint and pianist Jason Rebello, is a poetic jazz tribute to Olatuja's late mother, Comfort Bola Olatuja, and hosts the most complex musical interaction on the album. "Le Jardin" (The Garden), with vocal by Onaje Jefferson, is pure R&B in the mode of classic Stevie Wonder and Donny Hathaway. The title track, infused with a hip-hop sensibility, features rapper TY inspiring the listener to "Speak! Speak up!"

Olatuja is already taking what he's learned and helping other artists realize their own dreams. In addition to planning his own busy touring schedule, just this year, in fact, he co-produced ObliqSound artist Somi's forthcoming album, which includes a track featuring the legendary Hugh Masekela.

Olatuja's deep spirituality and unshaken belief in the power of the positive lies at the heart of every track on *Speak*. It makes perfect sense that Michael Olatuja titled the album what he did: *Speak* speaks volumes, and it speaks to everyone.

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For more information about Michael Olatuja, please see  
[www.obliqsound.com/backdrop](http://www.obliqsound.com/backdrop) and [www.myspace.com/olatuja](http://www.myspace.com/olatuja)