



TRENDY TRIO: Kathy Thomas, Jonathan Butler and jazz columnist Cornelius Thomas smile for the lens in Merrillville, Indiana, in 1992.

At the heart of Jonathan Butler

ISPOKE with "The Jazzman" Albert Spaargaren some time ago. Did he have the latest Jonathan Butler album?

"No," he answered, "Jonathan Butler just doesn't sell around here."

South Africa's jazz exile last performed in the country of his birth during the Fifth Annual Jazzathon on Robben Island, in February this year, when he played for former president Nelson Mandela, among others. At the time he also promoted his latest and ninth album, *Story of Life*.

Butler then took off for the United States to continue working with George Duke, Isaac Hayes and Stevie Wonder on his African Nights Tour concept. With this educational programme Butler hopes to bring African talent to the best jazz schools in the world — New York and Chicago.

On his last two visits here (Johannesburg 2000 and Cape Town 2001) Butler conducted extensive workshops. His African Nights Tour is to be an extension of his music teaching.

Meanwhile, he left *Story of Life* as an example of struggle and triumph for young musicians to learn from.

The township boy had come a long way since his duet with Ruby Turner, *If You're Ready (Come with Me)*, on his self-titled album propelled him to international stardom. The album gathered gold on

BackBeat
with Cornelius Thomas

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the back of *Lies*, on which Butler scats in a Cape idiom, calling by guitar and responding himself by voice. The number won him his first Grammy nomination. (He also won a Grammy nomination for his 8th album, *Going Home*.)

Story of Life departs from Butler's intensely political albums, *Heal Our Land* and *Deliverance*.

Heal Our Land stands as testimony to Butler's belief in reconciliation and the possibility of racial harmony.

His *Deliverance* captured American audiences with a synthesis of African melodies, touches of township jive, and Cape jazz.

Coming out when the divestment campaign squeezed apartheid South Africa where it hurt, *Deliverance* won Butler both critical and popular acclaim in the United States.

Work with American musicians, including Nathan East, Billy Kilon and Gerald Cannon, eventually resulted in his *Story of Life*.

The album offers musical snapshots trying to interpret "the emotional turmoil Butler has experienced since leaving his motherland to seek a better life and freedom from oppression".

It shows Butler having come through the mental and emotional carnage of poverty, apartheid and exile.

Said Butler of the album: "There are more vocals than instrumentals. I wanted

the album to be like that because the record is about the story of my life."

In this regard *Story of Life* constitutes a return to his roots. Although many know him as a left-handed guitar maestro, Butler began his career as a singer.

The guitar is only an extension of him as a singer.

Story features keyboardist George Duke, bassist Abraham Laboriel and drummer Nathan East — all from American jazz elite.

"Laboriel is the most anointed and blessed bassist I have ever worked with," said Butler.

Bear in mind Butler had taken Chicago by storm in the 1990s with the bass backing of Gerald Cannon, whom many consider the baddest bassist in the United States.

Despite the American input, Butler retained thematic and tonal control, returning to his source.

This is further manifested in his current emphasis on music education.

For Butler's return in *Story of Life*, for its educational value, and for a comparison of Laboriel and Cannon (and Wayne Brathwaite if you own *Deliverance*), this album is a must purchase.