

A musical exile



BackBeat

with Cornelius Thomas

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A FEW weeks ago the *Mail & Guardian* ran an article about Cape Town-bred jazz vocalist Sathima Bea Benjamin entitled "SA's Last Musical Exile Returns".

Not quite.

Jonathan Butler, born and bred on the Cape Flats, is still dividing his time in self-imposed exile between the United States and Europe.

But one of the finest left hand jazz guitarists is torn between two worlds.

I last listened live to the *hotklok* genius of the *bak* when he entertained at the Star Plaza auditorium in Merrillville, Indiana in 1992.

He had the 3000 audience, most of whom came from jazz mad Chicagoland, on their feet the entire show. And, amazingly, they sang along on all his songs — English and Xhosa — from his *Heal Our Land* and *Deliverance* albums.

Speaking to me back stage after the show he said: "I love them, and they love me".

After the trials he survived in South Africa — poverty on the Flats, apartheid, a spell with drugs — I could understand his comfort in a land that welcomed him and adored him; that he was at home there.

Last year he visited South Africa with Bob James. The two maestros combined with American drummer Billy Kilson and local bass guitarist Bakitha Khumalo, playing concerts and conducting workshops.



JONATHAN BUTLER

With regards to the workshops he told the Sowetan in a recent interview: "Music education is important. I can't express that enough. And vocal training is necessary for the development of a vocalist. As much as a saxophonist to do circular breathing exercises, singers need vocal training."

On the same tour Butler promoted his latest album, *Story of Life*.

This, his 9th solo album, carries more vocals than instrumentals.

Butler opted for a predominantly

vocal route because he wanted people to hear his story in words rather than speculate about it through interpretations of his guitar play. After all, he started out as a singer with Ronnie Joyce way back in the late 1960s.

He last visited here when he played in the fifth annual jazzathon on Robben Island in February.

The boy wonder wants to come home.

But he's torn between coming home to entertain and teach here and doing it in the States and promoting South African artists there.

Butler is currently in the States, working on his Africa Nights Tour concept.

He has been mulling over the concept at least since 1992 when he told me "I am hoping to bring South African jazz musicians here. To Chicago, and New York. These cities can offer them the best jazz education."

For this purpose he told the Sowetan: "I'm talking to lots of people to get it off the ground. These include George Duke, Stevie Wonder and Isaac Hayes."

Speaking of his *Story of Life* he said: "While making this record, I realized that despite all the pain, suffering and atrocities, I am still hopelessly in love with South Africa."

Meanwhile Butler has his Africa Nights Tour dream, and he is sizing up the US and UK concert circuits.