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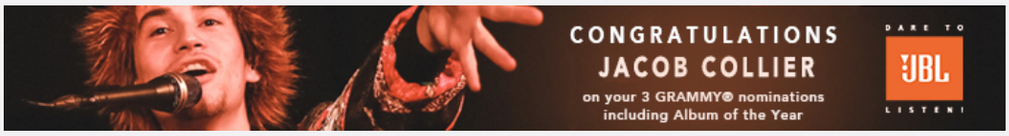


Jonathan Butler: "We Can No Longer Be Silent"

The guitarist and singer speaks frankly about his new single "Our Voices Matter," his lifelong encounters with racism, and his hopes for a new era in the U.S.

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 5, 2020 – DAVID R. ADLER

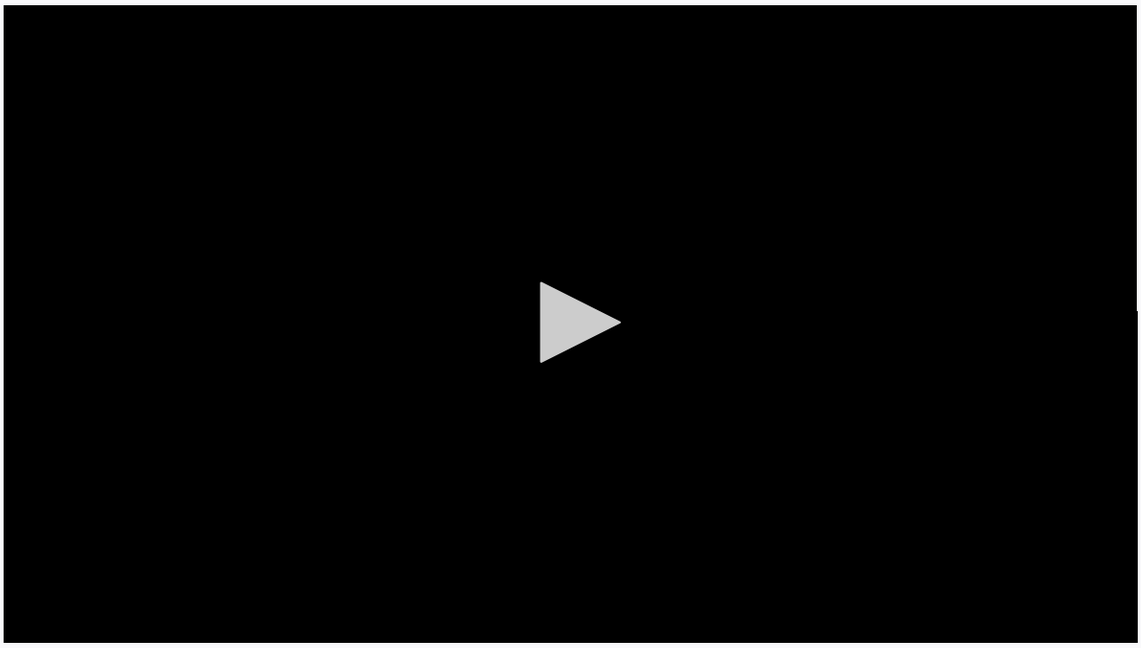
Jonathan Butler (photo: Raj Naik)

Since his rise as a teenage recording artist in South Africa, guitarist and singer/songwriter Jonathan Butler has gained a high international profile with music that crosses boundaries between pop, R&B, smooth jazz, and gospel. His new single, "Our Voices Matter," is a call for unity against racial injustice in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election. It features Butler with a top-flight list of peers including Rick Braun, Candy Dulfer, Dave Koz, Marcus Miller, Maysa, Will Kennedy, Jeffrey Osborne, Arlington Jones, Ruslan Sirota, Antonio Sol, and Ramon Yslas. We spoke with Butler from his home in Los Angeles, where he's lived for over 25 years, about the song and the deep personal history behind it.

Q: Can you tell me how you came to write "Our Voices Matter"?

A: The song came to me in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, his public lynching. It was something that took me back to South Africa and it really shook me. To top it off was seeing my grandkids and my children in downtown L.A. with their Black Lives Matter [signs]. We usually have "Talk Tuesdays" at my house, and I told my kids, "You know, you really ignited something inside of me." Things I have lived through my whole life, in South Africa, I'm here because I ran away from that. And for me to see this again in 2020 was enough.

I started talking with my good friend Dave Koz, and I started hearing myself say that musicians, the people I've been associated with in the "smooth jazz" world or whatever, it's amazing to me that I have not heard more of them speak on this subject. Bob James was one of the first guys I saw on Facebook, I had to call him to thank him, because he named all these Black musicians who helped him during his career. A lot of white guys use Black musicians every day but are afraid to say Black Lives Matter, because it might hurt them with their base.



Q: What are your hopes for the song? Could it spark some change, even if just in your area of the industry?

A: For me at 59, it's about evergreen timeless messages and continuing to speak out and rally the musicians I know, to keep bringing it to their consciousness. I play golf literally every day with these musicians and I'm amazed when this comes up. Because they haven't personally experienced a white guy threatening them or throwing them on the ground, they say, "Hey man, you're the one who can speak on this because you've lived it." And I say, "But you live *in* it! You've been living in it for 400 years and you're telling me I know it and you don't know it?"

So I spoke to Dave Koz about how everyone's got the livestream shows, it's desperate times, nobody's making money, and I said maybe this is a time to sow seeds that needed sowing all along. We can't take our fans for granted, we can't just do virtual shows and take money from people, let's share something important. I think we must stand for something more than just the music that we're trying to put out.

I hope this song will live as I perform it around the world. I hope that message becomes important to our conversations. And it's just about starting a conversation. I know that white guys don't know what to say, what to do, and I'm just saying, "Hey man, join me." Let's have this conversation and put it out there to the masses so they can hear that the music community cares about what's happening. With this song I feel like I've followed through with this conversation and it's brought a lot of my friends in the industry closer, to a point where we're in one accord about what we all see and know to be wrong with this country and around the world.

Q: When and how did the recording come together?

A: It came together in 48 hours. I sent tracks to Will Kennedy—"Hey man, can you play drums?" His drums were in L.A. but he said, "I'll put some pots and pans together." I called Marcus [Miller], I called everybody. Candy [Dulfer] was in Amsterdam, I said I just need a solo. I asked Jeffrey Osborne to sing a bridge and chorus at the end. I didn't want to put people on the spot, but I needed to get it done. It was a few days before the election, but I thought, I'm not just writing a song for the sake of the election. I want to send a clear message to the music community. I went online and said this is the real me, I haven't suppressed it. We're out there to make people happy, but we're living under an administration that is purely racist. This guy is a racist, and somehow it seems to be okay?

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Q: Were you consciously thinking about the tradition of protest music and how you fit in?

A: Yes, I'm inspired by people who use their voice to say something to all of these fans. Bruce Springsteen does it. There are people out there saying it. Herbie Hancock. I was talking to [bassist] Nathan East and he said, "Man, this is crazy, Herbie said vote for Biden/Harris and some people were saying, 'We used to love your music but we won't support you anymore.'" So be it! Stevie Wonder sold millions of records being what I call a real activist and artist. I stand on the shoulders of Stevie, Curtis Mayfield, the great artists who wrote about the times they were living in. Burt Bacharach, "What the World Needs Now." "Fragile" [by Sting]. "Lean on Me" [by Bill Withers]. The list goes on. I stand on their shoulders and I do have a responsibility. We can no longer be silent—to me it means you agree with what this guy has said and done in the last five years.

Q: You said that events in America triggered memories of South Africa. Has the increased racism in the U.S. directly affected you in a similar way?

A: Oh yes, just two weeks ago at Whole Foods, this white couple got into my personal space and told me I was a racist for wearing a T-shirt that said, "Racism is a public health issue."

Q: What happened then? Did it escalate?

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A: I don't mean to put Whole Foods on the spot. But I was so pissed. This couple rushed me, they came into my space and said, "What do you know about the greatest country in the world, what do you know about freedom?" So after that I'm fuming, sitting at the juice bar, and I can't let it go. I go back and look for them, I find them, and I ask them if my shirt is disturbing them. That's when they called me a racist and said go back to f'ing Africa. Every filthy name I could call this woman and her husband, I did. I ended up not buying my groceries. And it was Taco Tuesday! [*Laughs*] I took the cart and pushed it aside and left. Had I stayed, it might have turned into something more. I said to myself, screw Taco Tuesday, I'm going home, I'm gonna take this tequila and just chill [*laughs*].

"I think we must stand for something more than just the music that we're trying to put out."

Q: Can you say more about growing up in South Africa and what you experienced there?

A: At first I was trying to be polite to this couple, because Black people have always been polite in South Africa, it's the first thing you learn because of the authoritarianism and brutality of the police. Things that are gut-wrenchingly painful to remember, it just all comes back. I grew up where Black people had to buy their food through a hole in the wall, while whites went through the wide front door gates.

I have so many stories. There's a famous guy in South Africa, Jewish guy, David Kramer, he's a poet. His writings make fun of the Afrikaans establishment, and he had an all-Jewish band. They needed a guitarist. During the height of apartheid and the [freedom] movement, I got the gig. I had to think it through—I knew I'd be ostracized for this. But I took the gig. They're buddies of mine, it was like the South African version of the Blues Brothers, with one Black guy in the band. So when the curtain opened, the whites were going to see a Black guy. I remember after one show I was sitting at the bar, which I was not allowed to do, and these white guys came up to me and called me *kaffir* [racist South African slang for Black]. They said, "Kaffir, if you're still here in 10 minutes you're dead."

I used to be part of movements in South Africa when I was younger. I wrote songs the government would ban. I was fortunate before COVID to go back every year around my birthday and take 40 people with me. I'd show them the country, the beautiful and the bad side, take them into the prison cell where Mandela was for 27 years. I think about people like Mandela, Stephen Biko, Walter Sisulu, Thabo Mbeki, people who have showed us how you can come through adversity and call yourself the Rainbow Nation. I wrote a song called "Rainbow Nation" as well.

Q: What songs got banned?

A: I wrote a song when Mandela was released from prison, in fact I wrote a whole album called *Deliverance*, it had Michael and Randy Brecker, Don Alias, Omar Hakim. There was a song called "Welcome Home," and I also wrote the album *Heal Our Land*, the title track was on the radio and had a video with images from the Sharpeville and Soweto riots, the police killing the youth as they were coming out of high school. The government banned the song and the video, and I vowed not to play in South Africa unless I played for the whole of South Africa, not just for Black South Africa, which was my experience growing up.

Q: You found success there at a very young age, yes?

A: Yeah, 1974 was my first release of a song called "Please Stay" by Burt Bacharach, produced by Mutt Lange, who worked with everyone from Def Leppard to Shania Twain. I was young and met all these session musicians, I met Trevor Rabin from Yes. I was signed to a little indie label now called Jive Records, which was pretty advanced in terms of its vision, they signed Black artists, all kinds of artists from different communities. I was probably too young to know what this meant but I became the first Black artist that white radio stations were playing, maybe because it was Bacharach and maybe I reminded them of Donny Osmond or something. I had an incredible following in South Africa. But one time this kid said to me, "You still better look out, no matter what." I kind of brushed it off, but no matter how famous I was, I still had to go back to the shack that I grew up in. Not much changed.

I made many more records. It was an important time in South Africa, things were brewing, the ANC leaders were thrown in jail, Biko was in jail, police were raiding homes on the weekend, we were living in a police state and music was one of those things that was vibrant at the time. Some of the greatest South African jazz musicians, I was fortunate to grow up in front of them and learn from them about social injustice in South Africa. It was through those guys that I learned about Dr. King and the great American civil rights leaders.

Now when I go back home, the country's proud of me and my history—I'm a kid who grew up poor, my family are normal poor folks and I love going home to see them. Being in the U.S. and maintaining a level of success means a lot to me because it means a lot to my family and my country, to represent them in the best way I know how.

Q: You left South Africa for London. When and why?

A: I left during the uprising, but during my early success as a pop artist in South Africa I became a young drug addict. I started hanging out with jazz guys and drugs were rampant. I became an addict and lost a lot, went from playing for 20,000 people to four or five people at a club. Trying to play like John McLaughlin, Philip Catherine.

Then I got signed to a Black label and wrote a song called "7th Avenue," which is where I came from. Dollar Brand [Abdullah Ibrahim] was famous for his song "Mannenberg," Miriam Makeba was famous for "Pata Pata," and here comes this kid who was once a pop artist who's now playing jazz. And I wrote "7th Avenue" and it blew up in South Africa. I got a telegram—back in those days it was a telegram—from the same people who signed me as a kid. They had moved to London, they started Jive UK and gave me an opportunity to come out there and write songs. I flew over in the early '80s and I stayed, had kids there, became a citizen and stayed a long time. Recorded my first double album, I opened for Whitney Houston, did several albums with Jive.

When [Jive] moved to New York I was not prepared to move with them. I stayed in London about 12 years, then I moved to New York but lived up in Chappaqua [in the suburbs]. I fired my manager, had no label, then I got invited to do a record for Urban Knights with Ramsey Lewis, Maurice and Verdine White and all these guys. So I flew out to L.A., did the record, and I think God spoke to me in that moment and said, "You're not going back to London. You need to move to L.A." Everything kind of lined up.

[Before I moved] I was staying for the weekend with Ralph Simon, the VP of Jive, who had a beautiful home in Brentwood. He knew me when I was seven years old. Ralph's family taught me how to speak English. I would go into the office and try to read a newspaper in front of Ralph. I was very close to him and his family. When I left L.A. for the airport, Ralph's sister called and said, "I heard you were thinking about looking at houses." She told me to turn around, showed me a house in Studio City, and that was it. It was crazy. So I have a British passport, a South African passport, and American permanent residence. I'm married to a beautiful lady from St. Louis, she's a musician as well, she plays violin, and we're constantly going back and forth about what's happening in the world.

Q: How are you feeling about that right now, after this election?

A: I was sitting at Rick Braun's house having some drinks and watching the elections, and Rick was so despondent and discouraged—"Oh man, this f'ing guy's going to win." And I was saying, "Calm the hell down, this thing is not over." The righteous, the good will prevail here. You gotta believe it. I'm super-energized to know that this experiment, the American experiment, it's got flaws but man, it does know how to bounce back. That's why people come here. I became a British citizen but I always felt that America was home, where I belong. And in some ways, God uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. If this man was an ass in the White House, I think we've learned a lot about each other because of it.

DAVID R. ADLER

David R. Adler writes about jazz and assorted topics. His work has appeared in *JazzTimes, NPR Music, WBGO.org, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Village Voice, DownBeat, Time Out New York*, and many other publications. From 2010-2017 he taught jazz history at the Aaron Copland School of Music (Queens College-CUNY). In summer 2017, after 30 years in New York (apart from two in Philadelphia), David relocated with his family to Athens, Georgia. There he continues to write about music and perform solo as a guitarist/vocalist.

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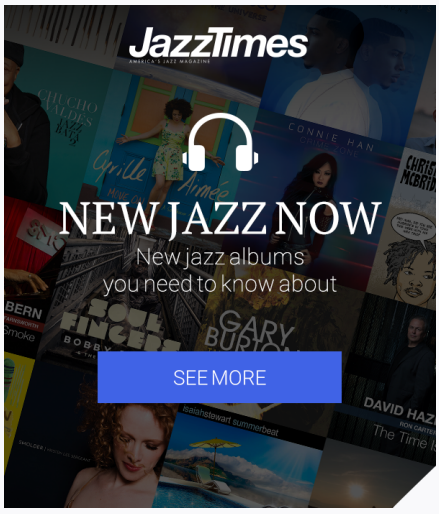

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