Butler is currently working on a new gospel album titled “Grace and Mercy.” While he enjoys the acclaim he has received in the United States since his first big solo hit, “Lies,” in 1988, he maintains his South African roots. Butler said there are a number of up-and-coming South African artists who have the potential to carry on his musical legacy and make their own mark on the world.

By CHRIS BOURNEA

Staff Writer

Internationally renowned jazz guitarist Jonathan Butler will visit Columbus on Dec. 3 and Cleveland on Dec. 4 as one of the performers with the Dave Koz & Friends Christmas Tour. In an exclusive interview with CP2, Butler reflected on his career that spans three decades, the personal challenges he has overcome and his roots in South Africa.

In early November, Butler performed two intimate concerts in Capetown and Johannesburg and led a group of American fans on a safari through his homeland.

“It was a lifetime experience, to be home, to take 35 Americans and show them my country,” Butler said by phone from Los Angeles, where he now lives. “It was an amazing experience.”

Butler said he returns to South Africa twice a year to visit family and friends. The country still has economic and political obstacles to overcome, but has made steady progress since apartheid ended in 1994, Butler said.

“It has its challenges, but South Africa is, overall, on a good path,” he said.

Butler’s South African concerts were such a success that he is considering releasing them on DVD, in addition to the footage of the safari.

“This was our very first safari that we’ve done,” he said, “and we’re planning another one for 2012.”

For the current time, Butler is focused on the Dave Koz & Friends Christmas Tour. For this outing, Butler will be joined by headliner Koz, saxophonist Candy

Dulfer and trumpeter Rick Braun.

“We’re all good friends,” Butler said. “We get to do this once a year.”

Even though the tour’s lineup is the same as last year’s, with the exception of Braun (who replaced keyboardist Brian Culbertson from last year’s tour), fans can expect surprises, Butler said.

“I enjoy watching people transform on the Christmas tour. They walk in one way and they go out with the spirit of Christmas,” he said. “I’m all about imparting something and not just entertainment value. I’m all about the spirit of Christmas, which is Christ.”

Butler’s strong faith helped him get through a series of personal challenges over the past year, including the passing of his mother and his good friend, jazz bassist Wayman Tisdale. Butler also supported his wife, Barnese, through her battle with cancer (she is doing better now, Butler reports).

Butler chronicled this difficult chapter of his life on his recent album, “So Strong.” Rather than dwell on the hardships he encountered, Butler conveys a positive message through songs such as his cover of Johnny Nash’s “I Can See Clearly Now.”

“The album is light and fun and optimistic, which is at the core of my being,” Butler said. “We like to talk about things once we’ve gone through them.”

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“A lot of them are doing good in the community and doing good in the world,” he said. “I look forward to what the future holds for me and for South Africa.”

For tickets and more information about the Dave Koz & Friends Christmas Tour, visit Davekoz.com or any Ticketmaster outlet.