Smooth Africa (2000)

01. Soweto - Wessel Van Rensberg
02. 11 K's To Freedom - Joe McBride
03. Point Of View - Jimmy Dludlu
04. Meeting Of A Woman - Paul Hammer
05. Manenberg - Jonathan Butler
06. Mpule - Andy Narell
07. Smooth Africa - Hugh Masekela
08. Cape Vibes Got'Em - Gito Baloi
09. Gumba In Durban - Sipho Gumede
10. Tazara Express - Martin Walters
11. When Days Are Dark Friends Are Few - Sipho Gumede
12. Lalela - Russell Sterling

Ever since the triumph of Paul Simon's Graceland, mainstream pop music fans seem more open to the spirited rhythms and galloping guitars of authentic South African musicians. To this point, smooth jazz has only paid lip service to the vast creative resources of that country's music scene, with Jonathan Butler (who appears here) mixing in a few bars of some home cookin' between his playful acoustic guitar melodies and silky ballads. This collection was the natural outgrowth of several trips label president Dave Love took to that country last year and his fascination with the way said rhythms could blend into his company's usual pop instrumental format. Love's idea was to let his artists Joe McBride and Andy Narell jam on various cuts with the natives, then let the natives loose to do their own thing, and he pulls it off quite attractively. There's no mistaking McBride's lively, melodic piano style on the top of "11K's to Freedom," but more impressive is the way he textures that with a simmering organ sound as bassist Muza Manzini turns the tune into a romp to the border. McBride creates a similarly seductive blues/jazz blend on the South African classic "Manenberg," letting Butler flash his trademark snappy acoustic chops as he reminds listeners where he hails from. On the moody "Mpule," Narell's one-of-a-kind steel pans ride gently over a thick percussion pattern by Roland Guerrero

and the dueling guitars of Ray Obiedo and Jonathan Crossley. Love himself wrote the dreamy, hypnotic title track as a showcase for one of the country's best-loved exports, horn master Hugh Masekela. Masekela's distant, soulful cry is echoed by a warm, chanting response from vocalists Darnel Alexander and Gloria Bosman. "Gumba in Durban" is the most exciting track, featuring a horn-section-splashed romp fusing hot percussion, a jumpy sax melody by McCoy Mrubata, Wayne DeLano's lively flute, and Errol Dyers' irresistible rolling electric guitar. Smooth Africa is an effective bridge between American smooth jazz and South African's ethnic flavors. A second volume with less star power and more showcasing by the unknowns would be a welcome treat. --- Jonathan Widran, Rovi

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