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Stephanie Matthews

**Local 47 Violinist Demonstrates
What Real Change Looks Like**

ELECTRONIC MEDIA SERVICES DIVISION:

**GUIDE TO SOUND RECORDING &
INTERNET STREAMING AGREEMENTS**

**NEW AGREEMENTS FOR PUBLIC TELEVISION,
INDUSTRIAL FILMS**



COVER STORY

Stephanie Matthews

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Los Angeles musician and consultant Stephanie Matthews of Local 47 (Los Angeles, CA) has a message: "We are here." That message is directed at anyone doubting the level of Black string talent in today's music industry.

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Stephanie Matthews

Local 47 Violinist Demonstrates What Real Change Looks Like

Los Angeles musician and consultant Stephanie Matthews of Local 47 (Los Angeles, CA) has a message: “We are here.” That message is directed at anyone doubting the level of Black string talent in today’s music industry.

And she should know. Matthews has put together string sections for some of the biggest stars. In 2020, she assembled an all-Black, all-female orchestra for Lizzo’s opening performance at the Grammy Awards. At the 2022 Academy Awards, she brought together the ensemble for Beyoncé’s opening performance of “Be Alive,” from *King Richard*, which she says was an incredible experience.

Also this year, Matthews gathered orchestra musicians for composer and pianist Robert Glasper’s salute to Duke Ellington at Disney Hall.

Through her company StringCandy, she does every type of music consulting, from original arrangements and transcriptions to musician staffing and staging. When she started out as a young violinist, Matthews could never have conceived the winding career path that would lead her here. Back then, she had never seen violinists who looked like her.

Matthews began playing violin at age 4 after she was mesmerized by a Pinchas Zukerman performance of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto on PBS. Even though her teachers saw a lot of talent in her while attending the Levine School of Music, her focus was academics and violin remained an “extracurricular” activity.

After high school, she set her violin aside to begin intense studies in biochemistry and molecular biology at the University of Maryland as a Meyerhoff Scholar. The prestigious program covers full tuition for students in science-related fields.

During her third semester of college, she was asked to play “Meditation from Thais” by Jules Massenet at a family friend’s wedding. Easy, she thought; she’d learned the piece back in middle school. To her surprise, it wasn’t.

“It wasn’t in my fingers and I had an emotional breakdown,” she says. “I remember calling my dad and telling him, ‘I don’t think I can do this; I don’t want to lose the ability to play violin.’”

Thankfully, she says, her parents were very supportive when she decided to pursue violin performance. “I begged my violin teacher to take me back to get ready for auditions. I shifted over and finished up my bachelor’s at Indiana University,” says Matthews.

Outside the Classical Space

Matthews’ mother insisted she go to grad school. That summer, before moving to New York to attend The Juilliard School, she had her first experience working outside the realm of classical music. Singer PJ Morton hired her to write strings for his debut album and flew her and two colleagues to Atlanta to record.

The experience was a prelude to life in New York City. “I was immersed in this scene where you have all of these incredibly talented jazz musicians, singer songwriters, playwrights, emerging film directors, and choreographers. It was like this electric talent pool,” she says.

She often found herself collaborating outside of the traditional classical space. “It was like a breath of fresh air; I was listening differently,” she says. “I remember going to live shows and hearing the guys in the band completely killing it and they weren’t tied to the music in front of them.”

Following grad school, she formed The Ebony Strings Quartet with three other Black women and they performed throughout the city. Her big break came in 2007. Adam Blackstone of Local 802 (New York City) was looking for a violinist and string arranger for Kanye West’s *Glow in the Dark* tour. After hearing Morton’s *Emotions* album, Blackstone decided to enlist her help.

“That was my first time in Los Angeles and my first time to work with an artist at that level of production, and my first major tour—which was international,” she says. “I think that kind of redirected my career trajectory in the music industry.”

Back in New York, the members of her quartet went their separate ways. Matthews accepted a two-year artistic residency in Trinidad where she helped to build a pre-college program at the University of Trinidad and Tobago. However, she sorely missed performing and during breaks she would fly back to the US for spot dates and shows.

At the end of the residency in spring 2012, she decided to

try something different. On a bit of a whim, she went to LA and launched StringCandy. The idea first occurred to her when she started to get calls after working with Kanye. “I started the company just because I wanted to work more consistently,” she says.

She had some money saved up and gave herself one year to make things happen. “I wasn’t getting the caliber of work that I wanted, so I moved back to New York,” she says. She soon landed a few placements on *Saturday Night Live* and other visible shows like *VH1 Storytellers*.

It turns out, she just hadn’t given StringCandy enough time. “While I was living in New York, I was starting to get more calls in LA. After a while, it didn’t make sense for me to keep flying back and forth,” she says. “The company began to take on a life of its own. I had developed relationships with different music directors, singer-songwriters, artists, and they began to call.”

She took on every project that came her way. “It was a training ground. You get sharper and faster and learn what works well and what doesn’t,” she said. On-the-job training also included a one-year stint as director of artistic development for the Sphinx Organization, 2017–2018.

Earlier, she had been a member of Sphinx Virtuosi, as well as the group’s tour manager. “I love the mission of the Sphinx Organization,” says Matthews. “It has positively impacted my career and the careers of a lot of my close friends and colleagues, as well as raised awareness for diversity and equity.” It also provided Matthews with a network of talented musicians to call on.

We Are Here

Gathering musicians and creating awareness is something she does well. She and arranger/conductor Matt Jones grew tired of the seemingly endless panel discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). “I was talked out about DEI; I’d rather show and prove at this point,” she says. They were inspired to create a one-time “think piece” to say “we are here.”

They based their piece on the question: what would the orchestra of Wakanda look and sound like? She and Jones gathered 33 Black orchestral musicians in a New York studio for a video recording of the *Black Panther* title track “All the Stars.”

“I’m super thankful to the musicians who showed up; a lot of them came in between gigs and work engagements to make it happen,” Matthews says.

They posted the video and it went viral. “We got messages from people in their 70s and 80s saying they’d never seen anything like it. It was humbling,” she says. “There are so few times that Black musicians get to collaborate in one space.”

“We didn’t even have a name for the orchestra,” says Matthews. “One of the violists suggested Re-Collective Orchestra because it is a collective of Black musicians—like a co-op.

“We created something that we were not only proud of but that built a community to empower Black musicians,” says Matthews. “We wanted to provide a safe workspace based on our shared experiences where we could learn from each other, connect, and create from a space of belonging, encouragement, and support.”

The Re-Collective Orchestra—never with the same musicians and in various configurations—has come together several times since for concerts and studio projects. The musicians are from all around the country—some have tenure positions in orchestras; some are educators; others are freelance, touring, or recording musicians.

The largest configuration to date of the Re-Collective Orchestra—69 musicians—was for Juneteenth: A Global Celebration of Freedom. It was also the first time in the Hollywood Bowl’s 100 years that an all-Black orchestra played the venue.

“It’s humbling knowing that there are so many people that came before me who made it possible for me to be in this position,” says Matthews. “All the Sanford Allens, and all the people who have broken new ground—the unsung heroes in our field. They made it possible. We’re standing on their shoulders.”

Real Change

During COVID, Matthews worked with the Black Orchestral Network. “We brainstormed ways to affect change in a real and tangible way. I’m proud of what we were able to do and to have been a part of it in its seedling form. I’m grateful for the friendship and leadership,” she says. Many of those musicians took part in the Juneteenth concert.

Matthews says that looking out for the concerns of fellow musicians has long been important to her. That’s why, when then Recording Musicians Association President Marc Sazer asked if she had a moment to discuss the AFM’s Band Together campaign, back in 2019, she was totally invested.

Up to that point, she had not been aware of the contract negotiations aimed at gaining residuals from streaming platforms. The AFM member-driven Band Together campaign included action-oriented mobilizations designed to bring musicians’ issues to the public as well as to the studios and their executives.

“We immediately began to discuss strategies and outreach; I knew we needed to make sure we were talking to all of the professional musicians—as many as possible—and not just those who function in scoring,” Matthews says. “There are so many more people in LA who needed to be engaged and included in the conversations, because it affects us all.”

Matthews says she continues to do her part to ensure young musicians are aware of their rights and the union. “There are a lot of young, capable musicians graduating from music schools every year. They are eager to enter the workspace and create in LA’s dynamic music community,” she says. “I’m not sure that they understand the role of the union and how to protect and inform themselves.”

“I think we need to have more engagement and conversations, as opposed to exacerbating some of the divides that exist within the LA music scene. Ultimately, we are going to be a lot stronger if we approach this together than if we are fragmented,” she says.

Matthews says she enjoys working with young musicians through outreach programs because, as a student, it had never occurred to her that the type of career she has today was even a possibility. She says, “We weren’t having those conversations in our classes, so it wasn’t on my radar. I love being able to let them know the possibilities.”

“There are so many opportunities in the music industry to find your place. Everyone has their strengths—some are brilliant soloists, some do well as orchestral musicians or may function better in smaller chamber ensembles; some people thrive in more mainstream art forms, and others end up going into film scoring, arranging, or contracting,” she says.

Matthews says she admires the upcoming generation of musicians and has strong hopes for the future. “This younger generation has a lot of fire and energy, and they don’t have patience for foolishness. I think people have been too fearful of ruffling feathers, but the younger generation is not going to stand for it; they have a certain boldness and a need for real change to happen.”