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James A Muhammad of Classical California Is Helping To Change Our World



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everything so hard?” I came to realize that so much of what I was doing in my career I was doing for the first time in my life. Beyond that, I was in many cases the first person to try certain things where I worked. I was always trying to stretch the limits or create a new model. I had to accept that the difficulties were inherent to the process of growth and innovation.

AS *part of my series about “individuals and organizations making an important social impact”, I had the pleasure of interviewing James Muhammad.*

James A. Muhammad is the President of USC Radio Group, overseeing Classical California, including KUSC and sister station KDFC in San Francisco. James was previously the President & CEO of Lakeshore Public Media based in Merrillville, Indiana. Known for his transformative leadership style, James grew Lakeshore Public Media into a nationally recognized media operation, winning prominent awards such as the Chicago/Midwest Emmy and the 2022 Nonprofit of the Year from the Crossroads Regional Chamber of Commerce. A public media veteran, James began his career as an intern at Alabama Public Radio in Tuscaloosa where he later became one of America’s youngest classical announcers. He also held leadership positions at NPR station WCBU at Bradley University and West Virginia Public Broadcasting. He has a B.A. in mass communications from Stillman College where he attended on a choral music scholarship and an M.B.A. from Valparaiso University where he sits on the national council for the college of business.

Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Can you tell us a story about what brought you to this specific career path?

My path to public media started with an internship at WUAL (Alabama Public Radio) at the University of Alabama. I needed an internship to graduate from college as a mass communications major and my journalism professor insisted that public radio would be a perfect fit for me. At the time I didn't agree, so I delayed approaching the local station until I got to the point that I was desperate for an internship. Fortunately, my father served on the advisory board for the station and arranged a meeting with the program director.

My internship was successful and after graduation, I worked at the station serving in different roles — reporter, producer, and operations. However, I was approached about a year into working at the station by the general manager to see if I had any interest in being a classical music announcer. At the time I was a contract staff member. This role would give me the opportunity to become a full-time employee with benefits. My initial thought to the proposal was, "Absolutely not!" Then reality kicked in and I was faced with the fact that I really needed health insurance. So, I enthusiastically said yes. The rest is history.

Can you share the most interesting story that happened to you since you began leading your company or organization?

There are so many interesting stories. The two flagship stations of Classical California (KUSC Los Angeles and KDFC San Francisco) have been around

for a long time. We have some extremely dedicated listeners and donors. One impactful story that comes to mind is a letter from a listener who had suffered from cancer a few years back. The listener explained how listening to KUSC played a vital role in their healing process as they went through excruciating chemotherapy treatments. The music we presented gave the listener hope and peace of mind to the degree that she credited our station as a major factor in her recovery. This story truly moved me.

We try very hard to be more than just a radio station. Through music, we would like to serve as a catalyst for hope, inspiration, calm in a chaotic world, and even healing. What we do matters because music matters. Cellist Pablo Casals once said, “Music is the divine way to tell beautiful, poetic things to the heart.” We hope to speak to the hearts of people through what we do in a way that inspires them all to be better.

It has been said that our mistakes can be our greatest teachers. Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

The funniest mistake I made was while doing a break on-air in my first year as a classical music announcer in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. My shift was going very well. However, when I got to one break I had a strange issue I never anticipated. My program director and mentor instructed me to write out my breaks and be thorough. During this break, the music ended, and I announced the music, and said “This is listener-supported WUAL, I’m...” Then I drew a blank on my name. I was operating the on-air console perfectly. All CD players were set. I just needed to say my name so I could announce the next piece of music.

Like any sensible person, I totally took for granted that I would never draw a blank on my name, so I didn't bother to write it down. It couldn't have been more than eight or so seconds of silence, but that's a lifetime in radio. Since long pauses were common in public radio (and even more common in the first part of the 1990s), I'm not certain if anyone actually noticed. I was on the verge of panicking when my name finally came to me. For about three years I would write down the structure of my breaks for my shift and include my name. This taught me to never take familiar things for granted. Anything can happen.

Can you describe how you or your organization is making a significant social impact?

Understanding that music has the power to inspire, motivate, and heal, we do our best to provide the best listening experience possible. We not only care about what is being listened to, we care about the listener even more. We continue to work to make our programming more reflective of California and the world of classical music. Very recently I met a 25-year-old race car driver who told me that he had been listening to Classical KUSC in SoCal since he was a child, and he still loves it. We are fully aware of the impact we have on the public, and that is what drives our goal to be a true reflection of the communities we serve.

Our playlists include diverse composers, arrangers, and performers as a standard of operation. We bring more than just the "greatest hits" in classical music. As a public radio operation, we try to introduce our audience to beautiful music that they may not be familiar with. We do this through our main channel, but we also have other music streams in the digital space like "Nuestra Musica," "The Great Escape" and our movie music stream. These streams are available on our KUSC and KDFC apps as well as on our website.

We are taking on new partners like the Brain and Creativity Institute at USC. We recently held a public forum this past June in Los Angeles to discuss music's effect on the brain. Our panelists included scholars Antonio Damasio, Beatriz Ilari, Assal Habibi, and Josh Kun. We also brought in some brilliant young people from USC's Thornton School of Music to perform and set the mood for the discussion. Another new partner is the Inner-City Youth Orchestra of Los Angeles (ICYOLA). We promote their performances for them and will be presenting them in performance in 2024. I was elated to be part of the final concert of their 2022–23 season in June at Walt Disney Concert Hall and bring greetings to their audience members on behalf of Classical California.

We have Kids Discovery Day events in SoCal and NorCal where we bring in community partners like the Pacific Symphony, LA Phil, LA Opera, San Francisco Opera, Oakland Symphony, Vivace Youth Chorus, Yamaha, and many others. Children and their parents are able to learn about different instruments, hear outstanding performances by local musicians, meet our on-air staff, and even be a DJ for a day at our "Be a DJ Booth." Our next Kids Discovery Day will be October 1st at Plaza de la Raza in East Los Angeles. This will be our first time doing this event on the Eastside. We also participate in Opera in the Park and Opera at the BallPark with the San Francisco Opera.

We have an educational project we've launched called "I Believe" where we go into schools with our announcer and resident artist Lara Downes. This series is based on a work by composer Margaret Bonds called Credo which was inspired by the WEB DuBois poem of the same name. The event includes performances of the music of Bonds and other diverse composers. Students prepare for the performance by writing their own "I Believe" statements. Select students even get to share their statements with the audience. We've

brought in students from the Thornton School of Music and the San Francisco Conservatory who've performed with Lara for these events. We're working to expand this project.

Another example of our impact is our talent development program where we are training the next generation of classical music announcers. We have three very talented, youthful individuals who are currently part of the program. One of them, Brisa Siegal, was just named one of public media's 22 Rising Stars.

Can you tell us a story about a particular individual who was impacted or helped by your cause?

One story that stands out is our work with Watts Learning Center. We did a Black History Month presentation this past February featuring Lara Downes. We had an audience of about 400 students. The leaders, faculty members, and staff were a delight to work with. It was the first presentation of the "I Believe" series. It was so exciting to be able to bring an internationally known classical music performer to the school in a project that focused on sharing the music and stories of diverse composers like Margaret Bonds, Florence Price, Duke Ellington, and William Grant Still. The children were all so excited and appreciative.

As an added treat, we brought two very talented USC students to the mix: cellist Quenton Blanche and poet Shandela Contreras. Quenton performed with Lara Downes on a couple of pieces, and Shandela shared her poetry with the students. We thought it was important to have young adults involved in the project.

The project had different layers. The students wrote very impressive “I Believe” statements that were on display as you entered the venue. Select students actually read their statements as part of the program. They also created artwork following the theme of “I Believe.” It was an amazing opportunity for these brilliant young people to connect music with the set of values and principles they believe in. One quote that really touched me was the student who wrote, “I believe in W.E.B DuBois’ poem that says, ‘I believe in liberty for all people;

the space to stretch their arms and their souls.” It’s truly powerful to be able to work with young people at the intersection of classical music, inclusion, art, and expression.

Are there three things the community/society/politicians can do to help you address the root of the problem you are trying to solve?

Our biggest challenge today is reach. There are three things the community can do to help us grow in our service to the public. One, give us a serious listen. If you’re already a listener, ask your friends and family to listen. Two, join us at our events. Three, give us feedback. Sharing beautiful music is our business. We have incredible announcers and programmers who we believe work especially hard to create a listening experience like no other. We just want to touch more lives.

How do you define “Leadership”? Can you explain what you mean or give an example?

This is a simple but tough question. We all have our thoughts on what leadership is and well as what it isn’t. For me in what I do, leadership is the process in which the leader(s), stakeholders, audience members, and the

community work together to achieve its mission. It is very important that this happens with consideration given to the norms and cultures of those we work with and serve. Leaders must be good listeners, possess empathy, be willing to accept accountability, lead strategy, be results-driven, and at all times exemplify the values of their company or organization.

How I view leadership closely follows the relationship where interactions are not simply transactional, they are meaningful. These relationships are approached in the spirit of service and with the understanding that it takes the participation of others to achieve big goals.

We are moving in this direction at Classical California. Not only do we want to provide an excellent classical music service that is accessible to all, but we also want to be more reflective of the communities we serve. We want these communities to know that we see them because we are them.



What are your “5 things I wish someone told me when I first started” and why. Please share a story or example for each.

1. As a leader, you must be involved in your community outside of regular work responsibilities. Although I grew up seeing my father heavily engaged in the community as a leader, I did not anticipate that I would need to do the same in order to be successful in my work. After getting more involved in the community as a young professional I actually found that it helped me in my work. I could hear face-to-face how my work and the work of my organization were impacting lives. My engagement kept me grounded in community issues and concerns because I remained connected and accessible. This helped me shape projects that were more relevant to the communities we served.

2. You must understand and be able to work with all personality types. This ability will give you the power to achieve big goals. I'll share this little tidbit as an example. Every personality profile I have taken labels me as an introvert. However, very few people see me that way. In the past, I naturally gravitated to people who were most like me and avoided those who weren't. Extroverts tended to confuse me in many cases. I found it very difficult to follow the many ideas they would articulate at one time. I eventually landed in some professional coaching as a young professional that helped me better process my interactions and better communicate across different personality types. This allowed me to see the value in my colleagues that was clouded by my limitations in communicating and working with certain types of personalities.
3. What is perceived as slow progress actually might be fast progress when properly understood within the context of the specific situation. I can often get impatient. Things can tend to move slower in my head than they actually are in life. I've had to learn to place all things in context.
4. Mistakes are part of the process of growth and innovation. Don't be afraid of them. Learn from them and use them to refine strategies. I love original ideas and I'm always open to trying something new when evaluation demonstrates that it just might work. With that, it means that one must be open to the possibility of all things not going as expected. The key is to refine your strategies and processes based on this new information. In many cases, these shortcomings may reveal new opportunities in indirect ways.
5. Anything truly worth having will not come easy. I used to always ask myself as a young man, "Why is everything so hard?" I came to realize that so much of what I was doing in my career I was doing for the first time in my life. Beyond that, I was in many cases the first person to try certain things where I worked. I was always trying to stretch the limits or

create a new model. I had to accept that the difficulties were inherent to the process of growth and innovation.

You are a person of enormous influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger. :-)

Any movement I believe I would champion would involve people being more willing to genuinely engage with others with an open mind. As humans, we often tend to view people and aspects of culture through lenses that help us better understand what we are experiencing. For some of us, it is almost impossible to accept another person's concepts, ideas, or beliefs without fully understanding them.

Understanding is an evolutionary process. Reaching understanding takes the willingness on our part to engage the process of understanding in a way that amplifies patience and empathy. I believe a movement of compassionate engagement with others will herald a new day in which we can be less judgmental of other people and cultures, and more open to the wonderful possibilities that await us.

Can you please give us your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

My mother was an educator so she had a lot of quotes she would throw around as life lessons completely unsolicited. The one I never forgot was, "Your attitude will determine your altitude." She strongly believed that credentials and experience could only take you so far. The wrong attitude will lead to hollow achievements at best. She preached that it was the proper attitude in all things that we do that makes the difference. Even when I did

something technically correct, my mother always challenged me to consider the attitude I brought to the endeavor. I carry that with me even today.

Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would like to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we tag them. :-)

I would have to say Viola Davis. Her story is absolutely fascinating to me. She exemplifies courage, tenacity, creativity, grace, and dignity in a manner that is rare in our times. She's carved out a space for herself in the entertainment industry without losing who she is. She hails from the same area in South Carolina where my grandfather's family is from. My family roots are in Fort Motte, South Carolina where I am a descendant of the enslaved Africans of the Lange Syne Plantation. The town of Fort Motte is now St. Mathews. That's where Viola Davis was born at the nearby Singleton Plantation.

Viola identifies herself as a product of that plantation in the same manner as my grandfather identified himself as being a product of the Lange Syne Plantation in Fort Motte. My grandfather went on to become a successful business owner and community leader. The same spirit, determination, grace, and dignity I saw in my grandfather, I also see in her. I would simply love the opportunity to learn from her and hear more of her story.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

<https://classicalcalifornia.org/> and

<https://www.instagram.com/classicalcalifornia/>

This was very meaningful, thank you so much. We wish you only continued success in your great work!



For media and partnership opportunities, please contact mmueller@kusc.org.