

Rickerby Hinds: Welcome to The Creator State, where we share stories of social innovation and entrepreneurship for movers, shakers, creators, and change makers. Each episode will celebrate success and failure, ingenuity and the endless pursuit of knowledge from education to implementation. Join us as we explore everything in between. The Creator State.

Rickerby Hinds: So what's your favorite song? I imagine it's hard to pick just one. Mine is, Sometimes It Snows in April, by Prince or maybe, Alpha and Omega by Israel & New Breed. Even our guest today, Nwaka Onwusa has a hard time picking just one favorite in one music category. Growing up in a strict household, listening to mainly gospel, Nwaka says she received most of her early music education through her own curiosity, after asking friends about what was popular on MTV. Today, Nwaka has managed the enviable feat of making music the guiding theme of her career.

Rickerby Hinds: According to her, the road to curating music history, first at the Grammy museum in downtown Los Angeles and now at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio began at UC Riverside. The first in her family to attend college, Nwaka, assess her experience working in the UCR Fine Arts box office got her foot in the door at the Grammy Museum. Starting in a box office, then joining its education department, and later becoming its curator, in 10 years, she conceptualized, researched and produced more than 20 exhibits for the museum, including Legends of Motown, All Eyez on Me: The Writings of Tupac Shakur, and Hip-Hop: A Cultural Odyssey.

Rickerby Hinds: At the Rock Hall, Nwaka hopes to bring a broader range of artists into the fold, including those many traditional rock and roll fans might consider outside the genres boundaries, especially more West Coast hip hop. Join us for a conversation with Nwaka Onwusa as we discuss her career ascent in music and her new role, and as we put her on the spot about her all time favorite songs. I'm your host Rickerby Hinds. Welcome to The Creator State.

Rickerby Hinds: I want to begin by asking you to tell us a little bit about the evolution of your career.

Nwaka Onwusa: For me, it starts actually, it does start at UCR. That was the moment, and I will never forget where I was standing. I used to work at, in the Fine Arts Theater and I worked in the box office there, and I remember the former box office manager handed me an application because he was always looking for a new gig or something like that. And he mentioned this place called the Grammy Museum. And at that time, my focus was still very much like on the IE, like this is what I'm going to do. I was substitute teaching at Brockton Elementary School and he said, "No, here's this application. I think you would kick ass at this job. You should just take it, get your foot in the door." And I started off at working in the box office at the Grammy Museum.

Nwaka Onwusa: Now mind you, my mom is from the South. My dad is Nigerian. I'm very much, "You're going back into the city." We just moved. We had moved out of Compton when the riots happened, just because they did not want us growing up, so that's how we even got to Fontana. At this point, I'm like, "You know what Nwaka, you are about to graduate college. You need to take this opportunity and move back to LA and without consulting parents and getting too many people involved." And I feel like that's how a lot of my life altering decisions happen when I just make it an insular, like, "This is you, me against the world." Okay, taking Tupac here, but like, "This is you against the world. What do you want to do?" And I took that application and I have not regretted that decision ever.

Nwaka Onwusa: I often think like, "Hell, what would my life be if I didn't take that application?" And mind you, I started off in the box office part time. That was really the turning point in my career. Just taking a leap of faith, not knowing exactly what the plan was going to be or the roadmap, and just taking a dive into music. And I knew that it was something about music and this career, this job like, "Okay, we have to be, it has to be entertaining. I mean it's the Grammy Museum, so what do I have to lose? If it don't work, I still have my job at Brockton Elementary." I feel like, this was my first career. Even though I was working in the box office, my job, our team was so nimble. So some of the things that I had to embrace and always kind of growing up being, I mean I went to a small church, I grew up in the church.

Rickerby Hinds: Tell me about the church. Because gospel was a presence at home. Tell me about this.

Nwaka Onwusa: Yes, gospel was everything. I mean I knew nothing of secular music. I mean when The Chronic came out, I was listening to it and a bathroom stall with my friend on her CD player Walkman.

Rickerby Hinds: Talk about how you went from gospel as that foundation to once again looking at other forms of music in a way that you had to, in order to get to this place that you are currently.

Nwaka Onwusa: Well, I feel, and this is coming from my place now with the understanding that I have is that, I mean, gospel period is the root, is the undertone for everything. From blues, I mean maybe a little bit of jazz, but blues, jazz, I mean rock and roll, especially R&B, you can't get to any of that without talking about gospel music and that feeling, that sensation of feeling gospel. It's not just the sound, it's a movement. It's a moment. So to feel these different moments that I felt as a young child growing up in church, I feel like that feeling, feel in the spirit and being in the spirit and all of those things to find some subtle nuances of that in other genres, and whether it's the music itself or the story itself, that's a hallelujah moment.

Rickerby Hinds: Yes.

Nwaka Onwusa: I feel like that's where I'm drawn to because of those experiences. I feel like that has kept me humble and it's kept the humility of the work there, too.

Rickerby Hinds: When I write ... What you just expressed, when I write a play or a screenplay, what my goal is in my writing is to take an audience to that place where I've seen gospel take congregations at its apex. And so when you said that, that's what my aim is, because you can't manufacture those moments unless they're happening genuinely.

Nwaka Onwusa: Absolutely. That's it. I mean, I recently saw Amazing Grace when it was here in Cleveland at this cute little theater and I was crying. I went with another museum colleague for Cleveland Museum of Art and I'm just singing the song, like dang, because I know these songs. And I see Mr. ... Reverend Cleveland up there. I'm like, I've never seen him in this way. I've heard this man's voice. I mean, it's just like you said, the feeling, the story of all of this. It just brings it to life and this emotion that is so genuine. You can't even, I mean you can't fake it. There's no way you can duplicate that, that kind of emotion.

Rickerby Hinds: No, no. That when you say the word museum, we have certain connotations that come to mind. How do you know when an idea is worth pursuing? When you are deciding what projects to take on?

Nwaka Onwusa: You know sometimes you have the choice. And sometimes you don't. I want to keep that real. Sometimes you do have a choice and sometimes you don't. I've been blessed to be privileged to have enough, a decent amount of opportunities where I've made those decisions and when it is that decision, it is so, it goes back to that gospel moment where you just feel it in your whole gut, like, "Is this is?" I can't be the only person who knows this. I can't be the only person who like, "And if you ain't thought about it then I definitely want to bring it to the forefront." It's that kind of like, "This is too good to be held in a room or to be in a closet somewhere and no can see it, and no one can at least talk about it, or be introduced to it for the how many ever, 13, 14 weeks we're going to let this exhibit run."

Nwaka Onwusa: One of my first exhibits I did at the Grammy Museum, it was my first exhibit I did at the Grammy Museum, which was on hip hop called, Hip Hop: A Cultural Odyssey. And I tried to cram all that I could into this see, but it was so many good nuggets. I'm like, "You know what, let's go and let's talk about the things that we don't know like Melle Mel and Chaka Khan's collaboration was the first R&B and rap collaboration to ever win a Grammy."

Nwaka Onwusa: That's some dope. We should be talking about that side of the story, not just the brilliance of who Melle Mel is and yada yada. But let's highlight some of these spectacular moments in music history and not just black music, but just music history that are riveting in their telling, to like why we are where we are now. I did an exhibit series, so called Legends of Motown and each section was like celebrating the Supremes, celebrating the Miracles. I didn't get to my third one

because I moved to Cleveland, but it was going to be on the Temptations. But again, with the Miracles, people don't realize, there was a female in that group and it wasn't just Smokey Robinson and the Miracles. It was like this was the foundation of what Motown was. There would be no Barry Gordy if there were no Miracles, truly.

Nwaka Onwusa: So again, to skip two all the way to the Supremes, and the Temps, and Mary Wells and all these prolific names, it's like there was a foundation these folks are living in, especially when I'm encountering living legends, folks who are still walking among us. And that same old thing that I got from church, give me my flowers, give these folks their flowers. Let's talk about them. Let's get the history right. And that's where, that's what drives my passion. Let's get the history right. We can speak to the actual people who were here. Let's really change the narrative in that way. I'm not as a curator, it's not just my job to come up with this way or even you as a writer, as a playwright to create the stories. But we have to validate them as well.

Rickerby Hinds: Can you talk about what role education, whether formal or informal has played in your life, in your career and where you are currently?

Nwaka Onwusa: Oh my gosh. It's so critical to everything. I got my training, I feel like from my pastor, from my teachers who, I still talk to my middle school teachers and if I could find my elementary school teachers, I would talk to them, too. But since middle school all the way up through college, I literally talked to Dr. Walker on Monday or this weekend. So I'm like, because teachers are so critical and you're going to make me cry at some point here. But they are so pivotal to my life and to who I am.

Nwaka Onwusa: Like I said, my dad came to this country, both of my parents, not go to college. They had some other trainings, some vocational training, whatever. So I was the first in my family to go to college. So I gravitated towards my teachers. Things I didn't know, like what the hell is a FASFA? How do I fill this out? You know? But educating, even like I said from the church, I, because I went to a small church, it was learning self-confidence on a whim.

Nwaka Onwusa: "Nwaka, get on up there and sing a song. Go, sing a solo. I'm going to need you to do a impromptu ... I need you to give a little sermonette for the youth until the pastor gets here." "Nwaka, can you lead our youth choir?" Or, "I'm going to do a praise dance." "Oh ladies, can you guys do a dance?" "Right now?" "Yes. Right now." So these moments prepared me, I feel for what life is. Life is not a planned, organized booklet that you follow minute to minute. Things are flying at you fast and furious, and church taught me that straight out of the bat. I mean at a very young age.

Rickerby Hinds: That is so interesting that when, I'm asking this question about education, and you went directly to the church and the type of learning that you gain in that space.

Nwaka Onwusa: Right. Right. Whether you can do it or not and then it's in an environment that's supporting you, and whether it's constructive. You're going to know if you did bad or good because it goes back to that. That feeling that the congregation gives you. But in my formal training, I switched my major over to sociology when I was at UCR. I was originally a philosophy law and society major. I didn't grow up from a collegiate family. So all of these things, being at UCR and taking these courses, I was just sucking it up, which is one reason I kept my books because I've gone back to read some of them actually. Like, "Wow, that's what now, this is what this means in my phase of life." Education sticks with you forever.

Nwaka Onwusa: So to someone who is like, "Well I'm tight on my money." Hell, you couldn't have been tighter on money than me, or probably someone even worse off. I had four jobs in college and still maintained a decent A grade average, but I needed all of that. It's worth it. Knowledge is power, truly. These things no one can take away from you. And here I am in my 30s now, still going back to books that I had at 18.

Rickerby Hinds: Can you walk us through that process really quickly of you going from a sociology major to now being a curator? What were the steps? What were the things that you learned or how did you get from that place to where you are now? Where you are at the ... really at the top when it comes to museums.

Nwaka Onwusa: Okay. This is wild to even think that. And so, and I'm not even looking at myself like that at all, so I appreciate you even saying that. My first boss, his name is Bob Santelli, he used to be the executive director at the Grammy Museum. So I'm chugging away selling tickets in the box office and he was one of those guys that would work on the weekends, was in the trenches with his staff. We'd get talking. He used to be a professor at Brown university. So again, another teacher, and I told them about my major and some of the things that I was passionate about and took a chance at that level. Again, there were a whole bunch of factors that go into this.

Nwaka Onwusa: So this could be a side conversation, but the economy was bad. We had to lay off our staff and the door was open for me to move into our education department as an education coordinator and like, "Damn, now I get to do this with music. Okay, this is insane. I never thought I could teach in a music museum. This is absolutely amazing." So I'm having to research and do, right, and do all the stuff for a curriculum. He sees this and is like, "Hey, we need to diversify our exhibit. I need a hip hop exhibit. I need a rock and roll." I'm like, "Well hell, I'll do the hip hop exhibit. Now I know I'm not the ... but I know some people who are and definitely can dig in the story."

Nwaka Onwusa: And that's where that professor, again back at UCR helped me to realize, "Girl, you're a sociologist. You love just the observation of people and understanding how societies and people work together and then bringing music into that." Oh my God. It's just like music truly is the fabric of who we are as people, as the fabric of our lives.

Rickerby Hinds: Are you facing any new challenges and how are you approaching those challenges?

Nwaka Onwusa: Whether it's you dealing with different energies in an office, now like I said, I just moved to Cleveland. I've been here now a little over five months. Moved here in the dead of winter and so that was a challenge in itself, but I felt like it was another Riverside moment for me. Like, "You know what? We just want to free fall and do this." I don't have no family here, whatever. It's not necessarily a challenge. It's an experience. So that's how I've embraced most of my challenges as an experience.

Rickerby Hinds: Couple of last things, talk about the creative process. What is your creative process when you have made a decision on something you're going to work on?

Nwaka Onwusa: It is different and I have to accept that it's different so I can get out of my own way. I think that's an important part of the creative process, and to keeping that at the forefront. Like this is, "It ain't about you. What is this story trying to tell you as well?" And doing my best to try to listen to or be open to, what an artifact can be, what is the storyline? I mean it, there's so many different paths, because I've been very blessed and thank God for having different sort of experiences with different artists. I mean coming from the museum where while I'm looking for artifacts essentially that are going to speak out to help enhance the narrative. Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes you can find things in boxes in a garage under a blanket.

Nwaka Onwusa: You have to be open. You can't be ... And so that's been my thing, just to completely be open to process. But I will definitely, what I can't ... What I can control as far as, being a nerd and reading my books on the weekends and foregoing those concerts, and whatever or just listening to the music, listening ... And I mean I will listen to every single album or listen to an entire album, read and see who was performing on these albums, what is their ... I mean I'll go in a deep dark hole, just the typical things. But when it comes to creativity, it really is in listening to music, I try to immerse myself. I just try to immerse myself to the point where I don't know what it is or how to explain it, but I don't know, I feel like those artists, once you go that deep and make connections with family, I mean it's interviews, it's like I said, it's connecting with so many people.

Nwaka Onwusa: I had a really dope call today speaking with, I mean I've had, I've met Afeni Shakur. I did an exhibit on Tupac. Loved Tupac, sure, but was obviously too young when he was killed to have it reverberate in the same way like Nipsey Hussle's murder has for me. But to be able to immerse myself so much in a project, that's where it goes to me. It's age ain't nothing but a number. And that was a challenge going back to that like, "Oh, well you're young, you didn't live through this." It's like, "I had to live through it to tell the damn story." I don't have ... That's a challenge that I had to get over and that will be one of the challenges I will say to whoever the millennials will be listening and undergrads, listening to this podcast, you don't let age be the deterrent to what holds you

back from your passion, or you being intimidated by people who've been in the industry longer, or have different resources.

Nwaka Onwusa: And I'm sure there could have been, and I know there could have been seven other people who could've done this exhibit on Tupac, but it was me who did this exhibit on Tupac and Afeni Shakur loved what I did and I mean, and she blessed it and I said, "And that trumps any educator who calls themselves an expert." Afeni, the mother who birthed this young guy, that's a woman who's blessing this and saying, "Pac would be proud." I had never, I didn't imagine that I would be in this position that I'm in now. Did not imagine that at all when I first signed that contract at the Fine Arts Theater that I would be a curator of two big music museums in this country and to do that, but it's putting in the work and having a taste of humility. I mean that, it really goes a long way.

Nwaka Onwusa: I worked in the box office, and picked up trash off the floor and peeled off vinyl off of, no job, it was above me as, "Oh, well you're the this." And if my passion goes for the longevity of what these stories are, meaning whatever it takes by any means necessary, whatever I have to do, then that's what I'm going to do. And that's the drive that needs to, that's the kind of drive and passion that's going to help this next generation when they're approaching challenges. Not to run away from them because it ain't happening too fast, but to dig in it because that's what builds character.

Rickerby Hinds: It is always a valuable learning opportunity to take time to reflect. At the end of each interview, we like to ask our guests this. In hindsight, what is something you wish you would've known when you were starting out?

Nwaka Onwusa: Whatever it has been. I don't wish that I would have done or known anything, any different. I mean, because the relationship out of me not knowing have groomed me and have built relationships, because I didn't know, I had to then ask so and so. I feel like all of those things have made me who I am. The not knowing in those moments have helped me to be who I am.

Rickerby Hinds: Nwaka, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to get to come back to us for a minute.

Nwaka Onwusa: Absolutely. Thanks for having me. This was an honor.

Rickerby Hinds: Join us for our next episode, when we talk with photographer and artist Chris Jordan about environmental advocacy and his UCR art exhibition, Intolerable Beauty, Exploring the Consequences of Mass Consumption and Global Plastics Pollution.

Rickerby Hinds: Thanks for listening. Find more information about our guests @creatorstate.com. Do you know someone creating something great? Send us what you're creating for a chance to be featured in an upcoming episode. Write to us at creatorstate@ucr.edu. There's a team creating this podcast. Help us by

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Rickerby Hinds: Gospel songs. What's that one song? But for me, it's The Potter's House and it's for praise and worship, it's Alpha and Omega, Israel & New Breed.

Nwaka Onwusa: It will definitely be Mississippi Mass Choir, Amazing Grace. They bring me to tears with that version of their song.