

Catherine Morris, Founder and Creator of BAMS Fest

Catherine T. Morris is the Founder and Executive Director of Boston Art & Music Soul (BAMS) Fest. She is also is the Director of Public Programs for the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a Fenway Alliance Member. Her background includes higher education, youth and audience development, event production and cultural programming.

When asked what inspired her to create BAMS Fest, Catherine says that it was her lived experience in Philadelphia where she held seven internships that spurred her to look at cultural festivals a little differently and with more interest, particularly their ability to bring BIPOC communities together and boost economies while providing more equitable progress for Artists and small minority-owned businesses. When she came back to Boston-her hometown in 2014, she started talking to members of her community, particularly elder leaders who told her that Boston lacked spaces and more broadly a sense of community belonging. "I wondered if Boston was willing to do something for everyone."

During that same time Catherine was attending graduate school at Simmons College (now University, and a long-term Fenway Alliance member). She received her master's degree in General Management there. While in Simmons, Catherine participated in a competitive shark tank-like session where students put together a business plan and pitched it to a panel of knowledgeable women business leaders from all corners of Boston. Catherine's pitch described in detail a large-scale festival of Black and Brown performers, and she ended up winning the Simmon's "shark-tank".

In 2015, she pulled together the first planning meeting for the festival that would come to be BAMS Fest. The initial group was comprised of community leaders working in diverse industries with a wide range of skillsets-- finance, law, business, nonprofits, and community organizing. "I leaned in hard with the elders in my community," Catherine explained. From May to September 2015, I built a partnership with Arts Emerson. For three years, BAMS Fest partnered with Emerson's Black Box Sound concert series. "We sold out every show during our three-year run there." In 2015, BAMS Fest partnered with the Fenway Alliance's Opening Our Doors Festival, emerging from a meeting Catherine had with ED Kelly and the Assistant Director at that time, Arreen Andrews. Opening our Doors hosted one of BAMS Fest premier participating jazz artists Valerie Stephens. In fact, Ms. Stephens was a headliner at the Opening Our Doors festival, performing outdoors on an unusually hot 87- degree day in October that year! She was a huge hit.

Though BAMS Fest was gaining citywide support and affirmative buzz, from the years 2015-2018, Catherine still had to work very hard to convince the "powers that be" in Boston that as a Boston native she and her team could pull off a large-scale festival, and moreover it would be a positive thing for the City to host a festival featuring Black and Brown artists. Catherine leading the BAMS Fest endeavor started methodically, creating numerous small and well-executed events that built an organic audience for BAMS Fest roster of multidisciplinary artists. Even so, as Catherine explains "in a City like Boston, race will always be a factor, in addition to social status, and even my status as a tall African American woman! I knew I had to be patient, and just continue to build up our audience. Personally, I was ready to hit the ground running, but I knew Boston didn't work that way." Catherine, ever generous in her praise for the elders of her community, passionately describes how she leaned

into and learned from those who had come before her for guidance, inspiration and support, cultural leaders like Elma Lewis, among others. “I listen to my intuition and pay attention to the timing of when I’m supposed to meet people; slow growth has worked in my favor.” She goes on to explain, “we are a close-knit town, and you have to be validated by someone to get things done. On the plus side of that, provided you are received well, folks here generally make good on those introductions and truly help you.”

For BAMS Fest finding a longer-term home or even a one-time venue was a particular challenge. Catherine freely admits the “venue journey, as she calls it, was not easy, and she knew from instinct and experience that location for events in Boston really matters. Catherine scouted potential venues for a full year, touring locations as diverse as the Xfinity Center to the Lawn on D, to the fairgrounds in Brockton. Then she had a festival-changing conversation with her mother: “Have you considered Franklin Park?” Of course, that was the place BAMS Festival should have its inaugural moment, she realized. When asked how Catherine then went about securing Franklin Park, getting all the appropriate permits and other permissions, she responds readily: “This is where civics gets involved and politics. And, I had paid attention.” She met with Julie Burros, Boston’s Chief of Arts and Culture at that time, and the current Arts Chief Kara Elliot-Ortega who was quick to embrace the vision for BAMS Fest. Catherine also met with Chris Cook the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation at that time. Chris is now the Chief of Energy and the Environment. Franklin Park is an historic Frederick Law Olmsted Park so special considerations would need to be in place to ensure the Park would be protected. She met with the Boston Police Department and the Fire Department. Through Dr. S. Atyia Martin, former Chief Resilience Officer for the Mayor’s Office, Catherine was introduced to and wisely engaged Nerissa Scott Williams, CEO and Lead Creative Producer of That Child Got Talent Entertainment, who saw the potential for BAMS Festival right away and helped her navigate the many obstacles. Importantly, she also made sure to show up at everyone else’s events to gain buy in and support, but also to show she supported other efforts to lift up the City, as well.

With the knowledge that she had always had the dream and desire to “scale the event up,” and recognizing the barriers to accomplish largescale events in Boston for artistic and community leaders of color, Catherine created a larger Steering Committee to assist. She explains, “Irish and Italian festivals receive a lot of bells and whistles in our City, whereas festivals featuring Black and Brown folks are often minimized, or worse yet perceived as threats to public safety. Coming in there was the expectation that I would fail. I had to prove a higher standard of professionalism. When you are a visionary, you so clearly see that vision, but you encounter a lot of doubt by many in the beginning. When I close my eyes, I can see what BAMS Festival looks like in 2028, beyond that I can’t see it, which means it will probably be time for a new leader by then.”

When she started BAMS Fest, Catherine felt there was a vital need for the Black Arts Movement to be represented in Boston, and the variety of music she sought out and received from the participating performers was astounding. Many white people assumed the festival would showcase solely Rap and Hip Hop artists. “Even our logo scared some people. So, this is what I was doing when I personally met with so many people and staged so many smaller events—building trust among potential dissenters and a place of belonging for our Artists. *Relationships matter to me.* I knew the quality of events had to be very high—this was the Boston I grew up in after all, and I wanted the festival and it’s

promotional events to reflect that as well.” She continues, “I adhere to the philosophy of Robert Lewis, Jr. (Founder & President of The Base www.thebase.org) ‘excellence is the standard. I’m giving you the best of me, because we deserve it.’ The Artists who signed onto BAMS Fest, *matter* to me—Valerie Stephens, Latrell James Obehi Janice, Elideusa—they were the ones I started with; they were the core.” More humorously Catherine adds they helped her establish the ‘one diva per gig’ rule.

Catherine, a creative powerhouse herself, is clearly also a champion and now often a mentor for other BIPOC Artists. She has thoughts on what is needed to support and amplify their work, versatility, value and character across Greater Boston and beyond.

She would like to see universities, colleges and cultural institutions extend, customize, or create new resources and opportunities to Black and Brown artists in their communities. These could vary from space usage, webinars, conferences, masterclasses, and public forums. More importantly, establishing a mentorship pipeline to these artists could enhance their ability to build their businesses, professionalism, and network.

“It’s called a creative practice for a reason. You’re supposed to practice and get better,” she states but of course you need people and places to do that. Catherine prefers the term Creative Entrepreneur rather than Artist. For her, Artist is a bygone term that implies fine arts and has become a vague catch-all that does not include the necessary business savvy required to really make a creative endeavor financially viable. “Artists take business risks every day. They may not have been trained in the business skills they need, yet they certainly need to be able to apply those skills,” she affirms.

Catherine also wishes major white cultural institutions would “come meet the Artists where they’re at” and not always expect it to be the other way around. She believes we are at a moment where how we interact with and support Black and Brown creative entrepreneurs has to shift, if the Arts are to survive. Pay scale of course is another issue. There are still huge inequities in pay scales for commissioned work, not just in terms of race but also in terms of gender, sexual orientation, artistic discipline, and authentic interest from large and mid-sized presenting and exhibiting organizations. Catherine is still trying to figure how ways in which we can balance these daunting scales. For Catherine and BAMS Fest, part of the formula of success has been exquisitely rigorous preparation and slow incremental progress. She readily acknowledges she thrives with this approach, but even she admits it should not have to be quite so difficult. When times are especially challenging, she leans on her staff for encouragement. “We support each other as a family. We vent *and* we celebrate. We have each other’s backs.” When asked how she reinvigorates herself and renews her own inspiration, Catherine doesn’t hesitate to say that music is a huge part of her self-care. Being first-time mother has also helped her find balance and a sense of renewal. “You’d be surprised what a child can teach you that is very different than what another adult says you can’t possibly do,” she says with a wink. And “Through my son, I’ve learned some patience, which helps me to listen to more calmly. Motherhood definitely adds a layer of magic,” she says, smiling.