



CHRISTINE OSAZUWA

‘Anomaly’, ‘Other’, ‘Guest’ – on belonging, at home and abroad

Christine Osazuwa is the Director of Data Insights for the Global Marketing Team. Her personal and professional experiences have been characterized by a level of removal from the typical – from her formative years spent as a Rock-music-loving, first-generation Nigerian-American in the predominantly white suburbs of Baltimore (yes, Baltimore of ‘The Wire’ renown) - to her experiences working in the uneclectic musical scene in Stockholm, and even now as a Black American living abroad and grappling with the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement without full access to civil engagement (more on that below).



Growing up just outside of Baltimore, Christine Osazuwa's childhood could not have been more different from the life portrayed in the series *The Wire*. Her parents, having immigrated to the US from Nigeria in their 20s, provided her with a comfortable suburban existence, with a nice car, and good schools. As an adult however, Christine is of the view that by shielding her from the admittedly harsh reality of life in Baltimore, her parents in fact prevented her from having a real concept of the depth of racial inequality in the city she grew up next to. "It felt like I was deprived of a full understanding of my own history," says Christine of the duality of that experience.

Her upbringing was also atypical in other ways – or at least considered as such by her peers. At the schools she attended, Christine found it difficult to find others who looked like her – and even more so, to find other Black kids to whom she could relate. Consider this: she was an unapologetic fan of Rock music, while the few Black peers she did have were exclusively listening to Rap and Hip-Hop and were completely disinterested in Christine's preferred genre. Although she did find friends who would accompany her to rock shows, she reflects that she never quite belonged in that space either. On top of that, as a first-generation Nigerian-American, her family's culture, structure and expectations were quite different from those of her peers.

What's fascinating about Christine is that she leaned into those differences and never backed down from her love of Rock music, instead going so far as to launch her own monthly music mag called *Scene Trash Magazine*. She ran the magazine for around five years, through half of her high school career and halfway through her time at University and by the end of it had a staff of twelve girls along the East Coast spanning from New York to Florida. Impressively, the magazine's website (although not mobile friendly) is still live, as are its associated social media pages. The publication included reviews, interviews, photographs and articles about local bands who you could expect to see touring the East Coast. While all the names may not be of the household variety, (and intentionally so for an independent mag), there are highlights like *Cobra Starship* and *All Time Low*. Coming full circle in some ways, Christine shares that she once booked Baltimore-natives *All Time Low* for her 16th birthday, and now the band is signed to Warner under Elektra in the US (and enjoying a successful run of it).

She has certainly retained that love for the music scene circa '04/'05/'06 – when asked which album she would turn back time to work on, her long-held fangirl status for *Fall Out Boy* takes precedence. "I think I've been obsessed with *Fueled by Ramen* since I could understand the premise of the music industry," Christine admits. She's talking about the label which is a subset of Elektra and which



during that era boasted bands like Fall Out Boy, Gym Class Heroes, Cobra Starship, and The Academy Is... In fact, she says that the chance to be involved with Fueled by Ramen and its bands was one of her first motivations for working in the music industry. She also takes the opportunity to share the less-known fact that Fall Out Boy's Pete Wentz is actually biracial and was once part of a band called Racetractor.

The topics of race, belonging and diversity naturally featured throughout our conversation, and we wondered what Christine's experiences had been like as a Black woman living in the UK. In answering this, Christine sets the scene by first sharing her experiences living and working in Sweden. "I actually never set foot in Stockholm before moving there so it was a very interesting culture shock," she laughingly reveals. Her collection of Stockholm anecdotes reveal a genuine frustration with the lack of diversity, and while at Universal she yearned for opportunities to work with artists who looked like her. "Even in Rap or Urban music, the most successful artists (in Sweden) at the time were Eminem and Post Malone. So that was a struggle," she notes. She also keenly felt the lack of familiar culinary experiences, and while food was not the most important factor, it certainly figured in her decision to eventually move on to other locales.

Her first (and second, and third) impressions of London, while visiting for

work, were entirely favourable. From the culturally diverse food so readily available (she admits to thinking wistfully of all the plantains she could eat if she lived here) to the visible diversity, to the much longed-for commonality of experiences with other first and second-generation Caribbean and African peers. The latter in particular marked a first for Christine – after having been for most of her life what she calls an anomaly, she was able to find in London a community of people with whom she could identify as a child of immigrants. Happily, with her geographical and career moves, Christine also found another community she had long been searching for – one which embraced a wide spectrum of music and which did not seek to separate the music made by Black artists from her much-loved Rock music. "There is that overlap, and it's important to consider. There are all these nuances and influences that Black music has on rock music but it's frustrating because very often in the States those two things are very much removed from each other."

Despite the sources of belonging that arose with her move to London, Christine remains alienated in some ways by her status as an 'expat' or as she calls it, a "guest in someone else's country". When asked about how she has dealt with the traumatizing events which gave rise to the recent resurgence in the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, she notes that one challenge in the past was dealing with the smug attitude of some Europeans that it (racial



inequality and police brutality) was an 'American problem'. One positive this time around is that there has been more acknowledgment that these problems exist around the world, which is unexpected progress as far as she is concerned. Still, Christine shares that it hasn't been easy as she naturally feels a bit removed from the situation in the US and she is also not be able to go out and protest as she would have otherwise.

One reason for that hesitance to protest on the streets of London is of course the global pandemic that we're living through, but another key reason is the fact that she sees herself as a guest in the UK – and a Black woman at that - who could easily be deported should she run afoul of the authorities. "I'm very hesitant to protest in a country that is not mine, so that is very much a challenge. How do you express your civil engagement when you can't vote and protesting seems dangerous?" The answer to this is still a work in progress for her, but she notes that she has been focused and intentional with her purchases and donations, supporting causes and Black businesses both in the UK and abroad which are aligned to the agenda she supports.

She also shares her thoughts on allyship and the importance of holding not just yourself, but also your government, your friends and your employer accountable. She notes that not being able to vote is somewhat limiting to how she can hold the UK Government accountable but

encourages others who can, to do so. On the topic of friends and other allies, she sums it up by saying "the hope is that all of these people that say they're allies are also doing the heavy lifting so you're not the spokesperson for all black people in the world all the time". Well put, we think. On the latter she had this to say, "You betcha, I 100% believe in holding employers accountable for what they say they're going to do, and for what they haven't said yet." She calls for the wider community to ensure that employers are driving the culture that we think will move the world forward in a positive way, whether through their financial standing or the use of their voice.

For herself, she admits that while her position at Warner is high up enough that she feels comfortable to speak up, the same may not apply for persons at other levels in the organization. The fact that she does have a voice within the organisation has emboldened her to use it however, and this is one way she makes up for her otherwise lacking civil engagement. Having been at Warner for just over a year, and having changed roles in that time, we were curious to find out what Christine saw as her next steps within her career. "I work in a global capacity so hopefully the world opens up again and I can travel to some of these territories I've been talking to for months – because time zones are a challenge." She also noted that it can be difficult to build relationships and the necessary trust without that face-to-face contact. Within her sphere of control



(since international travel is arguably not so), she has hired someone to join her team and looks forward to having more time to dedicate to strategic work in driving the marketing strategy for Warner Music Group.

Of course, we sought to bring the topics of race and music together, so we asked Christine for her thoughts on the responsibility of artists to speak about issues such as racial inequality and police brutality. “Unfortunately, the burden tends to fall on Black artists,” she notes, drawing parallels to the prior conversation on allyship. She reminds that police brutality is unfortunately nothing new, and that there is plenty of topical music - enough to create full playlists as some streaming services had done to support Black Lives Matter. “I think Black artists have done more than enough to acknowledge racial inequality, police brutality and just general injustice in the world,” she asserts. Compellingly, she calls for a reversal of the status quo, encouraging more non-people of colour artists to stand up and say something, “not just on social media, but within their music”. That distinction is for Christine an important one since incorporating these themes into your music has long been reserved for Black artists.

As we brought the conversation to a close, we asked Christine what five (5) albums she would be willing to listen to on repeat while stranded on a desert island. She proposed Fall Out Boy’s Under the Cork Tree (surprising no one

who had ever met her); something by Drake (“either Scorpion or Take Care”, I think); Linkin Park - Hybrid Theory; Lauryn Hill – The Miseducation Of; and ended with full-on pop courtesy Oops I did it again by Britney Spears, “because some of those were really heavy”. A playlist worthy of a self-titled ‘anomaly’, indeed.

Written by Leah Ishmael-Lynch