

A close-up portrait of Stephanie Matthews, a woman with short, styled grey hair, wearing a white collared shirt and gold hoop earrings. She is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera against a dark background.

Meet Stephanie Matthews

Stephanie Matthews is an award-winning photographer, creative director/producer, and mentor with 17 years of experience. Her imagery has been published internationally, including, Magazine covers, fashion editorials, a Times Square Billboard, and gallery exhibitions with work touching fields from fashion, dance, sports, entertainment, and photojournalism.

"How we choose to show up in life matters. I want to be remembered as an encourager and a builder who helped people reach their full potential."

In May 2021, she became a founding member of A Tribe for Jazz, and stepped into the role of Executive Director for the Columbus-based nonprofit whose mission is to preserve the legacy and advance the future of jazz through visual storytelling, live and virtual performance, education, and community engagement.

Leadership that transforms.

Stephanie's transformational leadership style, passion for community building and space-making, and expertise in visual storytelling and production flow into every aspect of her work. Whether collaborating with acclaimed Jazz musicians, contracting creative professionals to produce visual assets, engaging with community stakeholders, or creating programs, she leads with empathy, active listening, and inclusion.

Under her leadership, Tribe has garnered a reputation of caring and excellence among acclaimed Jazz musicians like Thelonious Monk Saxophone winner Jon Irabagon, Grammy-award-winning bassist Linda May Han Oh, and renowned pianist/composer Fabian Almazan.

Creating Safe Space to Build Community

Creating safe spaces developed from my work with modern dancers in 2007. At the time, I was refining my photography philosophy, still processing the death of my beloved father, settling into life in Manhattan, and working through a creative idea about the many faces we wear in our lives.

I was going through a lot...while also trying to find my own safe space amidst a life that was upended.

Back then, these "spaces" were an actual environment I would curate to encourage vulnerability, experimentation, exploration, and collaboration without fear of judgment. In these spaces, no actions or thoughts are wrong.

Photographing Dancers as a Practical Example

In those days, when a dancer would arrive at my studio space for a session, the drapes would already be drawn, the studio lights set, and calming music would be playing.

She would come in, relax, and stretch while I attended to other details, and when she was ready, we would discuss the intention for the shoot then I would briefly explain my philosophy. At that point, we would agree that ours was a judgment-free zone and begin the session.

Those sessions were all improvisational dance. During moments of rest, we would discuss what was happening or the choreography they drew from. Sometimes I would offer encouragement or highlight a particular move I really enjoyed.

Sometimes I would shift the direction entirely by asking them to meditate on a color or an emotional keyword I would give them to trigger a feeling we could explore.

After most sessions, the dancer and I would sit quietly, cry or hug.

The entire process was deeply freeing, cathartic, and transformative.

The success of the collaboration required only our willingness to be fully present, to bring our gifts into the open, to allow ourselves to be seen, and to accept the unknowns. That was the magic! It was never about the steps in the process or the final photographs.

I have faithfully used variations of this process my entire career. It is a part of my lifestyle and how I build trust and community with all my clients and professional collaborators.



Making A Mark

*For my first project leading **A Tribe for Jazz**, we produced a cinematic performance film featuring renowned improvisational saxophonist Jon Irabagon.*

I developed a vision for a solo performance that uses bold, majestic colored lighting for each song to represent a range of emotions — and a camera language to bring viewers intimately into the performance experience.

*The film "**Legacy Jon Irabagon: A Solo Tenor Odyssey**" debuted on stellartickets.com in October 2021 and was a great success. It was named an Official Selection in two international film festivals. There were press mentions in the *New York Jazz Record*, *Jazz Times*, and *Occhi Magazine*. We received a Columbus City Council resolution recognizing our innovative work, and we toured the film as a screening/artist talk series to The Nantucket Antheneum, Nantucket, MA, followed by four Columbus Metropolitan Libraries.*

*Later that year, I used the film as the central component in an education program called "**An Exploration of Emotions and Color through Jazz Music**," a five-step social-emotional learning/arts program that helps children in grades 3-8 unlock their emotions and work towards greater self-expression, self-awareness, collaboration, and confidence.*

With CoverMyMeds sponsorship, the program was piloted in select west side Columbus City Schools and was named a 2022 GCAC Art Makes Excellence Award finalist.

The fact that so much could come from one project was a tremendous lesson for me in adaptability and sustainability.

*Legacy has set the standard for how **A Tribe for Jazz** approaches the development of all of our major programs.*





Inspired to Innovate

Stephanie is very interested in the intersection between Jazz improvisation and STEM Education, DE&I, Medicine, and Design.

"I believe improvisation can unlock significant innovation in these spaces and create new opportunities for growth, collaboration, and appreciation of the art form."

She is developing a series of panel discussions for 2024 that will bring academic minds and changemakers from divergent fields to the conversation.

To learn more about A Tribe for jazz visit: www.atribeforjazz.org.

Stephanie resides in Columbus, OH. She adores her two cats, KaylaBean and Junior, and enjoys movies, wind-rustling leaves, lunch dates, early morning meditation, and traveling.

She continues to create compelling images for brands and private clients and mentors creative professionals.

Stephanie works in Columbus, New York, and Los Angeles and is available for speaking engagements, panel discussions, creative projects, creative consultation, and mentoring.