

# BACKSTAGE

## How This VO Actor Is Helping Connect African American Talent With More Opportunities

By Kelley Buttrick



Years ago, I received a message from a stranger interested in learning more about voiceover. It was the multi-talented Bryan J. Howard, who has since gone on to bring a wealth of characters to life in audiobooks, commercials, and corporate projects for industry titans like Walmart, Delta, Wilson, and others. In addition to voice acting, Bryan is a sought-after musician with a career that includes fronting for the indie-soul band The Heap, being a member and manager of Del Toro Sound, LLC. and recently touring with the band Cracker.

Over the years building his voiceover business, Bryan recognized the need for a go-to source where casting directors could find professional African American voice actors and founded the African-American Voice Actor Database. I spoke with Bryan about creating the database, how his music career influences his voiceover work, and more.

### **What inspired the creation of the African-American Voice Actor Database?**

The inspiration came from doing a web search to see if anything like it currently existed. I was actually surprised that I couldn't [find] anything close to what I pictured online. I then began asking agents and talent if they thought it might be a useful tool. The response was very positive so I figured I would give it a shot. I worked for a software company for a while so I started talking to folks who could put it together.

### **What is the criteria to be listed on the African-American Voice Actor Database?**

All talent on the database are expected to be working, professional voice actors and to have the necessary tools such as at least one professionally produced demo, professional-quality recording equipment or access to a studio, and connectivity options. There is no cost to be listed on or use the database. It is run on donations.

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## **What unique challenges have you experienced as an African American voice actor?**

I think I share the same challenges ALL voice actors have in common with the possible exception of being asked to sound “more black.”

## **When a casting director is looking for an African American voice actor, what specific qualities are they seeking?**

This is a great question, and I would love to know the answer myself. However, if I had to guess, I would imagine they have a certain, timbre, cadence, and possibly attitude in mind. But talent varies dramatically, and I do believe that there are many opportunities in VO other than jobs with “urban” listed in the specs.

## **How does the African-American Voice Actor Database help those who are casting VO talent?**

It is designed for those casting voices to be able to come in and browse the talent listed on the site and contact them directly. We are already planning the first update to streamline the process. Talent seekers can also send auditions to me at [info@aavadb.com](mailto:info@aavadb.com) to send to database members en masse.

## **As an African American voice actor, do you feel forced into a niche? Why or why not?**

I actually do not. When I look at a script my first thought is “can I sell this believably?” and that determines if I do the job. The longer I do this, the more I start to recognize where I shine. I get a good number of jobs that list “Sam Elliot style” in the specs, but I do all kinds of work including a lot of corporate narration. So, I refuse to be boxed into a niche at this point.

## **How has your background as a professional musician hindered you as a voice actor?**

The only hindrance at all is slowing down my VO work to go on tour. I always travel with a mobile rig so I can keep working, but I don't audition as much when I am on tour. I usually record at night after the show. I am blessed to be able to make a living doing what makes me happiest so I can't really complain about the difficulty involved with either industry. I am truly living my dream.

## **How has your background as a professional musician helped you as a voice actor?**

VO is just another form of music to me. It's all about rhythm, pitch, timbre, and creating an emotional response in your audience. I don't say that to sound overly dramatic, but it is exactly how I see it. I also think that, with over 30 years as a professional musician, I am able to adapt to the changes in the industry. I could go on and on about this, but music has made my VO career possible.

## **Can you please share some advice to other African American voice actors making their way in this industry?**

Never stop researching, learning, and improving. Also, be yourself, be persistent, and be kind.