

- Hey, and welcome to PCTY Talks. I'm your host, Shari Simpson. During our time together, we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro. And together we'll explore topics around hr thought leadership, compliance, and real life HR situations we face every day. Joining me on the podcast today is Jade Simmons. She is a world-class concert pianist, a powerhouse, activational speaker, and a CEO of Jade Media Global. I probably could spend 15 minutes just going on and on about how amazing she is. I recently got to see her at a conference. So, Jade, thank you so much for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

- Thank you for having me.

- So, you have this really unique background and journey. I was hoping we could start with, what was your epiphany to change how you used your presence as a concert pianist to what you do now?

- Yeah, I tell this story mostly the same way on most stages. And of course I tell in about two minutes and it really happened and it's still happening right over the course of many years. But the long and short of it is that I started out really seriously and genuinely only wanting to be a classical concert pianist. And over time, for a variety of different reasons, I started to add little by little to that experience. The first thing I added was speaking to my audience. And I always joked that part of it was a way to kind of catch my breath, get over a little bit of stage fright. I think I figured it out psychologically that if I could make friends with the audience by speaking across the footlights, it somehow created a bond that felt different than like spectator coming to see you conquer the bull which is the piano and all. And I'm sure half of that was just all in my head anyway but creating that conversational bond really alleviated some stresses like stage fright or memory slips or really being overly worried about making mistakes. And so that was probably my biggest breakthrough. And it changed my career in terms of people were wanting to book me even more because I did something other classical musicians weren't doing which was something as simple as speaking. And then over time I got a little braver and started shifting up the types of classical music I was performing or mixing on concerts, modern classical with traditional classical. And then even starting to bend the genres a bit a little bit of blues, a little bit of jazz and then really going crazy. And I always say combining elite music with street music like really bringing in the sounds you were more used to hearing on your favorite radio station if it were hip hop and RNB or in a nightclub. And that sort of amalgamation has brought me to where I am today creating what I call concert adventures that take audiences on this journey of inspiration, information, and entertainment.

- Once you landed on your new vibe, as I'll call it, how did you go about telling the world about yourself and I guess holding yourself accountable too to that new way of approaching things and not kind of

slipping back into this is the old way that I've done it before.

- To be honest, the beginning the first four or five years really was an organic evolution. Everything I just mentioned added on piece by piece. Some things were really cool collaborations that I was like I like how that felt. I wanna keep that, I'm not going back, right? So, and I always warn people that once you sort of give into this lifestyle of reinvention, which so in the beginning it was our organic evolution, now it's very intentional reinvention like set to a clock. If I have not added something new in the last 12 to 18 months, come check on me. Something's wrong, right? But I'll tell audiences often that eventually that accountability piece comes from not continuing to call the new thing by the name of the old thing. So, at some point I couldn't keep saying I was playing piano recitals, 'cause it was kinda like an outright lie at that point. And I was also setting myself up, right? If I was saying I'm playing a classical piano recital and 98% of my audience was coming for Chopin, Mozart, Beethoven, not only was I going to fail them in terms of what they were expecting, I would then have again that false sense of pressure of having to deliver on something I wasn't even a hundred percent committed to delivering on anymore. So, I started going from saying piano recitals to concert adventures. And that gave me also the freedom to sort of shape shift as the moment required. And I started doing things in the concert experience that I hadn't planned beforehand. Whereas when I was solely a classical artist there was a printed agenda and the audience is expecting in order to see what they saw. And I remember even with classical there were just certain parts of the music. You know, we have sonatas which are divided into three movements. And I would love the first movement, love the last movement but was like, eh, not so in love with the second. But I would suffer through it. And I remember going, who says I have to play that? Well, there was hundreds of years of reasons why I believe I had to play it. And when I would do concert adventures, I could say only gonna play the first movement and then I'm gonna jump 200 years into the future and play something by a living composer. And so it was this freedom that I was having as an artist that I saw become really contagious for the audience itself.

- Talking about reinvention, this is the first episode of the New year and I think a lot of times we fall into that, like what are your New Year's resolutions? And I kind of ditched that a while ago. Last year I focused on a word, I had a word that I wanted to focus on. So, as you think about that concept of reinvention, which I think is a great word, might be my word this year, we'll see, did you ever run into imposter syndrome?

- I'm gonna be very honest and say I don't struggle with it maybe in the way that I hear a lot of people talk about it now. So, as I was thinking about that for our time together, I wanted to be really genuine. And I can go back. The closest I've come to having it was probably when I was solely pursuing a career as a classical musician.

I really wanted to dig into that. I didn't wanna just call it imposter syndrome. What I realized was going on was that in classical, the majority of our time as we're educated to play the music and as we are tested as performers is spent imitating and replicating what has come before us. So, the further we get from Mozart and Beethoven the truth is we've got the research, we sort of know about these guys, but we don't really know them as people. And so we are left to sort of interpreting the notes how the last legendary interpreter interpreted. And he interpreted based on the last legendary Beethoven pianist. And that in and of itself creates this straight jacket, at least for me, that didn't even feel informed because like, I didn't even get to talk to Beethoven and really find out what he wanted. And I think the key to freeing yourself of what we now call imposter syndrome is to make sure that we are not imitating. So, don't imitate create instead. So, instead of saying, I need to be like every other classical pianist that came before me, I need to imitate that way, imitate that method of programming, imitate even the articulation in the playing, I had to start saying, what is the experience I am uniquely designed to create? And I think even in the world of human resources, even in the world where we're trying to redesign what the workplace looks like. Yeah, the circumstances were thrust on us. Nobody voted for the season we're in, but we're here and we can either struggle and feel like we have to survive the new norms, or we can say "Wait a minute, it must mean that I can create the next norm. So, I think the opportunity in this now is let's create spaces, I know sometimes it's easier said than done, where we are designing the experience, the workplace experience we wanna have, the professional experience we wanna have and can we create new spaces that stick, right? When you talk about retention and recruitment, can we create spaces that people are attracted to? And I think now we get to sort of create in mind of thinking of the triggers that the former workplaces used to have. We can now say, what would a workplace look like now if we intentionally eliminated some of the past triggers that we used to have.

- Speaking of triggers, you had shared a story when we had you at a conference that we hosted. And you talked about, as you were going through your reinvention and trying to help the world understand where you wanted to sit and play, that you saw this pattern of you kept getting tapped just during Black History month. And so you made a very intentional change during that time. I'd love if you could share a little bit about that and maybe tack on unconscious bias and how that played a factor in what you were seeing.

- And I don't even know if that's the term we would use for what was happening at that moment. I'm sure we could dig that out of there. But the move you're talking about, which was quite controversial, at least for my managers, was that I decided I was gonna start taking Black History month off and it freaked them out because it was sort of the elephant in the room. Bookings went up for February and black classical artists were still a very small minority in the world of

fine arts and especially when classical music. So, we were also sort of looking forward to that time of year, but I remember it was when it really hit home was this year where, I mean I was starting to really kill it. Like I was playing well all year long. I was having great debuts and good reviews, yet still, for some reason, somebody was looking at their arts calendar and go, let's savor for February. And then the other that would happen is they would say, well we'll have you this year in February and then in the future, oh, we'd love to have you back. And then I noticed that future never happened. And at the time I was what you called an emerging artist and I wrote a book for other artists called "Emerge Already" because I realized we had this label and then there were all these promises, you were a rising star. And we never seemed to rise all the way or emerge all the way. And I felt like I had to take my own personal stand. And what I told my managers at the time which I'm sure they thought was career suicide was tell them that my music sounds just as good in the other 11 months of the year. And I joke, I think I did with your audience that at least now we have March, we got Women's History month they give us a couple of weeks for Hispanic heritage. And I play a lot of Latin influence music. So look, I mean there were ways to get around it and say I'm just making my career any way that I can but I just never wanted to feel like I was allowing others to pigeonhole where my impact and when my impact could take place.

- I love the title of that book "Emerge Already", and it so resonates with me and I hope it resonates with our audience because HR has often sat in this space of like, hey we need a seat at the table, we need a seat at the table. And now we're at the table and it's like, well, what are you doing? You're here. Like, are you stepping up? So I think that's applicable for a lot of industries.

- Oh yeah.

- For people. It's time to show up and you have a really unique skill so bring it to the table and, and start influencing with it and helping your organizations reinvent. You talked a little bit about creating experiences. That's a space that HR is sitting in right now. It's so important for us.

- I think it is a unique, I've spent a lot of time in front of HR based audiences this year and the end of 2021. And I stand by this belief that this season, I don't know how long it's gonna last, I don't know how long the window is going to be open but I feel like for the first time in a long time, HR has the potential to drive an organization, to create culture. Because before all the shutdown, before George Floyd, none of the issues that are showing up now are really that new to you guys. They just were put under a spotlight. They were amplified, but many of you were the ones going, we need to watch this, hey, we need to look into this. And those concerns were really swept under the rug because there was no immediate demand for

change. And now that there's this immediate demand for change, which we must admit has gotten a little quieter, every six months, it gets a little quieter. I think you can't afford to miss the moment to really have your voice be heard. And listen, in defense to all the people who finally are at the table and are not sure what to say, it's because sometimes we fight for something so long we haven't even had the time to think about what we do if we actually got it. And I think the easiest way to remedy that is to believe in the expertise that you've been building over the last how many ever years, how many ever decades. And believe that your perspective is unique and necessary. And when you hear the issue that has always made your heart flutter or your blood boil, speak up and expect that it's a necessary thing that you're about to say

- Speak up. You've got that passion inside you. And you do have the knowledge. I mean, like you said, there's people who've been in this industry for years, they know what to do. They just need to find their voice. As we wrap up our conversation, you're somebody who I would look at and say you're a multi-passionate individual. And I find myself in that place a lot as well. I gravitate towards new things and challenges and wanna go really deep. And I think a lot of people in HR have the same multi-passionate on things. So, with that being said, how do you stay sane with all of the multi-passionate venues that you're approaching or trying to tackle?

- Yeah, who said I was sane? That's the first assumption. No, you know what it is? I had a mentor years ago and I don't know I was probably ideating out loud in whatever session she was doing and she said, "Jade you're like a shaken bottle of soda pop." And I was like, I rather to be offended or take that as a compliment. I decided to take it as a compliment. 'Cause that's just how I reframe everything. And I thought, you know what? I can teach people how to focus the fizz, right? And what I've learned over the years is, first of all, you're not gonna ever limit a multi-passionate person to one thing. It is the most futile exercise history of man. But what we can learn to do is focus all of our gifting skills, talents and abilities in one direction. And that direction to me is not a particular profession or a particular skill. It's actually purpose. And I try to say this in every group that I'm speaking in front of, which is purpose is not the thing you do, it is the thing that happens in others when you do what you do. So, if I know that I'm called to activate people into a bigger, bolder version of themselves, which is what I try to make happen in every room then that means anything that I lend my energy to must also activate in that way. So, it allows me to play music that activates, I can preach a sermon that activates, I can write a book that activates and I can always check myself and go, "If I read this book, do I feel bigger and bolder?" And I've spent years really honing in on that's what I'm called to do, and that's what happens when people are in the same space as me, then I still get to do all the things and know that everything I do is purposeful and will have the

right intended outcome. So, whatever space you're in, whatever workplace setting you're in, whether you're a rockstar, solo, one man, one woman show, I think being able to know that you create and cause an outbreak, identifying what that outbreak is and then dedicating time and energy to always being a part of making that outbreak happen, then you can put your hand to whatever it is you want and trust that it's gonna be doing good work.

- Jade, thank you so much for your perspective and encouragement to another multi-passionate individual. I think there's a lot of truth in what you said that can help me focus my own energies and hopefully our listeners too. So, thanks for taking a few minutes of your day.

- Thank you so much for having me.

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