



THE STATE OF BLACK AI FILMMAKING

VOLUME 1

2026

**Fourteen Voices. Three Continents.
Twenty-Four Hours. One Emerging Movement.**

Published by the Reel Sessions
Black AI Film Festival,
Kimberly Offord, Founder

RS

WWW.BLACKAIFILMFEST.COM

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This is not a market study. On June 19, 2026, for 24 hours, I streamed fourteen conversations (Reel Sessions, Black AI Film Fest), with creators of color who are using AI to build worlds, tell truths, build festivals and make a living.

I call them The Architects. What follows are the insights that emerged from listening to them closely, not because they represent every creator of color working in this space, but because what they told us is too specific, too consistent, and too honest to keep to ourselves.

Every insight in this report traces back to something a real creator said, on camera, in their own words. Where you see a quote, it's theirs.



Kimberly Offord, Founder,
Reel Sessions – The Black AI Film Festival
Playground Pastime

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THE ARCHITECTS

Fourteen people. Three continents. One unmistakable signal: a movement building itself in public, one frame at a time.

Technology doesn't solely create movements. People do.

The fourteen featured creators in this report don't share the same background, profession, or creative journey. They come from three continents. They have built careers in television, music, photography, graphic design, education, law, entrepreneurship, or advertising. Some have worked inside major institutions. Others built their own.

Yet after twenty-four hours of conversation, one thing became impossible to ignore:

They are all experienced creatives who recognize AI as another medium for expressing deeply rooted ideas.



Kimberly Offord
Organizer



Chris Branch
USA



Stacey Brewer
USA



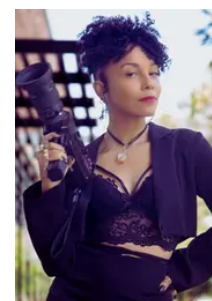
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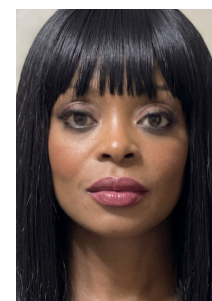
Joy Fennell
USA



Natalia Gonzalez
USA



Jai Harris
USA



Isy Imarni
ENGLAND



Diane Laidlaw
ENGLAND



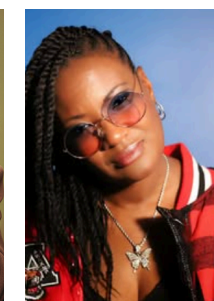
LaQuana Lewis
USA



Dr. Sam Martin
ENGLAND



Mary Grace
KENYA



Kim Pratt
USA



Justin Sims
USA



Ernest Williams
USA

THE ARCHITECTS

INSIGHT 01

Black AI creators aren't waiting for permission.

No studio greenlit this. No investor wrote a check first. Every one of the creators in this report started the same way: alone, with a laptop or a phone, and an idea no one asked them to make.

One was laid off from a network job at the end of 2024, and within a year had four festival awards and a development deal. Another spent two decades as a fashion buyer before ever picking up an AI tool and now is commissioned by international brands. None of them asked first. They just started.

That's the through-line of this entire report.

Think about this: **A generation of creators of color looked at a door nobody was holding open for them and simply walked through it.**

It made the playing field a little even. Before, we couldn't get into certain rooms because we didn't have the bandwidth to do it. But now we can.

JUSTIN "JSLAY" SIMS, Digital Artist, AI Filmmaker



THE ARCHITECTS

INSIGHT 02

They were master craftspeople long before they were AI creators.

Here's what gets lost in most conversations about AI and creativity: the people in this report didn't arrive as beginners. They arrived as a fashion buyer with fifteen years of experience. A hairstylist turned activist and coder. A lawyer trained at Oxford. A twenty-year makeup artist for major beauty campaigns. A game designer. A twenty-year veteran of network television production. A music producer and talent manager.

AI didn't hand any of them a creative eye. It handed a group of already-serious creatives a new instrument that could finally keep pace with their vision.

This distinction matters more than it sounds like it should. **It's the difference between a tool that replaces judgment and creativity and a tool that finally allows them move as fast as their own imagination.**



BUILDING BLACK FUTURES

INSIGHT 03

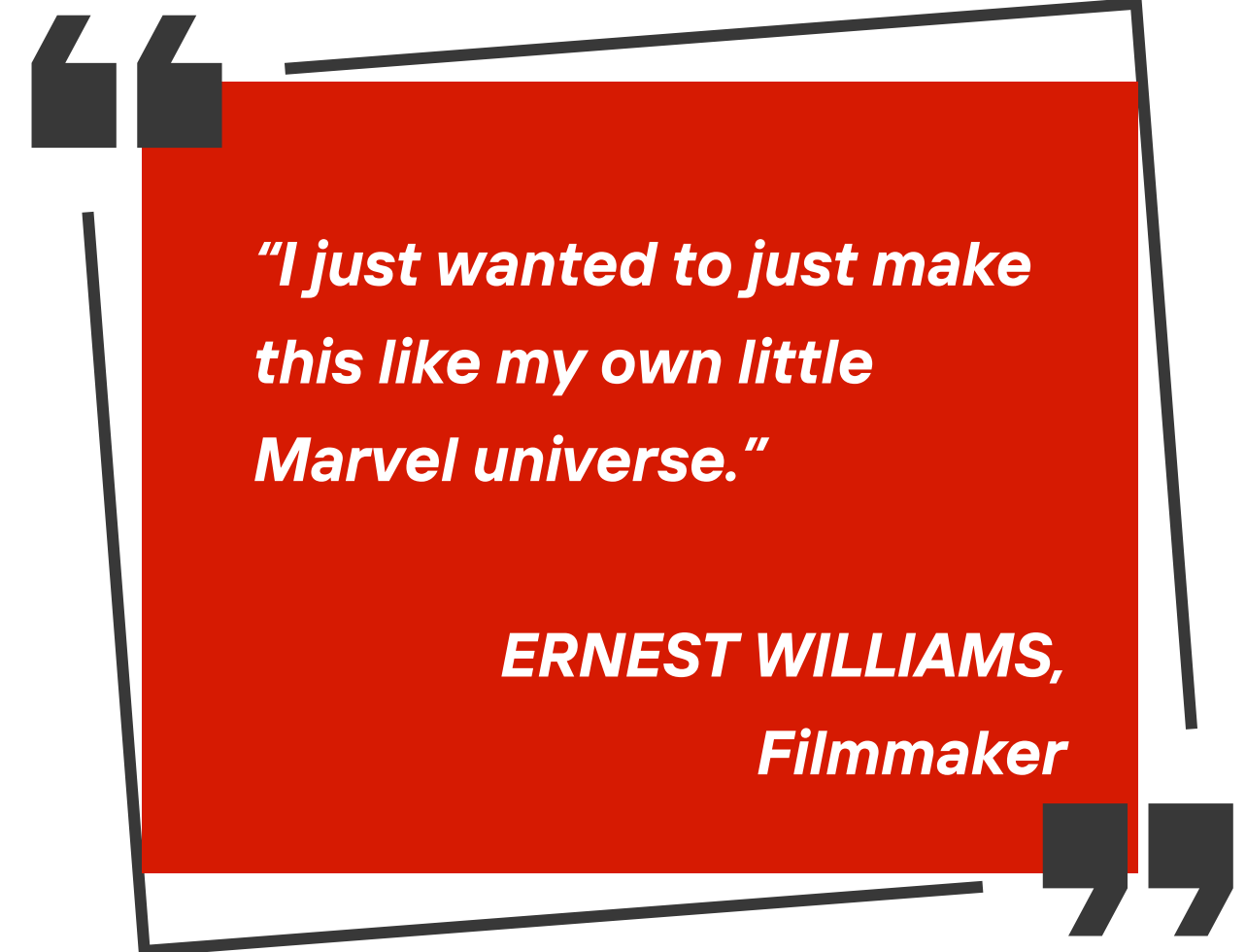
Before AI, imagining the future often meant imagining without us in it. The Architects are building Black futures on purpose, as history, as fantasy, as prophecy.

Afrofuturism is home base. Not the ceiling.

Ask most of these creators where they started, and the answer is often the same: Afrofuturism. Space, color, imagination, ancestral technology. It's the genre that gave a generation of Black creators a place to put their future that mainstream sci-fi rarely offered them.

But watch where they're going next, and a different story emerges. One is building a Southern Gothic horror universe rooted in Black folklore. Another is art-directing what may be the first Afrofuturist opera. A third walked away from a trending format entirely to build an epic, cinematic sci-fi saga she'd been writing in her head for ten years.

Afro-futurism opened the door long ago. **Now creators are walking through that doors into rooms where noone expected them to build.**



The future needs us to re-imagine it.

When a filmmaker in this report was commissioned to create a video for a national energy conference, it was shown to the entire country and broadcast by the president of a nation. Afterward, the same dignitary said something that has stayed with everyone who heard it: her team realized how deprived they'd been, as a people, of ever seeing their own image reflected in a vision of the future.

That's not a small thing. You can't walk into a future you've never been shown. For generations, Black audiences were asked to imagine forward without ever being shown what that forward might look like **with them in it.**

Fourteen creators, working independently of each other, are now building exactly that: **futures with a body, a face, a home, a family that looks like theirs as a birthright.**

"How can people walk into a future they cannot see?"

MARY GRACE,
Filmmaker



STORIES ONLY WE CAN TELL

INSIGHT 05

Some stories can be outsourced. These can't: Family memory, historical erasure, faith, folklore, grief and joy. The Architects are telling the stories no one else could, because no one else lived them.

I remember when I went I tried to prompt an older Black man, and it kept making the exact same old Black man in perpetuity. My hope is for those gaps to be closed in technology.

CHRIS BRANCH, Visual Artist

Representation is the foundation.

Most of the creators in this report work independently, on different continents, on different projects, and all described the exact same problem without ever comparing notes. Ask an AI model for an older Black man, one said, "and it gives you the same face, over and over, like the model only knows one."

This wasn't a complaint about a bug. It was a description of labor. This is the quiet, constant work of correcting a machine that defaults to forgetting you, prompt by prompt, until the image finally looks like it was made by someone who actually sees you.

That many of the architects arrived at the same finding, unprompted, is the kind of evidence that should matter to anyone building tools for this community. It's not one artist's frustration. It's a pattern.

We want to see ourselves everywhere.

***We can build the worlds
that we want.***

JOY FENNELL, Artist

For a long time, two kinds of stories were both hard to find: the ordinary and the impossible. Black life shown simply living, laughing, celebrating, getting through a Tuesday without a trauma attached to justify the screen time. Black life should be shown in the genres that imagine the impossible: the astronaut, the final girl who survives the horror movie, the hero at the center of the epic, not standing beside one.

One creator in this report described it plainly: mainstream science fiction never looked like her people, so for years she avoided the genre entirely rather than watch herself left out of the future again.

The range itself is the point. These creators aren't asking to be seen only in triumph, nor are they aren't asking to be seen only in struggle. They're asking for both the porch and the spaceship to be equally theirs to tell.

Joy is also resistance.

When people view my work, they feel a range of emotions. It's those conversations I enjoy. It makes it very worthwhile.

*DIANE "AFRO FUTCHA" LAIDLAW,
Filmmaker*

Not every story in this archive is heavy. One creator was explicit about this: she isn't an "AI artist," she's an artist who uses AI as a medium the way she once used brushes and makeup. Her medium of choice is color, surrealism, and joy.

She said it plainly: **"there's already an overrepresentation of Black trauma in art."** Joy, play, and forward-looking imagery are just as valid, and just as necessary, as anything harder.

In a field where representation conversations so often center pain, this is its own quiet act of defiance. **It is the insistence that a future worth building should also feel good to imagine.**

AI is lowering technical barriers, not creative standards.

If there's one thing every single creator in this report agreed on unprompted, it's this: the idea that AI removes the need for skill is the single most common, and most frustrating, misconception they face.

One creator put it as directly as it can be put: it's not just a prompt, you're directing everything in the film, camera movement, emotion, motivation, pacing. The tools have gotten faster. The judgment required to use them well did not get any easier.

What actually changed is who gets to exercise that judgment without first needing a studio's permission, budget, or blessing.

***It's not just a prompt.
You're directing everything
in the film.***

JAI HARRIS, filmmaker



BUSINESS OF BLACK AI

INSIGHT 09

There is no one way to make a living doing this.

Three different paths to sustainability are visible across this group, and no two creators are running the same playbook. Some are building portfolios to attract brand and institutional commissions. Some are monetizing their content directly through streaming platforms, ad revenue, and paid teaching communities. Others are using low-cost AI work as a proof of concept, with the explicit goal of eventually attracting real budgets and real crews.

One creator described this last path plainly: every piece she makes, she makes with the intention of one day having the funding to remake it for real with a full budget, a full crew, real actors.

None of the fourteen treated their business model as the only right one. It is an open field still figuring itself out in real time, in public, together. AND...the possibilities are endless.

"As creative pioneers, there's no more gatekeeping. The power is back to the creator. We can tell a story if we want it. We can distribute it how we want it and connect with the audiences."

*NATALIA GONZALEZ, founder,
Alterra Festival*



We refuse to allow the machine to forget or ignore us.

My brain has been colonized already. I'm trying to decolonize my imagination.

DR. SAM MARTIN, Artist

Many of the creators independently found the same bias in the same tools. What's worth sitting with is what they did about it.

Not one of them walked away. Each one learned, prompt by prompt, exactly which words moved a model away from its own defaults, which lighting terms, which texture language, which specificity forced the machine to actually see what it kept erasing.

That's not a workaround. That's a new kind of literacy. **The ability to read a tool's blind spots and correct for them on purpose, every single time. It's technical work.**

It's also, unmistakably, **an act of reclaiming.**

Owning your work means understanding what protects it

"Everybody has a record on you already. Where is your digital record of you?"

*JASMAINE COOK-KENDRICK,
Technology Sponsor,
Much Different World*

One collaborator central to this project put it with the clarity of someone who learned it the hard way: everybody already has a record of you. Google has one. Facebook has one. Every platform you've ever posted to has one. **The unsettled question isn't whether your creative output can be protected, it's whether you're the one holding the record of it,** or whether that record exists somewhere else, owned by someone else, without you.

What's still unsettled is who gets to be the source. Until that gets resolved, the issue isn't a copyright filing, it's a timestamp. A provable, time-stamped record of when you made something, built and held by you, that doesn't require a courtroom or an attorney's fee to mean something. It's a different kind of protection than the legal system currently offers artists, and for creators who've never been able to afford the legal kind, it may be the more honest one.

Being seen on screen means nothing if you don't own the record of it's existence. Now, the method is here and was built by a black woman with Much Different World.

There's room for all of us, so gatekeeping is a choice we're rejecting.

I'm definitely no gatekeeper. You can give a person the entire recipe, and they still won't cook it the same way you do."

*LaQuana Lewis, Micro-Drama
Series Filmmaker*

Ask nearly any creator in this report about the community around them, and a version of the same sentence comes back: there are too few of us here for anyone to need to compete. Tools get shared. Workflows get posted publicly. Newer creators get pulled in, not kept out.

This shows up in concrete ways; teaching communities with hundreds of members, open workshops with no expectation of a finished product, peer networks that function more like family than competitors. It is a deliberate, repeated choice, not an accident of a small field.

In an industry built for generations on scarcity and gatekeeping, choosing abundance on purpose is its own kind of reclaiming.

Tools change. Platforms rise and disappear. What outlasts both is the work and the people who decided, before anyone gave them permission, to make it.

This be a second Cultural Renaissance. (Like Harlem)

It's a big claim. One creator in this report made it anyway, and after fourteen conversations, it's hard to argue any inaccuracy. This is a concentrated, sudden eruption of Black creative and intellectual output, made possible by a technology that had quietly existed for years before it was finally put into everyone's hands.

Renaissance is not a word people reach for lightly. But look at what's already here: an Afro-futurist opera, a government-commissioned film broadcast to an entire nation, a community teaching itself, in public, faster than any institution could formalize it.

History will decide what to call this period. The Architects are not waiting to find out.



"Years from now, I envision others saying we were the pioneers of this era, and that we were responsible with it."

Stacey Bewer, Filmmaker



The real future isn't about better tools. It belongs to who owns the room.

Every tool named in this report will be replaced by a better one within a year or two. That was true when this project started, and it will be true again by the time you read this. Chasing the best model is not a strategy, it's a treadmill.

What won't be replaced, if it's built well, is the infrastructure creators own for themselves: their own platforms, their own teaching communities, their own audience relationships, their own protected work. Several of the Architects are already building exactly that independently, without coordinating with each other, which is itself the clearest sign that this isn't one person's idea. It's where the whole field is heading.

The tools will keep changing. The question this report leaves you with is simpler, and harder: who owns the room they're changing in?

Keep going. Your voice matters. Don't think any idea is too silly or is stupid or, too 'out there.' There's no such thing as too out there. Just do it."

Kim Pratt, Filmmaker



A FINAL WORD

I want to be honest. This report is a celebration. But there are real concerns that come with this technology, and I won't pretend otherwise. There is job loss, the environmental and community cost of data centers, and a flood of low-effort content that waters down what serious creators are building. We have to be advocates on all of it. Not later. Now.

But there are two truths here, not one. The truth we must advocate around: the harm, the risk, the things that deserve real scrutiny. And the truth that it's already here, and the only real question left is how we use it. Both are true at once. That's not a contradiction. That's just where we stand.

Fourteen conversations, twenty-four hours, and one thing became impossible to miss: **this generation of Black creators didn't wait for permission, didn't wait to be taught, and didn't wait to be represented well by someone else's hand.**

They built community instead of guarding turf. They protected what was theirs. And they made things nobody had made before.

This era is a golden opportunity. Not a threat to manage from a distance. We are witnessing an equalizer, maybe the first of its scale in a generation, for Black creators to build the stories we want to see, **on our terms**. It is time to reclaim narratives that were told about us and start telling them ourselves. To set the standard instead of waiting to meet one someone else wrote.

This is where our experience with this technology has to be understood as its own thing, not a footnote to the general conversation. For most of the industry, AI is a question of efficiency and disruption. For us, it's a question of voice and who finally gets to hold the pen after generations of having our stories told by someone else.

We didn't wait for permission. Neither should you.

Kimberly Offord

Founder, Black AI Film Festival
Playground Pastime



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**Reel Sessions is the Live Stream of the Black AI Film Festival
watch, submit, and join the movement.**

Press and citation inquiries: info@thereferralstore.com

Please credit: The State of Black AI Filmmaking 2026, Black AI Film Festival, Kimberly Offord

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