



## CultureCon CEO Imani Ellis Eyes Community as Annual Conference Expands

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Imani Ellis at CultureCon 2022 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, October 8, 2022. Credit: Wendy Ngala

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CultureCon 2022 made its final stop in New York City last weekend and there was a ton of star power in the building to help close the conference tour with a bang.

The Brooklyn Navy Yard was the host location of the fifth annual event. Like in years past, the organizers known as [The Creative Collective NYC](#), set out to build a space for creatives of color across a number of disciplines to not only boost their social networks but also to provide rare access to industry leaders, tastemakers, and celebrities who have insight on navigating various fields.

The conference has blossomed into a multi-city tour with stops in Atlanta and Los Angeles earlier this year. It's propelled by a number of big name sponsors including Nike, HBO, and Google, but for Imani Ellis, the founder and CEO of CultureCon and The Creative Collective NYC, the goal remains the same even as the brand balloons: keep building community.



Audience at the Culture Stage at CultureCon 2022 in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, October 8, 2022. Credit: Lalea Raymond

"The goal is really to foster community. We really want to create a space where diverse people can be seen and to recognize that we're not a monolith. There's all different kinds of experiences. There's not one way to be Black. I would definitely say we've met [the goal]," she told Cheddar News.

Ellis said she had set out to create an atmosphere where industry folks could be their authentic selves, learn, and share with one another without the added pressure that comes with networking.

**"If you're so used to running after something, you sometimes don't know what to do when you catch it."**

Lena Waithe

There were more than a handful of cultural heavy-hitters in attendance who shared their own experiences in hopes that the next generation of creators might have an easier path toward career success. From *Black-ish* showrunner Kenya Barris and prolific Hollywood filmmaker Malcolm D. Lee to entertainment executives like Brian Lockhart, ESPN's senior vice president of original content and ESPN Films, and Kathryn Busby, president of original programming at STARZ, there was plenty of advice and pro-tips to take away.

One of the most notable conversations of the day was with screenwriter and actress Lena Waithe. Waithe has had a successful track record creating shows like Amazon Prime Video's *Them* and *The Chi* on Showtime, but she made it clear that learning and growing within a prospective field is endless. While her experience has been rooted in climbing the ladder in the television realm, her broader message applies to every field.

"I want to continue to grow and be different, but not try to be something I'm not [and I want to] make sure the work is a reflection of who I am in that moment," Waithe told a crowd from the main stage. "There's this misconception that once you get the job, I can celebrate. But once the celebration is over and the job is getting on your nerves and you're feeling like it isn't everything it's cracked up to be, well what happens when you go from chasing the dream to trying to exist in it and having to redefine your narrative? If you're so used to running after something, you sometimes don't know what to do when you catch it."



Lena Waithe on the Culture Stage at CultureCon 2022 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, October 8, 2022.

Waithe also noted the importance of not only forging good relationships in your field, but also nurturing them and making the relationship beneficial for both parties.

Another topic of the day focused on navigating success in the age of the internet. Actor and social media sensation Tabitha Brown and TikTok star DeAndre Brown talked about their approaches to social media. Alana Cheeks-Lomax, the head of inclusion and diversity at Cash App, moderated a conversation on how Black entrepreneurs can grow and sustain their businesses, and comedian Zack Fox talked about amplifying your voice in an already loud and crowded entertainment industry.

Ellis and The Creative Collective NYC plan to continue making CultureCon a relevant event for both established and aspiring professionals of color by listening to those that have helped grow the event to what it is today.

"What's next for CultureCon, I think, is to always be in service of our community. The best part is we just ask our community what they want and they let us know and we build it. And for Imani, I think I'm really working on work-life balance. I'm a really hard worker, but now it's time to balance the rest of my life with more hobbies and goals. And I think when I do more of that, I'll do better work," Ellis said.