

Rising Stars: Meet Suraj Partha



Today we'd like to introduce you to Suraj Partha.

Alright, so thank you so much for sharing your story and insight with our readers. To kick things off, can you tell us a bit about how you got started?

I grew up in Memphis, TN. I started playing the drums when I was 3 ½ years old and also learned how to play the piano and sing at a young age. When I was 12, my vocal teacher, who had taught Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears way back in the day, asked if I was interested in acting. He encouraged me to take my first acting classes, and I immediately fell in love with that as well. The following year, he brought me to Los Angeles to audition for some agents; much to my surprise, people were interested. My family moved out to Los Angeles, and I started to audition for television and film roles. I have had the great fortune of working in some fantastic shows and films (Modern Family, Master of None, Ender's Game, Miguel Wants to Fight).

When I was in high school, a teacher at a summer camp felt I was a good enough musician to go to music school. He shepherded me through the process of applying to USC. I studied jazz at USC Thornton and was a student of the legendary jazz drummer Peter Erskine (Stan Kenton, Weather Report, Steely Dan). I'll always treasure my lessons with him, and he helped me connect my musical self and acting self.

I graduated in 2019 and took some time off. I started 2020 looking for work, and the world quickly went into lockdown. As so many people did, I started a podcast and newsletter! It was called Art In All Its Forms, and it was a way for me to explore the connection between different art forms and society at large. Some of those podcast episodes made it to Classical California KUSC, and the station encouraged me to apply to their host training program.

At first, working for a classical music radio station seemed totally out of left field for me... And then I realized I was kind of perfect for it. Classical California KUSC was looking for someone with a music background who could communicate those musical ideas with regular people. Basically, they didn't want a lecturer. They wanted a storyteller.

I've been at Classical California KUSC for two years, doing on-air hosting and digital content production. I'm having the time of my life, listening to brilliant music each day and finding ways to give our audience a window into that music—what is this going to make you feel, why is it important, and why does it matter?

Alright, so let's dig a little deeper into the story – has it been an easy path overall and if not, what were the challenges you've had to overcome?

Any job in the entertainment industry—including radio or podcasting—is filled with rejection. For every role I've booked, I didn't get another hundred roles.

Furthermore, being an on-air host can feel quite vulnerable because, at any given time, there might be 100,000 people listening. If you make a small mistake or mispronounce a name, someone is going to call you on it. It's easy to lose your confidence.

I've had to learn how to prep hard, enjoy the process, and not sweat the occasional mistake. After all, mistakes are what make us relatable and human.

Appreciate you sharing that. What else should we know about what you do?

In some ways, my specialty is that I don't have a specialty! I'm a constantly curious person, and I find myself interested in just about everything. I'll spend weeks studying the effect of interest rates on the economy (doesn't everyone find interest rates interesting?), then it's a deep dive into the life and music of Beethoven, then I'll be swept away by the work of director Greta Gerwig, and then I'll read a long book on the history of Ukraine.

That might seem quite scatterbrained, but I think it allows me to make insightful connections on the air at Classical California KUSC. After all, Beethoven had to deal with economic depressions too, and the Christmas carol “Carol of the Bells” is actually based on an old Ukrainian folk song that’s over 1000 years old.

I’m deeply connected to jazz and pop music as a performer and listener. I find myself making connections between classical music and those genres all the time. I hope to do more performing and composing/songwriting in 2024. And, as always, I’m auditioning for TV/film roles, and I love digging into a good script—even if I don’t get a chance to be in the project itself.

My work at Classical California KUSC has been so meaningful to me. Every year, we host an in-person event called our “Classical California Kids Discovery Day.” We have our “Be a DJ” booth, where kids can try telling stories and announcing pieces “on-air.” We meet with so many families who listen to the station, and they share the profound impact that KUSC has on their lives. Every time I’m behind the mic, introducing a Chopin etude or a John Williams theme, I remember how lucky I am to share music with them.

This past fall, I had the opportunity to host and produce a show called In the Halls of Thornton: A Spotlight on the Students and Faculty of USC’s Thornton School of Music. We had seven programs on Sunday nights featuring recordings of classical music performed by USC students and faculty. It was my job to connect the various pieces of music and tell our listeners about what makes the USC Thornton special—which is relatively easy, given that I graduated from there! This whole project was such a full-circle moment for me, and I look forward to the next season of In the Halls of Thornton in 2024.

Are there any important lessons you’ve learned that you can share with us?

Sometimes, the best opportunities in life are the ones you least expect. It’s important and necessary to have goals but don’t be so attached to your plans that you can’t see the possibilities right in front of you.





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